

TIM CHESTER

REVELATION

FOR YOU

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Revelation For You

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SERIES PREFACE

Each volume of the *God's Word For You* series takes you to the heart of a book of the Bible, and applies its truths to your heart.

The central aim of each title is to be:

- Bible centred
- Christ glorifying
- Relevantly applied
- Easily readable

You can use *Revelation For You*:

To read. You can simply read from cover to cover, as a book that explains and explores the themes, encouragements and challenges of this part of Scripture.

To feed. You can work through this book as part of your own personal regular devotions, or use it alongside a sermon or Bible-study series at your church. Each chapter is divided into two (or occasionally three) shorter sections, with questions for reflection at the end of each.

To lead. You can use this as a resource to help you teach God's word to others, both in small-group and whole-church settings. You'll find tricky verses or concepts explained using ordinary language, and helpful themes and illustrations along with suggested applications.

These books are not commentaries. They assume no understanding of the original Bible languages, nor a high level of biblical knowledge. Verse references are marked in **bold** so that you can refer to them easily. Any words that are used rarely or differently in everyday language outside the church are marked in **grey** when they first appear, and are explained in a glossary towards the back. There, you'll also find details of resources you can use alongside this one, in both personal and church life.

Our prayer is that as you read, you'll be struck not by the contents of this book, but by the book it's helping you open up; and that you'll praise not the author of this book, but the One he is pointing you to.

Carl Laferton, Series Editor

Bible translations used:

- NIV: New International Version (2011 edition). This is the version being quoted unless otherwise stated.
- ESV: English Standard Version.

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

Many people find the book of Revelation intimidating, perhaps a bit scary, or just plain confusing. But there's no need to be scared—and every reason to be excited.

Imagine looking close up at the details of an impressionist painting. All you can see are strokes of paint and dabs of colour. It's hard to make sense of it. But take a step back, and the picture becomes clear. And what emerges is not just a scene but the mood it evokes. That's how we should approach the book of Revelation. Lean in too close, look only at the detail, and it's all a bit perplexing. But step back, look at the big picture and Revelation not only becomes clearer, but grabs our imaginations. That's John's aim. Since we are faced with the threat and seductions of the world around us, John wants to recapture our imagination about how God is at work in the world.

The book of Revelation draws on a style of literature called "apocalyptic", which was written between 400 BC and AD 200. It's a genre with its own conventions and symbols. The key feature of apocalyptic is its claim to offer a divine perspective on history. John is showing us the world—the real world in which we live—but he's looking at it from the perspective of heaven.

But the book of Revelation is as much a book of prophecy as it is a book of apocalyptic. This is how the book describes itself (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), and it's stuffed full with **allusions** to the writings of the Old Testament prophets.

It's also important to remember that Revelation is a letter. The start of the letter (1:4) follows the conventions of first-century letter writing: "John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you". What we often call the "letters" to the seven churches in chapters 2 – 3 are in fact called "words" or "messages" by John himself. Revelation as a whole is a letter written to specific people to address the specific situation they were facing. In this sense our reading of the "letter" of Revelation is no different to our reading of

1 Corinthians or Galatians—it's just the form of apocalyptic writing that is unfamiliar to us.

We're used to the idea that Paul, for example, wrote 1 Corinthians to address particular concerns in the first-century church of Corinth. We know we need to understand how Paul addressed their concerns then before we can understand how he speaks to our concerns now. It's the same for the book of Revelation. John is writing to Christians facing the threats and seductions of life in and under the Roman Empire. We need to put ourselves in their shoes and see how Revelation inspires them to remain faithful to Christ before we apply it to ourselves.

Worship the Emperor

I have a coin from the reign of the Emperor Vespasian (AD 69-79) which includes the abbreviation "PON MAX", which stands for "Pontifex Maximus" or "Greatest Priest". The title denoted the position of emperor as the head of the state religion. One hundred years earlier in 29 BC, a delegation from Asia Minor had asked permission to set up a **cult*** to worship Caesar. Although Augustus, the Caesar at the time, refused, he did allow a cult devoted to the god of Roma (which included a temple with his statue). It was the start of an imperial cult that grew over time. When Augustus died, the Roman Senate voted to deify him, and so his son, Tiberius (emperor during the ministry of Jesus) was called "the son of God". The Emperors also began to be known as "the saviour of the world", "the lord" and "benefactor" (Mark 10:42). A generation later the Emperor Caligula proclaimed the "good news" that he had been **deified** and, because he was so feared, no one objected.

