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I

The Prologue of **CHRIST'S** *Revelation*

(1:1–8)

Many people are fascinated with the future. They faithfully read their horoscopes, seek out tarot-card readers, have their palms read, or consult psychics. All such attempts to discern the future, however, are in vain. God is the only One who knows and declares the future (Isaiah 44:7; 45:21; 46:9–10). Only in Scripture can truth about the future be found. The Old and New Testament writings provide glimpses of the future. The book of Revelation provides the most detailed look into the future in all of Scripture, unveiling the future history of the world, with the return of Christ and His glorious kingdom.

John begins his Revelation in 1:1–8 with two major sections. First, he presents the specific characteristics of this unique book. Second, he provides a preview of the second coming of Christ.

THE PROCLAMATION OF REVELATION'S SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS (1:1–6)

Many people are confused by the book of Revelation, viewing it as a bizarre mystery. However, far from hiding the truth, the book of Revelation reveals it. It tells how everything ends. Just as the creation account was written in clear detail, God has given a detailed record of the ending. Verses 1–6 provide eleven specific characteristics that reveal the uniqueness of Revelation.

1. Its Essential Nature

The Revelation (1:1a)

The Greek word for “revelation” appears eighteen times in the New Testament. In Luke 2:32, Simeon praised God for the infant Jesus, describing Him as “a Light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.” Simeon exulted that the Messiah had been made visible to men. Paul spoke in Romans 8:19 of the transformation of believers in glory as “the revealing of the sons of God.” Both Paul (1 Corinthians 1:7) and Peter (1 Peter 1:7) used the word to refer to the revelation of Christ at His second coming.

Revelation shares several significant divine truths. It warns the church of the danger of sin and instructs it about the need for holiness. It reveals the strength of Christ and that believers have to overcome Satan. It reveals the glory and majesty of God and depicts the reverent worship that constantly attends His throne. The book of Revelation reveals the end of human history, including the final political setup of the world, the career of Antichrist, and the final battle of Armageddon. It reveals the coming glory of Christ’s earthly reign during the millennial kingdom, the great white throne judgment, and depicts the eternal joy of the new heaven and the new earth. It reveals the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ over all human and demonic opposition.

Yet overarching all those features, Revelation communicates the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. It describes in detail the events

associated with His second coming, revealing His glory that will blaze forth as unmistakably as lightning flashing in a dark sky (Matthew 24:27).

2. *Its Central Theme of Jesus Christ* (1:1b)

While all Scripture is revelation from God (2 Timothy 3:16), the book of Revelation is *of* Jesus Christ. While this book is certainly revelation *from* Christ (22:16), it is also the revelation *about* Him.

Even a cursory glance through the book of Revelation reveals that Jesus Christ is its main theme. He is “the faithful witness” (1:5); “the first-born of the dead” (1:5); “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5); “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8; 21:6); the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:8); and “the Almighty” (1:8). Eight references can be found in just the first chapter! (See additional references in 1:17, 18.) The book of Revelation reveals the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in song, poetry, symbolism, and prophecy. In it the heavens are opened and its readers see, as did Stephen (Acts 7:56), visions of the risen, glorified Son of God.

3. *Its Divine Source which God gave Him* (1:1c)

The book of Revelation is the Father’s gift to the Son in a deep and marvelous sense. As a reward for His perfect, humble, faithful, holy service, the Father promised to exalt the Son:

Christ Jesus, . . . humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5, 8–11)

Christ's exaltation, promised in the last three verses of that passage, is described in detail throughout Revelation. The book of Revelation chronicles the Son's inheritance from the Father, ending in the showing of the full glory of Christ.

