



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Text Revelation 1:1-3

Revelation

“The Book with a Blessing”

TRANSCRIPT

We’re beginning a new series this morning, a series of studies in the book of Revelation, and so our text this morning is Revelation 1:1-3. It’s not a lengthy text of Scripture, but we will spend a great deal of our time this morning on introductory material. Our text is Revelation 1:1-3, and John writes:

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel 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.

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.”

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in prayer.

[Prayer] Lord, it’s good to be with your people on a Sunday morning. It’s good to open the Word of God and to study it. We pray you bless us as we do. As we come to this first passage in the book of Revelation, as we approach our study of this last book of the Bible, we pray that you bless us and make this a rich study for us. The book promises a blessing.

We pray that that will be our experience, and we can begin this series with the confidence that that will indeed be our experience. It’s always the result and the experience of studying your Word. We need to be doing that. We need to be doing it daily, but this is a particular time in which we are instructed by the apostles to gather together, to not forsake the meeting together of the saints.

To gather on the first day of the week, as the church has done all through its history, and be under your Word, and be taught and ministered to by the Spirit of God. And we confess, to begin with, that he is the one who is our teacher. We look to you to provide that teaching for us, that his ministry would enlighten our minds.

Illuminate them that we might understand the things that we’ ll study, not only this morning, but throughout the weeks and months to come, and that we would be built up in the faith through the study of this great book of the Bible. So we pray, Lord, that you bless us. This is a special time of the week, and it’ s a special experience because this is a time when the Spirit of God speaks to us through your Word.

So build us up in the faith, we pray, and equip us for the week to come, and for the weeks and the months to come, that we would live as faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ. Just as John himself was, and so many others have been; may we be equipped for that throughout the week, wherever we may be. We pray for ourselves spiritually, but we pray also for our material needs, and there are many.

We are continually, Father, looking to you for everything that we have. Our very existence, moment by moment, is really the product of your will. You will us to be at every moment, and if you were to change, we would cease to be. And you’ re faithful to give us life, and to provide for all of the material needs of life. We are instructed by our Lord to pray for our daily bread.

And that’ s a reminder that every day we’ re dependent upon you for the material things of life, and we can all testify that you are a faithful God, and you provide for us. And so, Father, we do that now. We pray for our material needs. We thank you for your faithfulness, and pray that you bless those who have particular needs; so many, Lord, whose names are on our prayer requests list, and pray that you would give them encouragement and healing.

And the encouragement that comes as knowing that you are in complete control, and your hand is upon us, and you are working out your will in our lives, even in the great trials of life. Surely we’ ll see that very clearly in our studies in this great book of Revelation. We commit our time to you now, Lord, and pray you bless us. Bless us materially. Bless us spiritually. Bless us in that way, and prepare our hearts for a time of study together. We pray these things in Christ’ s name. Amen.

[Message] In his *Divine Comedy*, Danté inscribed over the gates of hell the words, “Abandon all hope, you who enter.” There are a lot of people who feel those words ought to be written over the book of Revelation. For them, it is a closed book, and they feel little hope of knowing its meaning. It’s been a puzzle to many. One New Testament scholar described it as “a weird and fantastic book, full of angels and trumpets and earthquakes, of beasts and dragons and demons of the pit.”

Luther didn’t like it. He said he “held it in low esteem.” He never wrote a commentary on it. Calvin never wrote a commentary on the book of Revelation. Zwingli said it wasn’t a book of the Bible. Yet it was widely accepted by the early church as a book of the Bible, and it is the only book in the Bible that explicitly promises a blessing to those who read it. That’s how it begins, and that’s how it ends.

We read in verse 3 of our text in chapter 1, “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy.” Later, at the end, in 22:7, John writes, “Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book.” So we don’t abandon hope when we come to the book of Revelation. We increase our hope. It is written to give hope, and we anticipate this study giving us a great blessing.

