

## Revelation Class #1

Welcome to the Revelation class. I know we have all heard strange and sensational things about the Book of Revelation. Be honest now. You won't hurt my feelings. Raise your hand if you think this is an odd choice for us to study. That's ok. I understand your concern. One of the first goals of this class is to address the sensational claims about Revelation and see if they are true. Another question. Raise your hand if you have never really read or studied Revelation much in your Christian life? I was a disciple for 25 years before I ever took a serious look at Revelation. I think it's time we all did so. The Book of Revelation is in the Bible for a reason. God didn't make a mistake by giving us this Book. He knew what He was doing. I think it is time we reclaimed this Book from the sensationalists and let it serve for us the purpose that God intended. When I first studied Revelation seriously a few years ago, I found it was a very encouraging Book. My goal with this class is for all of us to be very encouraged and built up in our faith by the message of Revelation.

Let's read Chapter 1. :1-3. Right off the bat, we get some encouragement. We are promised a blessing for listening to the Book of Revelation and keeping what is written here. Raise your hand if you want a blessing. I get a blessing too for reading it aloud. Let's keep going. :4-8. More encouragement. Grace and peace from God and from Jesus. Who loves us and freed us from sin by his blood. Who made us into a kingdom and priests to God. Amen. He will come on the clouds. Everyone will see him. Our God is the beginning and the end. Eternal. Almighty. Are you encouraged?

:9-20 Revelation is full of amazing and incredible images. Here is our first one. Someone speaking with a voice like a trumpet. A voice like the roar of many waters. Think about a big waterfall or the pounding of the surf on the beach. Eyes like flame. Feet like burnished bronze. Stars in his hand. Sword from his mouth. Face shining like the sun. Who is this? Jesus. One who died and is alive forevermore. But not some milquetoast feltboard Jesus. A very impressive Jesus. So amazing that if you saw him you would fall down in fear as though dead. A glorified Jesus. A Jesus who conveys great power and majesty. Someone we can worship. Someone worthy of being our Lord. Someone who commands our attention. Someone we should listen to when he sends us a message. Are you encouraged that this is who you are following? This is who you are trying to get other people to follow!

We also learn something crucial here that will help us understand the rest of Revelation. Jesus is standing among 7 golden lampstands and holding 7 stars in his hand. What does that mean? He explains the "mystery" to John. The lampstands are the 7 churches and the stars are the angels of the 7 churches. The lampstands and the stars are not to be taken literally. They are merely symbols for something else. It says lampstands but it means churches. It does not mean there is literally a lampstand in heaven for every church on earth. A lamp is a cool symbol for a church. Jesus said something similar in Mat 5 when he said we are the light of the world. He said a lamp should not be put under a basket but should be put on a table so the light can shine. "In the same way" our good deeds are to shine before men. "In the same way" means it is a figure of speech. We are not literal lights; we are spiritual lights. Our good deeds shine in the spiritual darkness of

this world. We still have to turn on the switch to light a room literally. In Revelation most of the fantastic images are symbols for something else. They are not to be taken literally. Says lampstand means church. Says star means angel. Most of the images in Revelation work this way.

We get a lot of information about Revelation in the first chapter. Who wrote the Book? John. That's a very common name. Which John is it talking about? If you were a first Century Christian and heard that Jesus gave a Revelation to John – who would first spring to mind? John the Apostle - the Son of Zebedee. The beloved disciple who also wrote the gospel of John and the letters of John. Bible believing scholars generally agree John the Apostle is the John who received this Revelation. Early Christian writers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century onward say it was John the Apostle. I think the Book itself points us to the Apostle John. In v. 2 it describes John as one who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ. In Acts 1:22 the Bible says that apostles are men who are witnesses to the Resurrection. Peter emphasizes the apostles as witnesses again in Acts 2:32. Look at John 21:24. Here the author of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel is identified as the beloved disciple described in the Gospel. What does it say about him? He is bearing witness to these things. The same phrase used of John in Rev 1:2.