4. Its Human Recipients *to show to His bond-servants (1:1d)*

To further exalt and glorify His Son, the Father has graciously granted to a special group of people the privilege of understanding this book. John describes those people as Christ's "bond-servants," from a Greek word literally meaning "slave." The bond-servant was a special type of slave, one who served out of love and devotion to his master (cf. Exodus 21:5–6). This is why unbelievers find the book of Revelation such a mystery. It was not intended for them. It was given by the Father to the Son to show to those who willingly serve Him. Those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot expect to understand this book. "A natural man," explains Paul, "does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Corinthians 2:14). The unbelieving skeptic finds Revelation as nothing but confusion. Yet for willing bond-servants of Jesus Christ, this book unveils prophetic truth about the future of the world.

5. Its Prophetic Character *the things which must soon take place; (1:1e)*

Revelation's emphasis on future events sets it apart from all other New Testament books. The first four books of the New Testament are about the past, especially the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the next twenty-two are about the present, especially the life of the church. Revelation, though it contains some information about the past (Revelation 1) and the present (Revelation 2–3), focuses on the future.

A dual emphasis can be found in Revelation. One emphasis is the

portrayal of Christ in His future glory with the blessedness of the saints. The second emphasis is the judgment of unbelievers to eternal punishment. The profound and compelling truths in the book of Revelation result in both sorrow and joy.

Believers are not to try to set the “times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Instead, they are to follow the Lord’s warning to “be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matthew 24:42). The knowledge that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are soon to take place should motivate Christians to live holy, obedient lives (2 Peter 3:14).

6. Its Supernatural Delivery and He sent and communicated it by His angel (1:1f)

Revelation is unique in the New Testament because it is the only book sent and communicated by angels. As Jesus declared, “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches” (22:16). Angels were involved in the giving of the book of Revelation to John, just as they were in the giving of the Law to Moses (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrew 2:2). Not only were angels involved in transmitting the book of Revelation to John, but they also play a prominent role in the scenes it portrays. Angels appear in every chapter of Revelation except 4 and 13. The words “angel” or “angels” are used seventy-one times in the book of Revelation—more than in any other book in the Bible. In fact, one out of every four uses in Scripture of those words is in the book of Revelation. This book thus serves as an important source of information on the ministry of angels.

7. Its Human Author to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (1:1g-2)

The human agent to whom the angelic messengers communicated the book of Revelation is here identified as “His bond-servant John.” This was

John the apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James. John wrote the book of Revelation while in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9).

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 vision with the statement, “I, John” (1:9; 22:8)—an exclamation that expressed his amazement that he was receiving such overwhelming visions.

As he had loyally testified to the first coming of Christ (John 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:2; 4:14), so John faithfully proclaimed all that he saw concerning His second coming. The word of God expressed in the book of Revelation is the testimony about the coming glory of Christ given to His church and recorded by His faithful witness, John.

8. Its Promised Blessing

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; (1:3a)

The book of Revelation begins and ends with promises of blessing to those who read and obey it. In total, the book contains seven promises of blessing. (See “The Seven Beatitudes of Revelation.”)

Reading, hearing, and obeying the truths taught in the book of Revelation are to be a way of life for believers. Revelation is God’s final word to man, marking the completion of the canon of Scripture (22:18–19), and its scope encompasses the entire future of redemptive history (1:19). It is imperative that believers follow the truths it contains.

9. Its Compelling Urgency

for the time is near. (1:3b)

This phrase restates the truth taught in verse one. The Greek word for *time* here does not refer to time on a clock or calendar, but to seasons or eras. The next great era of God’s redemptive history is near. The imminent return of Christ has always been the church’s hope. Jesus commanded His followers to watch expectantly for His return (Luke 12:35–40). The apos-

cles Paul, Peter, James, and John all wrote that the day of His return is near. (See, for example, Romans 13:12, 1 Peter 4:7; James 5:7–9; 1 John 2:18.)