John titled the book, “The Apocalypse.” The word “apocalypse” is the Greek word *apokálypsis*, and it means “unveiling” or “revelations,” so we translate the title “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” But there were a number of books circulating in the first century which have come to be known as *apokálypseis*, or apocalyptic literature. They claim to unveil the future and explain God’s purpose in history by using fantastic images and symbols.

And they’re full of angels, and monsters, and mountains. Many of them are Jewish in origin, and conclude with God suddenly destroying the evil powers of the world and establishing his kingdom on the earth, which they generally anticipated happening at a relatively recent time in regards to the writings of their books. So they were looking for that to have occurred millennia ago.

Well, many scholars today connect the book of Revelation to that class or that genre of writing, and there are obvious similarities between the book of Revelation and some of those apocalyptic writings. But there are significant differences. The hope of apocalyptic literature is based on a future event, the coming kingdom. Hope in the book of Revelation is based in the past, on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

And very importantly, while John titles the book “The Apocalypse,” “The Revelation,” he’s not describing it there in terms of the type of literature that it is. He’s giving us in that word and that description the contents of his book. It is an apocalypse in the sense that it is divine revelation, and this is truth that has been given to him by Christ, who had received it from his Father.

In verse 3, he does tell us the kind of literature that it is. He tells us the kind of book that it is. He describes it as a prophecy, and that’s where this book fits within the Bible, with the prophetic books of the Bible, with Isaiah and Ezekiel, the great prophets of the Old Testament. The book of Revelation is that kind of book. In fact, one of the commentators, George Eldon Ladd, stated that “While the book of Revelation is filled with quotes and references from the Old Testament, it does not have one reference to Jewish apocalyptic writings.”

So the book of Revelation is a prophecy. It doesn’t come out of a school of strange literature and fantastic imaginations. Like all of the books of the Bible, it was inspired by God. This is God-breathed. Now, it was written when persecution was occurring throughout the empire. In fact, when we come to 2:13, we’ll read of a saint, a great Christian martyr, named Antipas, Christ’s witness, who was killed for the faith.

John wrote this, then, in hard times, and he wrote it to encourage the church by revealing God’s plan for the ages, and to give Christians perspective on the future so that they could have and live with hope in the present. By the end of the first century the church needed that hopeful perspective, particularly in the Roman province of Asia, to which the seven letters of this book in chapters 2 and 3 were written.

That Roman province is in the western part of Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey, and at the time that John wrote this book to those seven churches, persecution was occurring, and also apostasy. People were falling away. Years before, the gospel had been preached throughout the region; many people had believed and become Christians. We read about this in Acts chapter 19.

And the amazing ministry that the apostle Paul had in the city of Ephesus, and how that ministry spread throughout all of Asia, so that everyone, Luke writes, heard the gospel. And many, multitudes, responded in faith. And as they did, they were taught about Christ. They were taught that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. That he had been rejected by his people and crucified, but that was God’s plan.

That fit within God’s plan and program, and that was the very means that God used for saving his people. And the proof of that was Christ had risen from the dead, and not only had he risen from the dead, he had ascended into heaven. He is seated and enthroned at the right hand of God. But that’s temporary. He would return, and he will establish his kingdom on the earth. And that was the promise, and that is the hope that the church has, and that’s what the Christians of the first century were taught.

Christians look for Christ’s return. They hoped in that. But years had gone by and nothing happened. The empire increased in its strength. Emperor worship and idolatry flourished. Persecution of Christians began to occur, and many were falling away from the faith. By the end of the apostolic age, there was widespread apostasy. The New Testament epistles of 2 Timothy, 2 Peter, and Jude speak of that.

The last decades of the first century were discouraging times; times that try men’s souls. Where was the promise of Christ’s coming? The mockers seemed to have had it right, that all things continue as they had from the very beginning of the world. Nothing’s changed. Tomorrow’s going to be just like today, just like yesterday. This hope of a coming Christ is a pipe dream. It’s not going to occur.

And so people were discouraged, and it was to a perplexed and distressed church that John wrote this book. His main message, the theme of the book, is found in verse 7 of chapter 1. “Behold, He is coming in the clouds, and every eye will see Him.” Leon Morris wrote, “We must not think of it” – that is, think of this book, the book of Revelation – “as a kind of intellectual puzzle sent to a relaxed church, with time on its hands and an inclination for solving mysteries.”