Who was the Book of Revelation written to? The 7 churches of Asia starting with Ephesus. Let's look at a map. Ephesus is on the Aegean Sea at the western end of what we today call Turkey. It was the leading city of the Roman province of Asia. This is where the continent of Asia got its name, but the Roman province was much smaller, making up only the westernmost section of modern Turkey. The other 6 cities mentioned here formed a semicircle around Ephesus. Turn to Acts 19. Who established the church in Ephesus? Paul on his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey. Building the church in Ephesus was the main focus of that journey. 19:1; 8-10. Paul spent two years here and it says the whole province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. These 7 churches all got their start at this time, as the gospel spread out from Ephesus. If you look at Col 4:16, you'll see that Paul wrote a letter to the church in Laodicea. Some scholars believe Paul's letter to the Ephesians was intended to be read to all the churches in Asia.

Where did John receive the Revelation and write the Book? On the Island of Patmos. He says he was there on account of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus. Patmos was a penal colony. An ancient commentary of Revelation says John was sent there to work in the mines. Patmos is in the Aegean Sea not far from Ephesus. The same 2<sup>nd</sup> Century writers who say John the Apostle wrote the Book of Revelation also say he lived and pastored the church in Ephesus in the final years of his life. He was sent to Patmos from Ephesus and then returned there after his release.

When was the Book of Revelation written? The best evidence suggests John was exiled to Patmos near the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian in about 95AD and then released after Domitian's death in 96AD. It is possible Revelation was written earlier – some think Rev 17:10 suggests the Book may have been written during the reign of Domitian's father Vespasian, but the best evidence is the mid 90s. About this same time Domitian conducted a severe persecution of Christians generally. The Book of Revelation is full of references to persecution and the blood of the saints and this

almost certainly refers to the persecution of Domitian. The historical background of this persecution is important to understand Revelation.

In the Book of Acts, which covers the history of the Church from Jesus death around 33AD until Paul's first imprisonment in Rome about 60AD, persecution of Christians was primarily from the Jews. The Roman government in Acts seems largely neutral and at times even protects Christians from Jewish persecution. The first major persecution of Christianity by the Roman government occurred in 64AD under the Emperor Nero. There was a great fire in Rome that some suspected Nero of starting as part of his plan to rebuilt Rome. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire and initiated an intense persecution. Christians were dressed in animal skins and thrown to the dogs, crucified or placed on stakes in his garden and burned. Peter and Paul were both executed during this time. Nero died in 68AD and was succeeded (after a civil war) by the Emperor Vespasian. Govt persecution of Christians ended with Nero's death and did not occur again until the mid 90s. The civil war in 68AD also led to the Jewish revolt against Rome. Vespasian's oldest son Titus was the general who put down this rebellion and destroyed Jerusalem in 70AD. Titus later succeeded his father as Emperor, but only for a couple of years until his death in 81AD. Titus' brother Domitian ruled until 96AD.

Religion in the Roman world was polytheistic. They had numerous gods we are familiar with from Greek mythology. In the Roman Empire, a tradition began of deifying Roman emperors and making them part of this pantheon of gods. A cult of Emperor worship became part of the official support for the Roman Empire. Essentially governmental agencies known as *concordia* promoted the worship of Rome and its emperors. Temples to this cult were constructed in several of the cities of Asia to which Revelation is addressed. At first Roman emperors were only deified after their death. However, during the reign of Domitian, he referred to himself as *dominus et deus* – Lord and God. Citizens were expected to offer incense and say “Caesar is Lord.” There is some evidence that to conduct business, you needed a certificate showing you had fulfilled your duty of acknowledging Caesar as Lord. Christians refused to do this. For them only Jesus was Lord and they would not name anyone else as Lord. If they would not name him as Lord, they were subject to imprisonment and execution. Various disasters were blamed on Christians. Another intense persecution occurred under the Emperor Trajan a decade later in 108AD. Christians were beaten, beheaded, and devoured by wild beasts - thousands were put to death. Other Roman persecution occurred in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century.

Turn to Rev 13. In the face of such intense persecution by the powerful Roman Empire, disciples needed a special message of encouragement to get them through. A message that would also encourage subsequent generations of Christians during subsequent periods of Roman persecution. I believe this is the reason the Book of Revelation was written. Read v.10. Revelation is a call for the endurance of the faith of the saints in the face of imprisonment and death from the government. As we shall see, it gives many reasons to find courage despite persecution. It is a message of great encouragement when encouragement was most desperately needed. It is the story of the life and death battle between the mighty Roman Empire and the young church of Jesus Christ. I think we will all be inspired and encouraged as we read this incredible story.