THE SEVEN BEATITUDES OF REVELATION

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1. *Blessed is he*

who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it. (1:3a)

2. *“Blessed are the dead*

who die in the Lord from now on!” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.” (14:13)

3. *“Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one*

who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame.” (16:15)

4. *“Blessed are those*

who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” (19:9)

5. *Blessed and holy is the one*

who has a part in the first resurrection. (20:6)

6. *“Blessed is he*

who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.” (22:7)

7. *Blessed are those*

who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city. (22:14)

Despite the skepticism of the scoffers, who demand, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:4), the Lord Jesus Christ will return. And His return is near.

10. *Its Trinitarian Benediction*

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4–5a)

Ancient letters named their writers at the beginning. John identifies himself as the author and names the seven churches in 1:11 as the recipients. “Grace to you and peace” was a standard greeting in New Testament letters, used here by John with an added Trinitarian conclusion.

The phrase “Him who is and who was and who is to come” identifies the first Person of the Trinity, God the Father, described here in human-like terms. The eternal Father God is the source of all the blessings of salvation, all grace, and all peace.

“The seven Spirits before His throne” refers to the Holy Spirit. The number seven depicts Him in His fullness (5:6; Isaiah 11:2; Zechariah 4:1–10). Grace and peace also flow from “Jesus Christ.” It is only fitting that John mentions Christ last, and gives a fuller description of Him, since He is the theme of Revelation.

Jesus is labeled as a “faithful witness,” One who always speaks and represents the truth. Next, He is “the firstborn of the dead.” Of all who have ever been or ever will be resurrected, He is the premier one. Third, He is “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” He is Lord, who according to the Father’s plan and the Spirit’s work, grants believers His royal blessing of grace and peace.

11. *Its Exalted Doxology*

To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:5b–6)

The work of Christ on behalf of believers caused John to burst forth in inspired praise to Him. In the present, Christ loves believers with an

unbreakable love (Romans 8:35–39). The greatest expression of that love came when He released us from our sins by His blood—a reference to the atonement provided by His sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf.

John concludes his doxology with the only proper response in light of the magnitude of the blessings Christ has given believers: “To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” This is to be the response of all who read Revelation with this future glory in mind.

THE PREVIEW OF CHRIST'S SECOND COMING (1:7–8)

The book of Revelation is the ultimate action thriller. Anyone who loves a great novel will certainly love this book. It contains drama, suspense, mystery, and horror. It tells of rebellion, unprecedented economic collapse, and the ultimate war of human history. Revelation is a book of astounding drama and horror, but also of hope and joy. It culminates with a happy ending, as sin and death are banished forever (21:4; 22:3).

In verses 7–8, John provides his readers with a preview of what will come later in the Revelation. In doing so, he reveals the theme of the book as the second coming of Christ. Five truths about His second coming are communicated for our understanding:

1. The Necessity of the Second Coming ***Behold, He is coming*** (1:7a)

Verse 7 begins the first great prophetic oracle of Revelation. “Behold” is intended to arouse the mind and heart to consider what follows. This is the first of its twenty-five uses in Revelation—a book filled with startling truths that demand careful attention.

The “Coming One” was a title for Christ. This Greek word (*Erchomai*) is used nine times in Revelation to refer to Jesus Christ; seven times by our Lord in reference to Himself. Thus, the theme of the book of Revelation is the Coming One, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Despite the scoffers who deny the second coming (2 Peter 3:3–4), the

Bible repeatedly affirms that Jesus will return. That truth appears in more than five hundred verses throughout the Bible. It has been estimated that one out of every twenty-five verses in the New Testament refers to the second coming. Jesus repeatedly spoke of His return (Matthew 16:27; 24–25; 26:64; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26) and warned believers to be ready for it (Matthew 24:42, 44; 25:13; Luke 12:40; 21:34–36). The return of the Lord Jesus Christ to this earth is a central theme in Scripture.

The hope that Christ will one day return and take believers to heaven to live forever in His presence provides hope and comfort for those who know Him (John 14:1–3; 1 Thessalonians 4:17–18).

