



# Potomac Hills

## Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.  
Revelation 1:1-3

September 20, 2009  
English Standard Version

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### ***“The Promise of Blessing”***

This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> sermon in the series on The Book of Revelation entitled,  
***“The King’s Triumphant Return.”***

#### **Revelation 1:1-3**

*“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, <sup>2</sup> who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. <sup>3</sup> 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.”*

*Heavenly Father, again this week we dare to make our way through Revelation, so will You please help us? We know that there’s still a lot that we need to learn from Your Word so that it can have full impact in our lives. We know we’re susceptible to our idols, to our own selfishness and sin, to our fears. So Lord, open our eyes and ears to truly hear and understand and apply this Word to our lives. We want to be among those who are blessed for having spent time in this wonderful book. Help us to meet You in this book. Help us to see Your Son in its words. Do this for each of us, this morning, in Jesus’ name, and for His glory, Amen.*

#### **INTRODUCTION: *Only One Book?* <sup>1</sup>**

If it ever became illegal in our country, as it is in many countries today, to own a

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<sup>1</sup> The Introduction and the Conclusion are adapted from *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through The Book of Revelation* by Dr. Darrell Johnson, pages 13-32. Quote from Dr. J. Ramsey Michaels comes from his book, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, page 146.

complete copy of the Bible — and if the authorities allowed me to own just one book of the Bible for personal use — I would, I think, keep the last book.

I would keep the Book of Revelation.

Why? Because I've come to believe that no other book of the Bible presents the Gospel as powerfully as this book does. And furthermore, no other book of the Bible, in the face of all that threatens to undo us, proclaims the Good News of Jesus Christ in quite the same way that this book does.

Which is quite a statement coming from a preacher who's spent more time in the Gospel of John than any other book.

And yet I am **convinced** that no other book of the Bible presents Jesus as clearly and compellingly as we see Him in this **last** book. And this book lets us see Jesus **as He is right now!** No other book helps us **see Jesus** relative to the movement of history the way this book does. No other book helps us **see Jesus** relative to "*the powers*" at work in our time the way this book does. No other book helps us **see Jesus** in a way that overcomes our fears and builds our faith.

With that said, let's try to make a few things clear.

First, **The Book of Revelation** is **not** a crystal ball revealing esoteric secrets that enables you to escape the harsh realities of life on earth, but a down-to-earth **manual** on how to be a disciple of Jesus when facing those harsh realities of life on earth ... and in particular, how to do this the way Jesus did and Jesus does.

We learn how to face the harsh realities of life while waiting for the final in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, **living** in this world, **hoping** for the next world.

We learn how to face the harsh realities of life at those points where the Kingdom of God rubs up against the kingdoms of this world, creating **friction** and **tension** all around us.

We learn how to face the harsh realities of life knowing that One is coming on a white horse, the Risen Lord Jesus, who as **Revelation 19:15** makes clear, "*From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.*" This sword is very sharp, like a surgeon's scalpel, with the same intent of **deep healing** and **freedom**.

And second, I want to honor the Apostle John's primary motivation for writing this, the longest letter in the Bible. Yes, John is a prophet. And yes, John is a seer of apocalyptic visions. But first and foremost, John is a pastor. And he's a pastor who wants to help the people he loves **follow Jesus** as those who "*overcome.*" And so do I ... I want to serve you as your pastor, doing what I can to help you live above and beyond your circumstances, above and beyond those ever-present harsh realities of life.

I'm not claiming to have the last word on the last book of the Bible, only John can make the claim. But I want you to know as we go through this book, that there are a couple of guiding principles as we read this text:

1. I believe what John believes; and
2. I'm not always sure what John believes.

Dr. J. Ramsey Michaels, in his commentary on Revelation, says it so well, "The purpose of preaching from the Revelation is to evoke first wonder and then faithfulness to the slain lamb, not to explain the book away or reduce it to a blueprint of the future. The preacher's task is to stand out of the way and let the book's images do their work."

I think, more than any other series I've ever preached, it will be important for you to **read**

**the text in advance.** Probably several times. And as you read the text first, there are two questions you need to ask of the text:

1. **What jumps out at me here?** And
2. **What puzzles me here?**

And as we go through this book, we'll try to answer those questions.