It was sent to a little, persecuted, frustrated church; one which did not know what to make of the situation in which it found itself. John writes to meet the need of that church. And that’s the church today; in fact, as Morris put it, “there is perhaps no age for which the essential teaching of the book of Revelation is more relevant than for our age.” It is a book that deals with great powers on the earth, and its scope is worldwide.

We live in an age that has the potential of unleashing annihilating powers and plagues on a global scale. That’s never been true until the last 60 years. So we live in a world that is apocalyptic. We live in an age of great anxiety and fear about the future. Now, there are some people that don’t have much fear about the future, but it’s not because there’s nothing to fear; it’s because they just put it aside.

It’s kind of like death. How do people deal with death? Well, they just don’t think about it. They just assume that tomorrow’s going to come, just as it did today. But those who think, those who read their papers, those who really reflect upon the world’s situation today, must be wondering where things are headed, and wondering if anyone is in charge, or if the world is out of control, driven by fate, or driven by forces that are beyond anyone’s control.

The book of Revelation addresses all of that. And yet though there is no book more relevant for our age than the book of Revelation, there are few books more neglected or more misunderstood than this one. One reason is certainly the images and the symbols of the book. They are puzzling and daunting, and a person’s first read through the book would leave them mystified, I suppose.

But they are not arbitrary, and they’re not left to the imagination to interpret. There is a system here. Some have found a parallel – and a number of commentators have made this observation – a parallel with the modern-day political cartoon. And the purpose of the cartoon is to give a message about some situation, either locally or nationally or internationally, and so prominent people, like national or world leaders, are made identifiable in certain ways, usually by exaggerating their features.

Then you can think back on some of the political figures of modern times and how they were depicted. John Kennedy’s hair was a very distinctive characteristic of him, and Richard Nixon’s nose, and they would take these kinds of features and exaggerate them so that they didn’t look like the person, but you knew it was the person. It’s a symbolic way of representing someone.

And we do that on a national scale, with nations. Characters often represent countries. For example, Uncle Sam represents the United States, and John Bull represents Great Britain. Or animals represent nations. There’s the American eagle, the British lion, the Russian bear, the Chinese dragon, and you see one of these images and you know what nation is being represented in it.

We see these things, and as I say, we immediately know what is being said. The Bible does that as well. You go back to the book of Daniel and you see a lot of this, and Daniel has a strong similarity with the book of Revelation, and was probably the pattern for many of these apocalyptic books that were written. But in the book of Daniel in chapter 7, monsters come out of the sea.

Now, we’re not to understand that literally; that’s a vision that John literally saw, but all of that imagery is symbolical of something. The sea represents the Gentile nations throughout the Bible. It’s not difficult to interpret. And the monsters represent world empires, seen from God’s perspective. They’re not glorious – they’re hideous. They’re sinful, they’re rebellious, and so they’re pictured in that way.

And the prophets even brought images and characters that were common in some of the ancient pagan myths of the day, and would have been well known by the people of that day. We have an example of that in Isaiah 27, where Isaiah writes of Egypt and Pharaoh as leviathan the twisted serpent, and that’s a prominent figure in ancient mythology, the serpent, leviathan.

And as the people read that, and read how God would destroy leviathan, they knew what the prophet was saying. They knew the imagery; they understood it. It was very vivid and common in that day. This is what’s happening in the book of Revelation. There is a system to the interpretation. Now, that’s not to say it’s always easy to interpret these things. When we get to the trumpets of chapters 8 and 9, and the bottomless pit belches out smoke and locusts and scorpions, I’m not going to be dogmatic about my interpretations.

I think I understand the vision that’s given there, but there’ll be caution in the way it’s presented. I’m pretty sure that the locusts and the scorpions are not helicopters and tanks with American flags. That’s a popular kind of interpretation. It’s alluring because it makes things seem so relevant, and even imminent, but I don’t think that’s the way we interpret the book of Revelation.

