

Getting The Basics Right (Introduction)

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn back to Revelation chapter 1 and we can read again the first verse of the book.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place, He made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John.

As I mentioned in the reading, over the next two months we are going to be doing a series on the seven letters of Revelation chapter 2 and 3 and Phil and I will share this series together.

We read chapter 1 today but if you were to carry on and read the next two chapters you'll see that chapters 2 and 3 contain seven short letters written to seven different churches located across Asia Minor, which is what we would call Turkey today.

I'm just going to pop them up on a map just now so that you can see them. John is writing from the island of Patmos, you can see the wee green dot is where he's currently in exile, and he writes to seven churches and the order of the letters is like a clockwise direction.

[1 : 15] It starts in Ephesus, which is the closest one to where John is on Patmos, and it works its way round up to Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Leo de Sia.

We'd all call that Turkey today, back then it was known as Asia Minor. These letters give a fascinating insight into the challenges that these congregations faced as part of the early Christian church, but at the same time they also teach lessons that remain immensely important for us today. Our series is called Getting the Basics Right. Now for all of us that is so important. It's crucial for any part of life, no matter what our background, no matter what we believe, there's certain key things that we all want to have in place in our lives.

It's especially important for us as a church. There's fundamentals about what we believe and about how we behave that we've got to get right.

That applies to us all as individuals. I need to have the basics in my life right. And it also applies to us as a community together, as a church family. We need to have the basics right in terms of how we treat each other and in terms of how we serve together.

[2 : 35] The reason why this is also important is because basics are very easy to get wrong. And a good way to prove that is to think about New Year's resolutions.

I don't know if any of you made any New Year's resolutions or not, but usually at this time of year we resolve to do things in our lives. And your kind of classic New Year's resolutions are to eat more healthily, to get more exercise, to spend more time with family, to read more, to pray more.

These are the things that we usually identify as our New Year's resolutions because these are the things that we want to have in place in our lives. But the key point is that they are all basics.

I don't know anybody who sort of made their New Year's resolution. I want to learn more about astrophysics. It's basic stuff that we tend to choose.

But the reason that these are our New Year's resolutions is because all too often it's the basic things in life that we allow to slip. And I'm very guilty of that in so many ways.

[3 : 44] It's true in every part of life. It's definitely true in our lives as disciples and in our lives as a church together. So as we begin a New Year together, we want to make sure we are getting the basics right.

However, you might be saying to yourselves, well, that sounds great, Thomas, but revelation doesn't seem very basic at all. And for any of you who may have read Revelation before or glanced at it, you quickly discover that it's a very unique and in many ways a bit of a strange book.

It seems quite complicated. Lots of passages aren't very easy to understand in comparison to other parts of the Bible. And so you'd be forgiven if you said, well, look, Revelation is not really a book about basics.

Even the first chapter that we read has got some very unusual sounding imagery. If you carry on with the rest of the book, it gets even more complicated. But I promise it's not as hard to understand as it looks.

This week I want to just do two things as we begin this series. To start with, I want to spend a wee bit of time talking about revelation in general so that we can explain a little bit more about how we are to approach this book.

[5 : 04] I remember when I was a young Christian, I said to somebody, oh, I think I'll read Revelation. I've never read it before. And they said to me, oh, I don't think you should. It's too difficult. And I can understand why they said that because it's complicated.

But that's not actually the answer. It's not good to just avoid Revelation and never read it. What we need to do is actually work out and understand how we should approach it so that we can understand it better. So we'll spend a few minutes on that to begin with.

And then after that, I want to highlight some key truths that this book teaches us, that we're going to have to take with us into the coming weeks as we approach chapters 2 and 3.

So first of all, how do we handle this book, Revelation? As you may know, the Bible is made up of 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament, 27 in the New.

And among these are many different styles or genres, as we call it. So if you look, for example, at Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, they're all examples of Gospels.

[6 : 02] And a gospel is a selective biography that focuses on the life of Jesus and especially on his death and resurrection. Pretty much all of the rest of the New Testament, from Romans all the way down to Jude, is all letters written to particular people at particular times.

In the Old Testament, you've got some books like Genesis all the way down to Esther, is pretty much all historical narrative. So it's just telling you about stuff that happened in history.