Last week I told you that Revelation is something of an “alternate reality.” To John’s contemporaries and to us, the world, you see, **appears** to be one thing. In fact, it’s something quite different from what it appears to be, but only **faith** can see that. You **cannot**, you **must not** allow the **visual** to overwhelm the **invisible**. **You cannot live the Christian life this way**, says John. There is but **one** reality, **one** truth and that is the reality, the truth **as it is in heaven**. John is bringing that reality down to us as he was given to see it and in a form dramatic enough to **arrest** our attention and to **penetrate** our consciences.

John is convinced, as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, that there’s more to “reality” than meets the eye. John would say something like the following ...

*Look around you, and take in all that you can with your eyes. Listen around you, and take in all that you can with your ears. Smell. Taste. Touch. Take in all that you can with all of your senses. And then realize, as I did on the prison island of Patmos, that there is more to what we call “life” than we can know with our senses and with our intellect and with our emotions.*

It's the purpose of Revelation — this down-to-earth, this-worldly, pastoral purpose — to **open that up more**. To teach us that there is more to this moment than we can know. To see Jesus as we have never seen Him before.

In our study of **Revelation**, by keeping our focus on God's revelation **of Jesus**, then our primary concern in our understanding of the Book of Revelation will be on **the present work of Jesus right now** for His people and the hope, grace, and strength that this revelation brings to us today in the midst of our struggles in this world.

So let’s dive in and turn to our text, Revelation 1, starting with verse 1 ...

#### **v. 1a: The Revelation of Christ**<sup>2</sup>

*“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His servants the things that must soon take place.”*

Since we spent all of last week looking at this verse in great detail, I’m not going to spend much time on it this morning. But it’s a really important verse and if you missed last week’s sermon, please go to our website and download it.

Mark Driscoll, the Pastor of Mars Hills Church in Seattle, writes about this verse in his book *Vintage Jesus*. He writes ...

*The book of Revelation is therefore an incredibly important book because it is a book about Jesus, no less than the four gospels, and the primary book that reveals to us that*

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<sup>2</sup> The Exposition of the text is adapted from *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through The Book of Revelation* by Dr. Darrell Johnson, pages 13-23; the sermon “*The Time is Near*” by Dr. Kim Riddlebarger, Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, CA, 2002, [www.christreformed.org](http://www.christreformed.org); the sermon “*The Lord of History*” by Dr. Derek Thomas, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS; the sermon “*Unveiled Majesty*” by Rev. Steve Zeisler, 6/2/85 and the sermon “*Jesus: The Alpha And Omega*” by Rev. Ron Ritchie, 6/23/96, both of Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, CA; *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 1-11* by Dr. John MacArthur, pages 13-22; *Unveiled Hope* by Scotty Smith & Michael Card, pages 1-24; *Triumph of the Lamb* by Dr. Dennis Johnson, pages 1-47. Quote from Mark Driscoll comes from his book *Vintage Jesus*, page 150.

*picture of Jesus in heaven today as opposed to on the earth yesterday. Sadly, the book of Revelation has become the fishing pond for Christian wingnuts with an affinity for goofy charts to string together endless debates about what the mark of the beast is, who the antichrist is, and whether or not locusts are really code words for Blackhawk helicopters. Such people need both new hobbies and the right meds. Revelation is a book about Jesus and emphatically declares that in the opening lines of the book, which describes the entire book as “**the revelation of Jesus Christ.**”*

This verse continues by telling us that God has made “**the revelation of Jesus Christ**” known to ...

**v. 1b-2: The Servant of Christ**

*“He made it known by sending His angel to His servant John,<sup>2</sup> who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.”*

This is the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee (Matthew 4:21), the brother of the Apostle James (Mark 1:19), Jesus’ first cousin (through his mother Salome, who was Mary’s sister [Mark 15:40; 16:1-2]), a fisherman (Mark 1:19), one of the inner circle of three (with Peter and James [Luke 9:28]), the ‘**disciple whom Jesus loved**’ (John 13:23), the Bishop of Ephesus and now a prisoner on the Island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9).