So we have to be very careful, and we have to even be ready to admit that we don’t understand all of the details of this book. I’m certainly prepared to admit that. But then of course that’s true of any book of the Bible. No one has a complete handle on everything, and we are all fallible, and we must be ready to admit that whatever book of the Bible we’re studying, there are some things that we simply don’t know yet.

Maybe we’ll know them next year, or ten years down the road, but as we study, we learn and we grow. It’s certainly true of this book. Nevertheless, and in spite of the real difficulties, I think that the book of Revelation is very understandable. It has an important message for us today in the 21st century, just as it did for those in the 1st century. The message is simple.

The future of the world does not belong to the Roman emperor, or to any powerful ruler of this age. It belongs to Christ, who has saved his people and will establish his

kingdom on the earth. This is a book that sets forth very clearly the absolute sovereignty of God. He has his powerful hand on history, and he is guiding it to its appointed end. History is not circular, as the Greeks believed.

History is not the ages endlessly repeating themselves, like the changing of the seasons of the year, like an endless wheel going around but going nowhere. History is not a circle; history is a line. It is linear. It is advancing. It’s not pointless, as modern man believes. It has meaning and a goal, and that goal is the kingdom of God. But there are also evil powers in the world working against that goal.

Working for their own ends, their own kingdom, the devil and his minions. And in the future the man of sin, the antichrist, will come on the scene and join in that opposition. There are real powers at work in this world – evil powers, malevolent powers, strong powers. And to understand the world and how it works, we must understand that. The book of Revelation uncovers, unveils all of that, and it shows us the evil that exists.

But it also shows us that that evil, as strong as it is, as pervasive as it is, will not prevail. We have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who is God’s Son, and that too is one of the great teachings of this book; one of the central themes of the book of Revelation. He is very God of very God. He is the Almighty. So he’s well able to defeat the devil and his forces, and save all of his elect ones, and he will do that.

That’s what the book sets forth very clearly. That’s our hope. And it is important that we understand it, important that we believe it, and live in the present light of that triumphant future. The kingdom is coming, and what we do today counts for all eternity. The book of Revelation reinforces that. What you do today is not insignificant, and it is used of God in the furthering of his kingdom and his program, and it will be greatly rewarded.

Now, briefly, just a few words about the author and background of the book. We know the author is John. He identifies himself in verses 1, 4, and 9, and we take him to be John the apostle. The early church accepted that. In verse 9 he says that he was on the island of Patmos, because of his testimony for Christ, and calls himself “a fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom.”

So John was exiled to Patmos for his faithful ministry as an apostle. It was, as the book indicates, a time when the church was suffering some persecution. Persecution happened midway in the first century under the reign of Nero. It was intense under him.

That’s the first great persecution of the church. But as great and intense as it was, it was chiefly limited to the city of Rome, and rather brief.

When John and the church were undergoing persecution, what they were experiencing was widespread. It wasn’t localized in one place, in the capital; it was throughout the empire. It happened later, during the reign of Domitian, about A.D. 95. It was an era when emperor worship was advancing. Now, emperor worship was older than Domitian; it had begun under Julius Caesar.

But many of the emperors didn’t take it too seriously. At least they didn’t take themselves to be Gods, and many of them refused worship, but Domitian was different. He not only accepted it – he thought that he was divine. He liked to be called “our lord and god.” That was a title that was to be ascribed to Domitian, and that’s a title that John gave to Christ. No human is lord and god – no mere human – and John refused to worship a mere man.

And because of his refusal to do that, and his refusal to ascribe that title to Domitian, he was probably exiled to Patmos. But there on that rocky island he became the author of this book and prophecy. It is a revelation that Jesus had promised to give to his disciples. Back in the Upper Room discourse, in John 14:26, and then again in John 16:13, the Lord said that he would send the Holy Spirit, who would reveal what is to come; future things.