2. The Glory of the Second Coming with the clouds, (1:7b)

Clouds in Scripture frequently symbolize God's presence. A cloud was used as the visible manifestation of God's presence with Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21–22; 16:10; Numbers 10:34). At Mount Sinai, "a thick cloud upon the mountain" symbolized God's presence (Exodus 19:16). When the Lord communicated with Moses at the Tent of Meeting, "the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the Lord would speak with Moses" (Exodus 33:9). Both the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34–38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:10–12) were filled with a cloud symbolizing God's glory at their dedications. Jesus ascended to heaven on a cloud (Acts 1:9). Believers will ascend with clouds at the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:17), and Christ will return with clouds (cf. Daniel 7:13; Matthew 24:30).

The clouds picture Christ's descent from heaven. More significant, they symbolize the brilliant light that accompanies God's presence. The appearance of the Christ and the brilliance of innumerable angels and the redeemed who accompany Him will be both an indescribable and terrifying event.

**3. *The Scope of the Second Coming
and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the
tribes of the earth will mourn over Him.* (1:7c)**

During the incarnation, Christ's glory was hidden. Only Peter, James, and John caught a glimpse of it at the transfiguration. At His second coming, every eye will see Him. His glory will be obvious to all humanity.

John divides those who will see the second coming into two groups. "Those who pierced Him" does not refer to the Roman soldiers involved in Christ's crucifixion but to the unbelieving Jews who instigated His death. In Zechariah 12:10 God says, "I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn." Peter affirmed that the Jewish people were responsible for Christ's execution, boldly declaring

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. (Acts 2:22–23; cf. 3:14–15)

Israel's mourning, noted in Zechariah 12:10, will be that of genuine repentance. Many Jews will be saved during the tribulation, both the 144,000 and their converts. But for many others, the second coming will be the time of their salvation. It will be "in that day [that] a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity" (Zechariah 13:1).

John describes the second group as "all the tribes of the earth," a reference to the unbelieving Gentile nations. Like the Jewish people, they will also mourn over Christ. Some of that mourning may relate to the

repentance of those who are saved at that time (7:9–10, 14). But unlike the Jewish nation, the Gentiles' mourning will not generally result from genuine repentance. "Mourn" is from *koptō*, which literally means "to cut." The word became associated with mourning due to the pagans' practice of cutting themselves when in extreme grief or despair. First Kings 18:28 records that the frenzied, panicked prophets of Baal "cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them" in a desperate attempt to get their god's attention. The Israelites were strictly forbidden to engage in such pagan rituals (Leviticus 19:28; Deuteronomy 14:1).

The Gentiles' mourning will mostly be prompted by terror, not repentance. They will mourn not for the Christ they rejected, but over their doom. (9:21).

4. The Response to the Second Coming

So it is to be. Amen. (1:7d)

Experiencing the response of both believers and unbelievers to Christ's second coming, John includes his own response. Using the strongest words of affirmation both in Greek and Hebrew, John pleads for the Lord Jesus Christ to return before noting words from Christ's own voice.

5. The Certainty of the Second Coming

I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (1:8).

In this verse the Lord God puts His signature on the prophecy of the second coming recorded in the previous verse. He calls Himself "the Alpha and the Omega," emphasizing His perfect knowledge. Alpha and Omega are the first and final letters in the Greek alphabet. Second, as the one "who is and who was and who is to come," God is forever present; He is not confined by time or space. His promise that He will come settles the issue. Third, "the Almighty" affirms His perfect power. Nothing can stop Him from carrying out His will.

These terms also imply that He is the creator and consummation of all history. He is *the Beginning and the End* (cf. 22:13).

It has been noted that:

- Jesus came the first time in humiliation. He will return in exaltation.
- He came the first time to serve. He will return to be served.
- He came the first time as the suffering servant. He will return as the conquering king.

The challenge the book of Revelation makes to every person is to be ready for His return.

Only those “who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8), who love Him and acknowledge Him as the rightful king, will enjoy the blessings of His kingdom.