In 90-96 A.D., John, by then the last living apostle, was ministering to the second generation of Christians in the city of Ephesus. Around the same time, the Romans elected their ninth Caesar, Domitian and gave him the title "Our Lord and God." He was a vicious, cruel man who continued the persecution of the Christian churches that had begun under Nero in the sixties. John and many other disciples refused to bow their hearts to Caesar as God, so many were either killed or placed in prisons. The Romans took John aboard a ship in chains and sailed some fifty miles from Ephesus to a small island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos. This island, only eight miles long and four miles wide, had been turned into a penal colony where poorly fed and clothed prisoners were forced to work in the rock quarries. But this imprisonment did not stop our risen Lord from communicating with His beloved apostle.

The enormity of the visions John received on that barren island staggered him. Throughout his gospel, John never directly referred to himself. Yet here he bookends his visions with the statement, "**I, John**" (found in both chapters 1 and 22) — an exclamation that expressed his amazement that he was receiving such overwhelming visions.

John had loyally testified to the first coming of Christ in his other books, which we see in ... **John 19:35**, “*He who saw it has borne witness — his **testimony** is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth — that you also may believe.*”

**John 21:24**, “*This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his **testimony** is true.*”

**1 John 1:2**, “*... the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and **testify** to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.*”

**1 John 4:14**, “*And we have seen and **testify** that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.*”

And so John, under the Spirit’s inspiration, faithfully testified **to all that he saw** concerning Jesus’ second coming. Specifically, John bore witness **to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ**. Those phrases appear together again in **Revelation 1:9**, “*I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of **the word of God and the testimony of***

*Jesus.”*

The word of God expressed in the book of Revelation is the testimony about the coming glory of Jesus Christ given to His church and recorded by His faithful witness, John. And as God the Father knew **who** John was, **where** he was, and the difficult circumstances **he** was living in, so He's aware of **who** we are, **where** we are, and the difficult circumstances **many of us** are in at this moment. We're now living in a spiritually dark and immoral world system, with enemies who hate Jesus on every hand. And yet our living Lord wants to **BLESS** us with comfort and courage when we're willing to hear and take to heart the words of this prophecy.

And that blessing is ...

**v. 3: The Promise of Christ**

*“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.”*

One of the first things we see here is that Revelation, as John says in verse 3, is a **prophecy**. This is especially emphasized in the book by being said at the very beginning and then, again, at the very end. We have learned to call this literary device an *inclusio*, a statement at the beginning and at the end that tells us something about everything in between.

At the end of Revelation, the book is again referred to as a prophecy, **Revelation 22:7, 18-19**, *“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the **prophecy** of this book. ...<sup>18</sup> I warn everyone who hears the words of the **prophecy** of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book,<sup>19</sup> and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this **prophecy**, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”*

And by prophecy is meant certainly the disclosure of the future as verse 1 has already indicated and as we will read again at the end, **Revelation 22:6**, *“And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show His servants what must soon take place.”*

But prophecy, as we know, is not **only** the prediction of the future but **the authoritative proclamation** of the meaning of the present and of **the obligations of God's people** in the present. In short, most of the time **prophecy** is simply **preaching**. And the prophets of the Old Testament were preachers even more than they were predictors of the future. The Apostle John himself stands as a successor to the Old Testament prophets who were always addressing the immediate situation of their contemporaries **as well** as speaking of things to come.

Indeed, the message of the Old Testament prophets saturates the book of Revelation. We read in **Revelation 10:7**, *“but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as He announced to **His servants the prophets**.”*

This verse says, *“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”*

The Greek word for blessed (*makarios*) means happy. Since John was Jewish, he may have also been thinking of the Hebrew word for blessed (*ashar*), which is used in **Psalm 1:1-2**, *“**Blessed** is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;<sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.”*

At our Presbytery retreat last week, our speaker preached from this verse, Psalm 1:1. He gave two messages from this verse on what it means to be blessed. And one of the things that he

said is that the one who is blessed is the "*one who finds the right path in light of the wrong path.*"

How blessed, then, is the one who not only hears but takes to heart what is written in this prophecy, because **it is always the right path** in the face of the many wrong ones. This word is from the heart and mind of God. Obedience to this truth results in personal blessings, for in this prophecy are the secrets of **how to live for Jesus** in the difficult days ahead.