By the time John was writing, there were forty major temples where Caesar was worshipped as god—including one in each of the seven churches addressed in Revelation chapters 2 – 3. The imperial

* Words in **grey** are defined in the Glossary (page 177).



REVELATION TIMELINE

27 BC	Augustus becomes emperor
AD 14	Tiberius becomes emperor
37	Caligula becomes emperor
41	Claudius becomes emperor
54	Nero becomes emperor
65	Christian persecution
66	The Jewish revolt begins
69	The year of the four emperors: Galba, Otto, Vitellius and Vespasian
70	The Jerusalem Temple is destroyed
79	Titus becomes emperor
81	Domitian becomes emperor
90s	Probable date when John wrote Revelation
98	Trajan becomes emperor

cult was a big part of commercial life through the trade guilds. These guilds offered members a network of associates and contacts, so they were a key way to get on in commercial or political life. The problem for Christians was that participation in the trade guilds became synonymous with involvement in the imperial cult. Pressure to participate came from neighbours as much as from officials. People were urged not to make trouble and to be grateful for Roman rule. This inevitably put Christians on a collision course with the culture and, ultimately, the authorities. Faithful believers believed in Jesus as the one and only Son of God, the only Saviour of the world, and the one true lord. But to express this belief out loud was culturally awkward, commercially disastrous, and politically treasonous.

Reading Revelation Today

People often identify four ways in which Revelation can be read:

1. *Preterist*—Revelation describes events in the first century.
2. *Historicist*—Revelation forecasts world history from Christ onwards.
3. *Futurist*—Revelation forecasts future events just before and after Christ's return.
4. *Idealist*—Revelation portrays timeless principles which are true of any era.

None of these approaches quite capture the sophistication of what John is doing. John is drawing on the Old Testament prophetic critique of economic injustice, imperial power and idolatrous claims, and reapplying that critique to his day. In so doing, he gives us a model that we can and should follow in our day.

In the past people have claimed that Revelation described the power of the Pope or the campaigns of Napoleon or the rise of communism. People often deride these identifications today. But there is something right in the instinct of generations of Christians to do this—something

we would do well to rehabilitate. It's true that John was not predicting specific future historical events outside or apart from the experience of his first readers. John was not a kind of sound evangelical Nostradamus. We must not suppose that John on **Patmos** thought he was predicting events in sixteenth-century Britain and the twenty-first century Middle East. He wrote to address the experiences faced by his readers. But, like John and generations of Christians before us, we should apply the prophetic critique of imperial and idolatrous power to the particular challenges we face today in our context.

The Structure of the Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation is a complex piece of literature incorporating many elegant literary devices and a high degree of what today would be called "intertextuality" with the Old Testament. In particular, groups of seven are interwoven throughout the book. And sevens provide the elegant overall structures of the book, as shown in the diagram over the page.

Revelation should not be read as a single sequence from beginning to end. Each set of seven ends with the final judgment and the triumph of God. So it's impossible to read these sevens as consecutive periods in history. The phrase "it is done" in Revelation 16:17, for example, is repeated in 21:6, which suggests we are revisiting the same event. Instead Revelation is an **anthology** of images in which history is told and retold. Perhaps the best way to think about it is as a series of action replays. When a goal or touchdown (depending on which version of football you enjoy) is scored, the television coverage will show it in slow motion from one angle. Then it will reshew the action from another angle. Then from behind the posts. The book of Revelation is showing us the same action from one angle—then in action replay from another angle. There is some intensification as the cycles of seven develop (the seven seals affect a quarter of the world, the trumpets affect a third, and the bowls affect everyone). But this development is not a chronological development through history. It's

THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

1:1-8 Prologue	
1:9-3:22	Seven lamps
4:1-7:17	Heavenly door open (4:1) Seven seals
8:1-11:18	Seventh seal opened (8:1) Seven trumpets
11:19-15:4	Heavenly temple opened (11:19) Conflict (Seven visions: "And I saw ...")
15:5-16:21	Heavenly tabernacle opened (15:5) Seven bowls
17:1-19:10	"Come, I will show you..." (17:1) The city of Babylon—the whore
19:11-21:8	Heaven opened (19:11) Conflict (Seven visions: "And I saw ...")
21:9-22:5	Come, I will show you ... (21:9) The City of Jerusalem—the Bride
22:6-21	Epilogue



a literary or **theological** device: it's as if the camera zooms in and the action is shown in slow motion.

John layers one image on another. We're not meant to piece these images together like a jigsaw puzzle to construct a single whole. We get one image, and then that's replaced by a new image. Don't be freaked out by this. You're actually used to engaging with art in this way. Think about most music videos. They're often a jumble of images. A video impacts us without us feeling the need to decode every image. Or think of a movie. The first time you see it you enjoy it. But when you watch it a second time, you see **motifs** and allusions you didn't spot first time round. Even so, it still made sense

when you first saw it. In many ways the book Revelation is a piece of performance art. We are, after all, told to read it “aloud” (1:3). And it’s worth paying attention to the *sound* of Revelation with its loud voices, heavenly songs, trumpet blasts and thunder claps, plus extended periods of silence. Revel in the sensory richness of John’s writing.

The book of Revelation deals with competing symbols and imagery. The propaganda of Rome competes with the vision of the Lamb. And today, if we are to stand firm in our globalised consumer culture, we need to allow the book of Revelation to capture our imagination for Christ. Revelation is about two cities, two visions, two sets of values. But they’re not spatial locations. The call to “come out of her” in 18:4 is not a geographic movement. We can’t disentangle ourselves from Babylon—the world that lives without reference to God—nor are we to live in a ghetto. It’s a movement of the imagination: the decision to live by a different vision of the world. It’s a different allegiance—one that changes everything.

REVELATION CHAPTER 1

1. THE FAITHFUL WITNESS

What do you think when you hear about the persecution of Christians around the world? It can seem that the church is being destroyed in parts of the Middle East. Does the church there have a future? Or what about in the West? Our culture is moving further from Christian truth. Our views are increasingly not just considered wrong but deviant. Church attendance is falling. Does the church here have a future?

In May 2017 Australian tennis legend and Pentecostal Christian Margaret Court wrote an open letter opposing the support of same-sex marriage by the airline Qantas. In response Martina Navratilova tweeted, “Thank you Qantas for your support. And Margaret—you have gone too far. Shame on you. #wrongsideofhistory.” Are Christians on the wrong side of history? It can seem so.

By the time John was writing the book of Revelation the Roman Empire had been around for about 600 years. There would still be another 400 years before the fall of Rome—though they didn’t know that at the time. That means the Roman Empire lasted four times as long as the British Empire, the communist empire and the American empire combined. It was an amazing achievement. We still reflect and respect that achievement today. From Capitol Hill in Washington to the “Senate Houses” of universities to the pillars of my local Sheffield City Hall in the UK, we are still constructing buildings with Roman-style colonnades to evoke the prestige of Rome.

But as John writes, the might and glory of this empire is set against the church. John is in exile on Patmos. Persecution is on the horizon. Does the church have a future?

John has a message that has come to us through a five-link chain: from God to Jesus to an angel to John to us (Revelation **1:1-2***). And if we “take to heart” this message, then it will bless us (**v 3**). (So if someone’s interpretation of Revelation doesn’t bless its hearers, then something is wrong.) What is this message that brings blessing?

The Almighty Father

John brings “grace and peace” from three Persons:

- “From him who is, and who was, and who is to come” (**v 4**)—that is God the Father
- “From the seven spirits” (**v 4**)—that is, as we shall see, God the Spirit
- “From Jesus Christ” (**v 5**)—God the Son

Father, Spirit and Son—the holy Trinity—are the source of comfort to beleaguered Christians.