Some parts of the Old Testament are poetry, like Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Psalms, and many other parts of it are prophecy. So you go from Isaiah down to Malachi, and it's pretty much all prophetic writings that you find there.

Lots of different genres. Now, the reason I want to highlight that is because the type of genre affects how you're going to interpret it. In other words, the style of writing is going to shape the way you read it and the way you understand it.

Now, that's true for any piece of literature. So if you, like me, have spent time doing a zillion lateral flows, when you get a new type of kit, you pick out the instructions and you read it very literally.

[7 : 16] You're like, OK, five times that one nostril, five times that the other, 20 dips, no, six dips in the thing, I think the current is. Leave it for a minute, four drips. Very literally, you think, OK, I'm going to read this and I'm going to follow every instruction very, very carefully, and I take it all literally.

But if you read a poem that says, no man is an island, every man is a piece of the continent, then you don't immediately conclude that you're a piece of European rock. And if you hear the MC Hammer song, you can't touch this playing on your phone, you don't think to yourself, oh, yikes, I can never touch my phone again.

Everybody who's aged between 30 and 45 is now singing that song in their head. Revelation is a little bit unusual because it's actually a hybrid of three different types of genre.

Revelation is a prophecy, and you can see that from verse three, which we read. John says, blessed are though, is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy. Now, prophecy is something that we tend to think, you know, it's to do with predicting the future and that element is there.

But first and foremost, when you think of a prophet, you should be thinking of God's messenger. A prophet is God's spokesperson. And every prophecy in the Bible, whether it's in the Old Testament or right the way through to Revelation, contains two key elements, judgment and salvation.

[8 : 45] In other words, in the Bible, prophecy is used to warn people about where they were going wrong and it was used to give people promises about how God is going to put things right.

So Revelation is a prophecy. Revelation though is also a letter. If you look at verse four, you see that you have this typical opening for a letter.

Now, whenever we write a letter, we tend to write dear so-and-so, and then at the end, you'll write, you know, you're sincerely Thomas at the end. In the early church, in the classical period, it was the other way round.

The first word you wrote is the person that is from, John. And then you say who it's to. And then you say John to the seven churches that are in Asia. So that's a very typical greeting that you have there in verse four, indicating that in some ways this is a letter.

Now, that's going to be even clearer as we look at chapters two and three, because there's, within the big letter, there's seven mini letters to the seven different churches in various locations.

[9 : 48] And the fact that it's a letter is important because it tells you that it's written to specific people in a specific context. It's not just abstract stuff. It's telling, it's writing to people in a real life situation.

Now, in the case of Revelation, it's written to Christians round about the year 95 AD, who were being persecuted under the Roman emperor, Emperor Domitian.

Now, we don't need to go into that too much detail, but these are the days of the Roman Empire. And in this period, the Roman Empire at that time was called Domitian. And towards the end of his reign, he kind of launched an attack on Christians.

And it's in this context that this letter is being written. So it's a prophecy, it's a letter. Lastly though, and this is maybe the one we need to think of a little bit more, Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature.

Now, you're forgiven if you're like, I've never heard of that. That's okay. It's not a familiar term. But the Greek word for Revelation is the word apocalypsis, which I've just put in brackets there so you can see it.

[10 : 56] And so that's where we get this category of apocalyptic literature. And this was a type of writing that was common-ish in those days that used very vivid language, sometimes quite alarming, maybe even grotesque language, in order to reveal things that had been previously unknown.

So you think Revelation is a revealing of something. And often this type of literature was written to people who were experiencing oppression or difficulty, which of course fits the context that we've just mentioned in terms of imperial persecution from Rome.

And that explains why there's so much weird sounding stuff in the book of Revelation. That's the style that apocalyptic literature uses.

And so that means that if you read through the rest of Revelation today, you're going to read about numbers and beasts and horns and all sorts of different things. When you read that kind of stuff, you mustn't take it literally.

Instead, it's symbolic language. And you see that in verse 16, in chapter 1. So what it says, it's describing Jesus in verse 16.

[12 : 09] It says, in his right hand, our seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, his face was like the sun shining in full strength. Does that mean that Jesus has a sword instead of a tongue? No, it's symbolic language telling us something.

And we know it's symbolic because it's explained in verse 20. It says, the seven stars are the angels of the seven church. That's probably a reference to the leadership of the church. The seven lampstands are the seven churches.