And so the Apostle John pronounces this blessing upon all those who read the words of this prophecy — for these words *are the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ*. The blessing extends to those who hear these words and who take them to heart, because *the time is near*. Since Revelation was a circular letter intended to be read aloud in the seven churches to which it is addressed, John may mean “hearing” here in the ordinary sense of “hearing” this letter as it is read aloud. But given the stress upon taking what is heard to heart, “hearing” is probably used in the sense of hearing not merely as listening to the words, but truly believing what was heard and taking comfort from the testimony of Jesus Christ which is being revealed. If we believe what we hear and take it to heart, there is a great blessing in this book for Christ’s church.

This is the first of seven “*beatitudes*,” or “*blessings*” found in this prophecy. Numbers used in Revelation are never accidental or coincidental. They are symbols which point to something else. Throughout the Scriptures, **seven** is the number of **completeness** or **perfection**. The seven blessings in Revelation are connected to believing and hearing (chapter 1), to being faithful unto death in chapter 14, to being ready for the Lord’s coming (chapter 16), to receiving rest from our labors (chapter 14), to responding to the invitation to the marriage supper (chapter 19), to participating in the first resurrection, (chapter 20), to finally being granted the right to eat from tree of life and enter the new Jerusalem (chapter 22).

Therefore, anyone who hears these words of this prophecy and responds in faith to all seven of these promised blessings of God, will have the reward of eternal life and victory over death, rest from our labors, and will dwell in the city of God. In other words, they will receive their seven-fold inheritance that is ours in Christ (completeness), and obtain every blessing that God has for his people (perfection).

However, there is a sense of **urgency** about this book of Revelation because verse 3 ends with “*for the time is near.*” Does this mean that the predicted events of this final book of the Bible are to take place within the span of John’s lifetime, or that of his readers? Perhaps, and if so, it will radically affect the way we understand the book. Some do interpret Revelation this way, assigning much of its contents to a description of the downfall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman Empire in the time of Nero in 70 A.D., this means, of course, that the book would have to be written **before** this date.

Others have observed that ‘*near*’ is a relative term and could mean that when the time comes, the predicted events will take place in relatively brief time-span. This allows for a later dating of the book, and the more traditional fulfillment of the persecutions in the reign of Emperor Domitian, around 96 A.D. This was the view attested by the Church Father Irenaeus (who lived from approx. 130 to 200 A.D.). For now, it’s sufficient to note that, either way, there is a sense of urgency: the time for the fulfillment of these things has arrived. A decisive moment in time has been reached.

This phrase reiterates the truth taught in verse 1, that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are **imminent**. The word “*time*” does not translate *chronos*, which refers to time on

a clock or a calendar, but *kairos*, which refers to seasons, epochs, or eras. The next great era of God's redemptive history is **near**.

That the return of Christ is imminent, the next event on God's prophetic calendar, has always been the church's hope. Jesus commanded His followers to watch expectantly for His return, **Luke 12:40**, "*You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*"

Paul wrote to the Romans, Romans 13:12a, "*The night is far gone; the day is at hand.*" The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers, **Hebrews 10:24-25**, "*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,<sup>25</sup> not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*"

James encouraged struggling believers with the reality that Christ's return was imminent, **James 5:7-8**, "*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. ... You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*" Despite the skepticism of the scoffers, the Lord Jesus Christ will return. And His return is **near**.

Behind this phrase lies the idea that a Sovereign hand is in charge of the future: that history is His-story. What happens to God's servants is not chance, but decree. God orders and fulfils His plan for His people, even in the face of terrible and terrifying events. No matter how bad it may seem, God never abdicates His Sovereign rule.

My sons are sometimes — **affectionately** — known in our house as "**Crash**" and "**Smash.**" They are forever running into something, falling off of something, or breaking something, and we regularly dash them off to the hospital. So much so that I find myself taking them to different emergency rooms so we don't get too well known at any one hospital.