First, we have grace “from him who is, and who was, and who is to come” (**v 4**). “I am the **Alpha and the Omega**,” says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty’” (**v 8**). This is not Jesus because the phrase is used in **verse 4** of a person (God the Father) who is listed alongside Jesus. Plus “Almighty” is commonly used of the Father.

The first blessing for the beleaguered Christians to whom John writes is that they have an everlasting Father who is almighty.

Archaeologists have found graffiti in Ephesus, one of the churches to whom John writes, which reads, “Rome—your power will never end”. We don’t know whether it was written in triumph or despair. But for John’s readers, Roman power was a present and serious threat so this claim was bad news. Rome was known as “eternal Rome”. It seemed as if Roman power would last for ever.

But here God makes three striking counterclaims.

* All Revelation verse references being looked at in each chapter are in **bold**.

1. God Is Eternal

First, it is God who is eternal, not Rome. God is the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (**v 4, 8**). John doesn’t start in the past with “who was”, as we might expect, but in the eternal present with “who is”. It’s an echo of the God’s revelation to **Moses at the burning bush** when he says, “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE” (Exodus 3:15, see NIV footnote). God was before Rome and God will be after Rome.

I once attended a Christian conference in Poland. We met in the hotel that used to host the annual congress of the Polish Communist Party. In the very rooms where the leaders of Polish communism met to plot the eradication of Christianity from Europe, church leaders were now meeting to plot the expansion of Christianity.

The Roman Empire has come and gone. The communist empire has come and gone. But God is eternal and his church continues. We can take the long view because our God is “he who is, and who was, and who is to come”.

We can take the long view because our God is he “who is, who was, and who is to come”.

2. God Is Almighty

Second, it is God who is almighty, not Rome. Remember that graffiti? “Rome—your power will never end.” Not “your glory” or “your culture”. “Your power.” Rome thought it was all-powerful. The rest of the world thought so too. Many had learned this truth the hard way. But in Revelation **1:8** the Lord God says, “I am … the Almighty”.

3. God Is Coming

Third, God will intervene in history. An eternal God and an almighty God is not a source of hope if God remains distant from the affairs of

humanity. Most people today think of God as distant and uninvolved, if they think of him at all. It's "deism"—the belief that the Creator leaves the world to its own devices: God is functionally absent.

But notice how God describes himself. We would expect him to say, "who is, and who was, and who will be". That would be using the present, past and future of the verb "to be". But God changes the verb when he speaks of the future. He is. He was. And he is *coming*. God is going to intervene in history.

We can be confident of this because God has *already* intervened in history. This is Peter's argument in 2 Peter 3. Peter says there will be scoffers who say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised?" (2 Peter 3:3-4) It's a very contemporary attitude: "We don't see any sign of divine judgment so it must be a myth". But Peter says people "deliberately forget" that God intervened to destroy the world in the time of Noah (v 5-6). There is a precedent. God has intervened to judge the world, and he will again intervene to judge the world.

In AD 410 Rome was overrun by the Visigoths. In 455 the Vandals did the same. The Roman Empire quickly began to unravel. God came to bring this "almighty empire" to a shuddering halt. It is one more sign that God is eternal, God is almighty and God is coming. And one day God will come to judge the whole earth in the person of his Son:

"Look, he is coming with the clouds,' and 'every eye will see him, even those who pierced him'; and all peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him.' So shall it be! Amen" (Revelation **1:7**).

The All-Present Spirit

Our second source of comfort is that grace and peace come from the all-present Spirit. "Grace and peace to you ... from the seven spirits before his throne" (**v 4**). This could be translated "the sevenfold Spirit" (see NIV footnote).

We have to enter John's world. John is drawing upon the conventions of apocalyptic literature. He constantly uses symbols, numbers

and imagery to convey his message. And one of his favourite symbols is the number seven. Sevens are interwoven throughout the book. Seven is a symbol of completeness or perfection. So the seven Spirits or the sevenfold Spirit is John's way of saying the Spirit is complete or perfect. The Spirit of God is all-present and all-seeing. He is everywhere and sees everything.

Think what this meant for John's readers. All around you are symbols of Roman power. Wherever you look, you see the propaganda of the empire—on coins, standards and banners, and in public buildings, inscriptions and a pervasive military presence. Its seduction and its threat press down on you. And it's tempting to feel forgotten by God.