So it's all symbolism that needs to be interpreted. Now that might seem weird to us, but again, we have to recognize that we actually do this all the time.

To give you another wonderful song to get stuck in your head, one of my favorite songs is, I Have the Tiger by Survivor. Another excellent song. Now, when you hear that song, have you ever imagined somebody doing a post-mortem on a tiger and taking out that eyeball and thinking, wow, look at the eye of the tiger?

No, you don't think like that at all. You think of victory. You think of overcoming the odds, or maybe you just think of rocky. But that's what you think of. It's symbolism used to point us to something.

[13 : 19] And sometimes we can do it with very weird sounding language. And again, we do this today. So I'm going to give you an example.

Here is a word or a sort of selection of words that you will not see in the dictionary. And you look at that and you think, come on, that looks like nonsense.

And if somebody from first century emphasis came in here and was learning English, they would be like, what on earth is that? So you look at those words. Oh, it doesn't make any sense. But if I came back from a Carl away football match saying, oh, way, oh, way, oh, way, oh, way, you would know straight away that we'd won.

So we do this all the time. So when you come to revelation and you see stuff that seems strange, don't think, oh, man, this is just nonsense. It's not. It's just the way people communicate. If you were reading this kind of language in the first century, you would understand it in the same way that we can understand, oh, way, oh, way, oh, way, and all that kind of stuff.

And you would learn that that was a different way of doing things. And that would help us understand different cultures have different ways of using language. And apocalyptic writing was a known genre in this early church, this early church period.

[14 : 36] So revelation is a hybrid, a prophecy, a letter and an example of apocalyptic literature. And if you remember those three things, it'll help you as you read revelation for yourself.

But what's it all about? That's maybe the even more important question. Well, there's a key phrase that we read in verse one, the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place.

In other words, revelation is all about stuff that's going to happen. All the spectacular images that are contained in it are symbolizing events that will take place in the experience of the Christian church.

So it's telling us stuff that's going to happen. The big question is, when does this stuff happen? And as you may know, there are lots of different viewpoints as to how that's to be understood.

And I'm going to just summarise four main ones just so that you're familiar with them in case you're ever reading a book on revelation or anything like that. Some people think that revelation is all about stuff that happened in the past.

[15 : 56] So if you read through the whole book, it's all talking about stuff that happened in the days of the Roman Empire around the turn of the first century into the second century.

So it's all about the past stuff. It's all about the Roman Empire oppressing Christians. Now, this is known as the Preterist view. Now, Preter just means past.

So it would be so much easier if they just called it the pastist view, but they don't. They call it the Preterist view. But it just means it's all to be seen as stuff that's happened. So someone with that opinion would say, well, when you're reading revelation, you shouldn't think, oh, this is stuff that's going to happen in the future.

This is all referring to stuff that happened then. Other people think that it's all about the order of events in history. So you go to Revelation chapter 4 and 5, that's stuff in the early church. 789, maybe the Middle Ages. 15 to 20, that stuff is happening now. And you get this kind of like, you know, various interpretations as to what's going on. It's like following the order of events in history.

[16 : 59] Now, sometimes that can be a bit extreme. I know somebody who's now a free church minister, but long before he ever became a free church minister, kind of dabbled with all this interpretation. And he said that he used to meet with a friend.

He'd go to a cafe, they'd pick up the newspaper, they'd read about what was happening in the Cold War, and then they would go to their Bibles to see if they could figure out what prophecies were being fulfilled. Now, that's a very extreme version of this and not one that I would endorse.

And the guy himself said that he was kind of very much saying that's not the way I think now. But that idea of it's been the order of events in history is called the historicist view.

Other people think it's all about the future, so it's not about Roman Empire. It's not about the order of events in history. It's all about stuff that's going to happen when Jesus comes back. And that view is the futurist view, which is an easy enough one to remember.

And then, fourthly, other people don't see it as specifically about the past or about the order of events in history or about the future, but it's just about general ideas, the general idea of conflict and opposition that the church is going to face.

[18 : 03] And that's called the idealist view. And I just wanted to give you these because if you pick up a bit about Revelation or if you read an article about it, you might see these words and I just want you to be familiar with them so that you'll know, oh yeah, that's just different schools of thought.