And he did that with the book of Revelation. Now, you find that in other writings of the apostles. Paul gives us eschatological passages, passages about the future; Peter does the same. But this book is a book in which the future dominates. That’s primarily what it is. And that’s indicated in the simple, three-part outline that Christ gave to John in 1:19. This gives us a very nice outline of the book.

It divides very simply into three parts. John is instructed to “write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things.” Well, first, the things that he had seen, they are the vision of Christ given in chapter 1. The things which are are the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. And then the things which will take place after these things are the events still future from chapters 4 through 22.

So there’s past, present, and future to this book. The vision that John sees in chapter 1 is past when he begins to write. And as he begins to write the book, he addresses it to the 7 churches of Asia Minor in chapters 2 and 3, and that’s present. They were in

existence while he was writing. In fact, as we’ll point out as we go through a study of those churches, they were historical churches, but they are representative of churches in every age.

The problems they face, the challenges they face, the incentive that Christ gives to them – that all applies today. We face the same kind of problems. So that is the present. Chapter 4 on is yet future, and so the book from chapter 4 to 22 is a book about eschatology – about last things, about the future – maybe the near future; maybe things that are soon to begin to occur in this world.

But whether they are near or far, the events that we will read about – the past, the present, the future – all of these things have both moral and spiritual relevance for the church today. J.B. Philips wrote a translation of the New Testament over 50 years ago. It’s very popular. I can remember growing up hearing people quote J.B. Philips. I have a few copies of his translation. It’s a very good translation of the New Testament.

But he described the experience of translating the book of Revelation as, in his words, “thrilling.” He wrote that “the translator is carried not into some never-never land of fancy, but into the ever-ever land of God’s eternal values and judgments.” And we could add to that that God’s ways and values and judgments are timeless and timely. They’re relevant for today.

Everything that we read in this book is relevant for today, whether the events will unfold shortly or in centuries to come. Now, John begins this great and final book of the Bible with its title, the *Apokálupsis*, the Revelation of Jesus Christ, and that statement gives the whole nature of the book. As we’ve already pointed out, *apokálupsis* or apocalypse means the uncovering or the unveiling of something hidden.

In other words, this is a book that reveals things that man could not discover of his own accord. Men can search and study and think and ponder and philosophize and speculate – they’ll never come to these things. This is something that can only be known by revelation. So it’s not a book of human wisdom. It’s not a book of philosophical speculation. It is revelation, divine revelation.

It is the uncovering of what God has made known. It’s the uncovering of his plan of the ages. John calls it “the revelation of Jesus Christ,” and that brings us to something of an exegetical question, interpretive question. What does he mean “of Jesus Christ,” because that could mean the revelation of him in the sense that it’s about Jesus Christ, or it

could mean the revelation of Christ, meaning Christ is the source of it; it is a revelation given by Jesus Christ.

And in a sense, both are true, but probably the main meaning of that title is the revelation that Jesus Christ gave. In verse 2, John speaks of it as “the testimony of Jesus Christ.” So it is his revelation. This isn’t John’s production. He is just the reporter, and he will swear, as it were, under oath that what he has seen and reported is true. He’s the reporter, he’s not the producer of it.

In fact, it didn’t even originate with Jesus. As John explains further, Christ received it from his Father, and having received it from the Father, Christ gave it to an angel to reveal to John, so there are, in all, five stages of transmission. And what a pure channel of communication it is, from the Father to the Son to the angel to the apostle to the church, to the readers. So this is a book that has great authority behind it – the trinity, the angels, the apostles.

This, then, is the pure Word of God. It is therefore necessary reading, and reliable reading. We can count upon the things of this book being true. John then explains it. He says, “It is about events which must soon take place.” It is a prophecy. But what does he mean when he says, “Soon take place?” That’s puzzling, isn’t it, because John didn’t write this yesterday; John wrote this nearly 2,000 years ago.

So nearly 2,000 years have passed, and yet he says it’s “soon to take place.” It doesn’t sound very soon. Maybe John was wrong, and some say he was, and that’s probably the easiest solution to the question and the problem of this word “soon take place.” John got it wrong. Well, as I say, that’s the easiest solution, but if that’s the solution, then this is no prophecy, and we need not read any further.