Now I never fail to grasp the urgency of the situation when something painful happens to them. No one has to tell me I should rush them to the doctor.

But there are **other things** that I need to be reminded of. For instance, conversations we ought to have that I keep putting off, sharing things that burden my heart, listening to them, which I never quite seem to have the time or energy to do as fully as I ought to do. Yet I believe that those things are just as **important** as their physical well-being. Yet because those things don't seem quite so **urgent** it is easy for me to put them off.

One reason I have mentioned this is to urge those of you who are parents to remember to make these things a priority in life. But I hope it also illustrates what John is saying here about the place the Lord Jesus occupies in our lives.

We frequently don't treat as urgent **what the Scriptures say is urgent**.

But these issues cannot wait. Our involvement with the things of Christ, our willingness to say what needs to be said, to obey what ought to be obeyed, to serve where we ought to serve and to use our gifts ... **cannot wait** until we retire or when things are more convenient. If we put them off we will wake up one day and feel the awful loss of missed opportunities. The Lord will honor Himself anyway and somebody else will have the joy of it, but we will miss out. We cannot help but sense the urgency John brings to bear in this book.

And that urgency becomes even more clear when we look at ...

### **CONCLUSION: *The Fundamental Issue***<sup>3</sup>

What is the fundamental issue that is being addressed here?

I think it's simply this ... **Whom Will I Worship?**

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson quote comes from his book *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, pages xi-xii.

Someone has said that people are incurably religious, meaning that we cannot help worship someone or something.

**So who will it be?** The powers of the present age — or Jesus Christ?

**To whom will we give our ultimate allegiance?** In the imagery of this book — to the beast, with his seductive offer of pleasure and wealth, or to the slaughtered Lamb, with His offer of life?

**Whom will we follow as we walk through this world?** We will follow Babylon-the-harlot ... or will we follow New-Jerusalem-the-bride's?

**What will shape my life?** The Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus ... or humanity in rebellion against God?

It turns out that, although the seven churches of Asia Minor to whom Revelation was first addressed were facing varying degrees of persecution, the greatest danger was not the persecution itself, but rather, **spiritual complacency**.

The last book of the Bible calls us to **an all-out loyalty to the Lamb** in a world “feverishly worshipping the beast.”

In his excellent book on Revelation, Eugene Peterson suggests that in this book we're not taught anything we haven't already learned in the rest of the Bible. We don't discover any new truth. We're simply taught the already-revealed truth in a new way. He writes ...

*I do not read the Revelation to get additional information about the life of faith in Christ. I have read it all before in law and prophet, in gospel and epistle. Everything in Revelation can be found in the previous 65 books of the Bible. The Revelation adds nothing of substance to what we already know. The truth of the Gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it.*

No new truth as such. But truth conveyed in a new way ... in a way that penetrates deep inside and sticks with us. I think we'll discover that we'll receive more help in **facing** the harsh realities of life on earth from studying Revelation than from any other book of the Bible. Not only that, but we'll receive more guidance for how to **live** the Christian life from this book; **and** ... we'll receive more guidance on how to **be** the Church from this book.

We'll discover that this is an everyday book for everyday life.

As we hear John's words in the Book of Revelation throughout this series, let us continue to respond to the Savior who is revealed to us, by taking every word to heart. For God promises us a great blessing if we do so. In this book, **The Revelation of Jesus Christ**, we have the sure and certain testimony of that One who gave Himself for us and who conquered death and the grave so that we may live victoriously ... regardless of our circumstances. That same Jesus, whose testimony is given in this vision, will indeed bless all those who hear these words and take them to heart.

So do that. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

*Heavenly Father, thank You for this revelation. Thank you that it does reveal to us our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We pray, Lord, that you will help us to understand these things and more than that, to take seriously what is written, to keep these revelations and let them adjust our lives to what they reveal. We ask that You would do this within each one of us ... in the Name of Your Son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever.*

*Amen.*

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**Revelation 22:6-7**

*“And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show His servants what must soon take place.” And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”*