Which one is correct? Probably none. Now, by that, what I mean is that I think that there's truth in all of them. And there are aspects of Revelation that do apply to the past.

There is a sense in which some events in history have been ordered out. A lot of it is to do with the future and in many ways it is more about general principles rather than specific details.

So I think that there's stuff that we can gain from all of them and I would be reluctant to put myself into any one particular camp as such. The key thing though is that Revelation is written to show the church the things that must soon take place.

In other words, this book is addressing the key question that every single one of us has to reckon with. What is going to happen to us?

[19 : 18] What is going to happen to us? That's the question that Revelation makes us think about and that instantly makes Revelation fascinating and it instantly makes it incredibly relevant for all of us today.

That's not because it's going to predict the newspaper headlines tomorrow, it's not going to do that. It's because it forces us all to think about the past, to think about the present, to think about the future and to ask the question, what is going to happen to me?

What's going to happen to you? We all stand here today as products of our past in so many different ways, culturally in terms of our families, in terms of our work, in so many different ways. We all face the challenges and opportunities of this present moment and we all have to think about the future, whether it's for ourselves or for our children and our children's children who are coming behind us.

Yet one of the biggest problems in Scotland in 2022 is that most of the time, the only occasions when we ask the question, what is going to happen is in relation to stuff that's trivia.

[20 : 33] So we think to ourselves, what's going to happen in the football on Saturday? I think that all the time. What's going to happen in Bake Off? What's going to happen in Strictly, what's happening on Facebook or Instagram?

Now none of these things are wrong. They're all good things in their right place. The problem is that this stuff consumes our attention. It fills our minds and if our attention is consumed by that kind of stuff, then we are far more likely to neglect the questions that really matter.

What has happened in my past and your past that shapes who you are today? What's happening right now that we need to think about and respond to? What's going to happen to us in the future? Revelation makes us think about these things. What's going to happen to our nation? There's been huge changes in terms of society, legislation, culture in the last 20 years.

What is going to happen in the next 20 years? What's going to happen to us as a church? Is there going to be a church here in 20 years time?

[21 : 49] And what's going to happen to you? Are you going to work, retire and try and avoid cancer for as long as you can?

What's going to happen after that? These are the questions that Revelation makes us think. Revelation makes us stop and think.

We live in a society that never stops and in a society that hardly ever thinks. That makes Revelation a brilliant book for us to study.

So Revelation is showing us certain things that are going to happen in the life of the church. As we're saying, the purpose is not to pin down specific events here, there in terms of times, dates, fulfilments.

And on that note, if you ever pick up a book or an article that talks about Revelation and says, oh, this beast is Putin or this horse is Donald Trump or whatever, I wouldn't read the book, I wouldn't listen to it.

[22 : 53] I don't think that's how it should be interpreted. In terms of what's going to happen, whether that's in the first century church or whether it's today, Revelation's telling us that there's one key thing we're guaranteed to experience.

We're going to face challenges. And that's the context of the book. You see that in terms of John writing the book. He's on an island in exile.

He's basically been imprisoned on an island because of his faith in Jesus. And he's writing to people who are in the midst of tribulation and who are facing oppression, hardship and suffering. And it's important to note that Revelation isn't saying all that to be negative. Revelation is saying that to be realistic. Because behind all the elaborate and mysterious imagery of this book lies the very real life reality of suffering, of pain and of hardship.

But that's not a controversial thing to say because if you look at human history, that's exactly what we see. Whether it's science, politics, sociology, the environment, if you look at history, past, present and future, you see a repeated pattern of conflict, hardship, oppression and suffering.

[24 : 11] And perhaps worst of all is human behavior. You look at the way humans have behaved in the past and it's appalling. You look at the way humans treat each other today. It's embarrassing. You think about the way things are going in the future.

It's worrying. And all of that combines to explain why none of us really want to think about this stuff very often because when we do, it's depressing.

It's depressing to look at human history. It's depressing to analyze human behavior. And when we stop and think about past, present and future, all too often we can find ourselves thinking, what is the point?

What is the point of life? What is it all about? In the midst of that mess, there's one big thing that revelation is giving you.

It's not written to confuse you. It's not written to depress you. It's not written to scare you. Revelation is telling us about the things that must soon take place and it does that to give you something that we all desperately need.