But John is saying God is with you by his Spirit: the Spirit who is "before [the] throne" in **verse 4** and 5:6. That means the Spirit connects us to the Father (1:4) and to the Son (5:6). The Father himself and Jesus himself are present with us through the Spirit. He is the Spirit of the Son, giving us the same experience of sonship that the Son enjoys, so that we call God "Father". You are never alone.

Indeed it is "in the Spirit" that John sees his vision of the risen Christ (**1:10**), and it is in the Spirit that he is told to pass on that message to the seven churches (**v 11**). Even as we read the book of Revelation, the Spirit is mediating to us the comforting words of Christ.

The All-Conquering Son

Our third source of comfort is the all-conquering Son. Verse 5 speaks of "Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (see also 3:14).

Throughout the book of Revelation, John repeatedly uses the word "testimony" or "witness" (it's the same root word in Greek) (**1:2, 9; 2:13, 3:14; 6:9; 11:3, 7; 12:11; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4**). It's one of John's favourite ways of talking about "Christians". Christians are those who are witnesses to Jesus, even if that means death. This is what John is going to call us to be as we read this book. Those who

triumph do so “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” or witness (12:11).

But here at the beginning, before we meet any of that, we are introduced to Jesus, the ultimate “faithful witness”. He is our model and pattern. We are to be faithful as he was faithful; we are to be witnesses as he was a witness. And that may well mean we will suffer as he suffered.

But Jesus is not just our model. A model can be discouraging if they highlight how far short we fall. Plus where did the faithful witness of Jesus get him? It got him to the cross. But that is not the end of the story.

John is writing to people for whom martyrdom is a possibility. Those who overcome are those who “did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” (12:11). In heaven John sees those “who had been beheaded because of their testimony [or witness] about Jesus” (20:4). Our word “martyr” comes from the Greek word for “witness” or “testimony”. A martyr is a witness who has paid the ultimate price for their testimony.

But death is not the end. For Jesus is also “the firstborn from the dead” (**1:5**)—the first to rise with a resurrection body. Where he leads, his people follow. He leads us into suffering, and he leads us beyond to glory (1 Peter 4:12-13). Jesus is the “firstborn” because many others will be reborn to new life in the same way.

Jesus is also “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation **1:5**). Rome didn’t replace local elites with direct rule. Instead, it co-opted local leaders. It made them Roman. So it could claim to be the ruler of the kings of the earth. Kings across the world owed allegiance to Rome. But here Jesus says *he* is the ruler of the kings of the earth—including the rulers of Rome. He is the true and ultimate King. The descriptions of verse 5 allude to Psalm 89, which speaks of God’s covenant to establish King David’s line for ever (Psalm 89:3-4, 27, 36-37).

Revelation **1:7** combines two Old Testament passages. Daniel 7:13 predicts Christ’s enthronement in heaven. Christ’s rule may

be ignored on earth, but in heaven he is acclaimed as King. Zechariah 12:10 was written in the context of a prophesy about the defeat of Israel's enemies. But John has added the words "every eye" and "all peoples" to show that Zechariah was looking beyond Israel to the final **vindication** of God's global people. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, John's readers have backed the winning side. On earth it looks as if Rome's power would never end. And today the evidence of our eyes might suggest we have backed the losing side. It looks as if we'd be better off succumbing to the seductions of the culture around us.

To know God's will is effectively to know God's character. The two always go together in the Bible.

So we need to be confident that we can trust what John is saying. This is why his opening is so important. This message has come via John from an angel, from Jesus, from God (Revelation **1:1-2**). God himself declares Jesus to be the ruler of the kings of the earth. At the moment we see Jesus by faith while surrounded by contrary evidence. But one day every eye will see Jesus coming with the clouds (**v 7**).

Questions for reflection

1. What contemporary ideas, empires or movements claim (explicitly or implicitly) that they will last forever?
2. Do you feel on the #wrongsideofhistory? If so, what comfort do these verses bring?
3. What comfort does each member of the Trinity provides for the challenges you are facing?