There are other answers, better answers. It may mean that when the events begin to happen, they will happen soon. They will happen quickly. They will happen suddenly. Suddenly these things will begin to unfold. Or we’re to understand “soon” from the prophetic perspective. You’ve heard it stated, you’ll be familiar with the analogy that prophets, when they looked through time, saw events much like one would see mountain ranges.

We look at a mountain range, and we can see a line of mountains, and then there’s one behind it, and we really can’t get the right perspective on it. They don’t seem distant to us. It seems like one’s right behind the other, and we don’t see the valleys between. And

that’s much the way the prophets looked at events. They’ll be events that have years, thousands of years, between them.

And yet they’re maybe one or two words between the two descriptions, and so they had that perspective. They didn’t always see the gaps in time, and John perhaps did not see the long ages between his day and the last days. So from that perspective, they are coming soon. But the speed with which they occur is not according to our perception, but God’s perception. And God looks at things differently from the way we look at them.

He is both inside and outside of time. He sees it all at once. He sees the end from the beginning, much like we might look at a chart of history with a timeline, and all of the dates and the names on it. It may begin with the beginning of the world and end with the new heavens and the new earth, and we have all kinds of things at dates on that. Or you take a more restricted history – American history, with the Mayflower, and the date, 1620.

And you move on through the Puritan era to the Colonial era, and then the Revolutionary War in 1776, and move on to the other wars that we have fought – to the Civil War, to World War I and II, and have all these events marked and dated, with names. And we look at that, and we can look at all at once. Well, that’s how God sees things; he sees it all at once. He’s in it, he’s outside of it; it’s all in its perspective to him.

And so with him, as Peter said, “One day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day.” The point is it will happen – all of it. It is a certainty. And John lays some stress on that with the word “must”– “Things which must soon take place, things which must certainly take place.” These events have been sovereignly determined, not in the sense of some mechanical determinism or fatalism.

Human decisions and actions enter into all of this; we see this. We’ll see later in our studies how the prayers of the saints come up to the throne of God, and the judgments that follow are in some way connected with that. That our prayers for our Lord’s return in some sense enter into the plan of God to bring this thing about. But God has sovereignly planned everything, and he is working out his plan, and it must, and it will take place.

Christ will come and triumph and rule and reign. Again, that is reliable, because this is a revelation from God. This is not mere speculation. This is not some strange apocalyptic writer writing out fanciful stories and ideas. This is an apostle who has received revelation from an angel, who received it from Christ, who received it from the Father, and it was communicated to John, he says.

It was communicated to John by means of signs or symbols, and that’s really what the word “communicated” there in verse 1 means. It can be translated “signified.” You probably have that alternate reading or that translation in the margin of your text – “signified,” or we might even translate it, “sign-ified.” It speaks of symbols, and these things, this revelation was communicated to John in that way; in signs and symbols.

And the meaning of the symbols of the book, that which we ponder over, the meaning is found in the Old Testament. So it is all about literal people and events, but described in symbolic language, which should caution us against taking the descriptions literally. This statement that John makes here in verse 1 from the outset gives us an understanding of how we’re to interpret this book.

These things were signified, sign-ified, to him; given to him in symbols, and that’s how we’re to look at it. So for example in chapter 13, when we read of a beast coming out of the sea, we’re not to think of some literal monster – something like Godzilla coming out of the water. The sea and the beast have symbolic meaning, and we need to interpret them in that way.

All of this revelation, John says, was signified to him, and as I suggested earlier, the code for understanding the signs and the symbols is found in the Old Testament. The Bible is self-sufficient; it interprets itself, and it interprets these signs and symbols for us. Now, John swears that all of this is true. He recorded it all, as fantastic as some of it may seem, just as he saw it – just as he saw things in the visions that were given to him.

And that’s what he affirms in verse 2. He says that he “testified to the Word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.” And much of it is what he literally saw in visions. But it is for our reading and for our understanding, so in verse 3 John promises a blessing for those who do that, for those who read. “Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy.”