[25 : 22] And so when you think of revelation, this is the one big word that I want you to remember. The book of revelation is all about encouragement.

That is what this book is about. In fact, out of Old Testament, professor used to say that revelation is the most encouraging book in the whole Bible and he's absolutely right because revelation tells us some amazing things.

And very briefly, I'm going to highlight four or five of them. Revelation tells us that God is sovereign. He's the Alpha and the Omega. That's the first letter and the last letter of the Greek alphabet.

So we would say he's and the A and the Z, the one who is, who was and who is to come the Almighty. Even though the world has rebelled against God, even though so many people think that God is an irrelevance, even though there was a Roman Empire, we thought that he was emperor, we thought that he was God and that he should be worshiped.

Even though the best that a secular world view can offer us is delayed oblivion, revelation reminds us that God is real and he reigns over everything.

[26 : 28] He is in control. Revelation reminds us that sin is serious. This imagery we have of Jesus white like wool, like snow, flame of fire, burnish bronze, that's the language of purity and authority.

Jesus is righteous and holy and pure. That means he takes sin seriously and thank God he does. Why is the world today so full of inequality?

Why do nations stand and watch people dying of drug addiction year on year? Why do we happily shop for cheap goods that have squeezed every last drop of cheap labour out of people in other nations?

Why do we think it's entertaining to talk about everything that's gone wrong in people's lives? It's all because we do not take injustice and inequality and selfishness and exploitation and greed seriously enough.

Revelation shows us that Jesus is not like that. And thank God he isn't. Revelation tells us that Jesus is supreme.

[27 : 36] You have that language here. Jesus, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth. Nothing and no one can threaten Jesus.

Nothing and no one can undo what he has achieved. Nothing and no one can stop him from saving to the uttermost all those who come to God through him. That means that if you're a Christian or if you become a Christian, nothing and no one can snatch you out of his hand.

Jesus is utterly supreme. Revelation tells us that the cross is central to everything. You have these beautiful words here speaking of how he's the one who's loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood.

He's the one who was pierced so that we can be saved. That reality needs to shape everything that we're going to read in the next two chapters over the next few weeks.

Jesus is writing to those whom he loves and whom he's freed by his blood. And that reality has also got to shape everything that we do as followers of Jesus. We are going into a week just now that is going to be full of bad news, full of challenges, full of reasons to be depressed.

[28 : 55] But Jesus has shown us on the cross that he loves you and that if we trust in him he will save us from all the rubbishness and brokenness of sin and of the mistakes that we've made.

That means that we have got reasons to be magnificently positive in the week ahead. And Revelation is telling us that we are bound together as a community, as followers of Jesus.

We are in a church community that belonged to him. He's made us a kingdom. We are partners together as John speaks of there at the bottom of the slide.

He's joined us together in a new society as one. We partner in joys, we partner in sufferings together. We are his, we're not on our own, we're together as a team.

And that's something that we absolutely want to do going into 2022. All of us here together. At every stage we're on in our journey with Jesus, whether we've been following him for many years or maybe we're only just maybe taking the first step or not even sure if we're taking that first step, we want to be together, supporting one another, helping one another.

[30 : 07] All of this is reminding us that Revelation is written to encourage us. Revelation is reminding us that our past, our present and our future is part of something bigger.

It's telling us that in and through Jesus we can have peace and hope and joy forevermore. And that's why if you go to the end of Revelation you will find the happiest ending that's ever been written.

But it's not a fairy tale, it's reality. This is where we discover the most encouraging message that the world has ever heard.

But all of that's really easy to forget. That's why as we go through a journey through these different locations over the next few weeks we have got to make sure that we're getting the basics right.

Part of that's going to involve making sure that we go back to what God is teaching us in his word.

Part of that's going to involve repenting of things that we're getting wrong. As we do so we're going to be encouraged to keep going no matter what.

[31 : 19] We're going to be made aware of our accountability to God and to one another and we're going to see the importance of working together as a congregation and in terms of our behaviour as individuals.

These are the basics that we want to get right. So I want to leave you with a question to think about. Often we ask about how we're doing.

We'll ask about certain things. How's your job? How's your Christmas? How's the house coming on? How's your dog? How's your whatever? The question I want you all to think about is this.

How are your basics? Amen.