The word “read” means to read aloud; that’s how people generally read in the ancient world. In his *Confessions*, Augustine speaks of coming to the house of Ambrose, the great preacher of that day, in the city of Milan. And as he and his friend approached Ambrose’s study, they saw Ambrose sitting there reading. Ambrose wasn’t aware that they were outside the room.

And Augustine was very surprised by the fact that he was reading to himself; reading, as he put it, while his voice and tongue remained silent. Evidently, that was very unusual in that time, and we can assume that to be the case in the first century. But John is

not really saying you need to read out loud rather than read silently. He means read it publicly; that’s the idea. This is to be read in the church service.

And that indicates that John is affirming to us that this book is Scripture. This book is to be read publicly in the churches. We’re not to neglect it. We’re to read it publicly in the church, just as the Jews read the prophets aloud in the synagogue. So John calls it what it is – it is a prophecy, just like Isaiah, just like Jeremiah, just like Ezekiel. It is a prophecy with a blessing.

This is the first of seven blessings, or beatitudes, in the book of Revelation. It is a book of blessings, which means it is a book with moral force. There’s probably no book in the Bible that causes more fascination and curiosity than Revelation does. But it’s not written to satisfy our curiosity; it’s not written to satisfy our minds alone, but to affect our conduct. It will bless us, we’re told.

Now, how will it do that? Well, first, by giving us hope – hope that is real, hope that is grounded in God’s Word and promise. This life is not the end of things. This world is not all that there is. If it were and we were honest with ourselves, there’s no hope. There’s no reason for living. There’s no point or purpose to it. There’s no meaning to anything. But this world is not the end. There is an eternal kingdom to come.

That hope galvanizes action, because we know that what we do today has purpose, has meaning, and it has great reward. When people lose hope, they lose all motivation. They stop striving. They stop building. But the assurance of this prophecy is that God’s kingdom must come. It is inevitable. God cannot be frustrated. He will bring all of these things to pass. And having that hope makes us much better people.

Now, that’s what John wrote elsewhere. In 1 John 3:3, he says that when Christ appears, we shall see him, and when we see him, we’ll be like him. It means that the moment we see him, we will be transformed instantly, like that. His presence, his appearance will have a transforming effect upon us. And then he adds, “And everyone who has this hope fixed on him” – fixed on Christ – “purifies himself, just as he” – just as Christ – “is pure.”

It makes us pure because the hope of Christ’s return not only galvanizes action to service, but it affects restraint on sin. And that attitude of restraint or discipline is a Biblical attitude. Jesus said in Mark 13:33, which is the eschatological chapter in the book of Mark, the Olivet discourse, Jesus said, “Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time will come.”

We don’t know when he’s coming, but John tells us that the time is near. It’s always at hand. Every generation has lived with the real possibility of the Lord’s return. But how much more true that is for us – the time is nearer now than ever before, and that should stimulate diligence in our work, and carefulness in our walk. And that should generate joy within us. The time is near.

Well, may that be the case, and may our studies in the book of Revelation have that effect upon us. If you’re here without Christ, the book of Revelation gives the promise of blessing for believers in Jesus Christ. It is a book that is also full of terrible threats of judgment for all who are not believers – those who are in unbelief – so we offer you the invitation of Christ to come to him. Turn away from unbelief, and turn to Jesus Christ.

Believe in him; he is God’s Son, who came into this world, died for sinners, so that all who believe in him would be saved from the wrath to come. Look to him – that’s all one must do. It’s not a matter of works. The works will come; they come as the fruit of faith and regeneration. They will be produced in your life. No, we’re saved through faith alone, by the grace of God, so look to him. May God help you to do that.

May God help all of us to have the hope that this book offers, and may it have that moral effect upon us. Let’s bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for this great book, the book of Revelation. What a magnificent way to conclude the Bible, with the hope of things to come, the hope of the kingdom to come, the hope of the world to come, and the new heavens and the new earth – that’s our future. Our future’s not tied to this world; it’s tied to eternity.

Eternity has been opened for all.