

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

[Note for those using the audio introduction in conjunction with this hard copy: there are several points in the hard copy where you may pause the audio and look at the section of Revelation in focus if you wish.]

Hello everyone.

Before I begin talking about the Revelation studies, let me introduce myself: my name is Rosemary Bardsley. I've been speaking and writing for CWCI since the 1980s. I have my own Bible study website, and I teach Bible study groups in my church. Year after year, the ladies in one of my study groups would say to me 'Rosemary, can we study Revelation next year?' and year after year I would say 'No!' [And if you've heard what people say about Revelation and the arguments they have, you will know why I said 'No!']

But finally, I gave in. I spent the whole of 2014 studying, and writing studies on Revelation. Then the whole of 2015 teaching Revelation. And rather than being two years of stress, they were two years of great joy and grand assurance, as the book of Revelation repeatedly revealed how incredibly precious we are to God, and how unshakeable and secure our salvation in Christ is.

The KYB study series on Revelation focuses on Christ and his church because that's what Revelation focuses on.

Somehow, we have to stop thinking that Revelation is only about what is going to happen at 'the end', and we also have to stop thinking that Revelation is 'too difficult'.

Revelation *is* hard. But it is not meant to be. The very name 'revelation' indicates that this book is meant to *reveal* God's truth, not to confuse or hide God's truth. He has given us this book because he wants us to know the truth revealed in it.

To understand Revelation, we need to know what kind of writing it is.

It's not a historical narrative – it does not flow chronologically from one historical event to the next. But it does contain reference to past events, to on-going present events and to future events.

It's not a letter written to address particular issues. But it does contain a section of letters.

It's not a gospel. But it does contain the gospel.

It's not a sermon. But it does proclaim God's word.

If it's not all of this, what is it?

It's a kind of writing known as 'apocalyptic', which literally means an uncovering, an unveiling - a 'revelation'. It is a style of writing that employs lots of visions and strange symbols to communicate truth.

The apostle John tells us that this ‘revelation’, this apocalypse was given by God to Jesus, who gave it to John via an angel. John describes it as ‘the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’. It’s comprised of a series of visions, each giving us different perspectives on Christ and his church – each showing us layers of truth seen from different angles. When we put them all together we see the whole thing, we get a comprehensive understanding that we could never get from just one perspective.

So I want you to imagine

Imagine ...

You are in a huge media room. The walls are lined with numerous screens receiving live video feeds from multiple cameras filming a massive extended event bigger than the Commonwealth Games, bigger than the Olympic Games - an event so massive that no single camera could capture everything that’s happening.

No one screen tells the whole story. Some cameras zero in on specific detail or specific characters. Others give broader focus. Some are distance shots. Others are close-ups. Zooming in, zooming out. Looking down. Looking up. And each of them is, from its own particular perspective, recording the extended event from its beginning to its end.

Such is the book of Revelation. It shows us the same truths again and again, but from different angles, different perspectives.

#1 Revelation 1:9 – 3:22 [Pause audio]

So imagine ...

The image streaming onto the first large screen in the media room is from Revelation 1 to 3. It’s a picture of the glorified Jesus, *who was dead but is now alive. He is walking in the midst of his church on earth* from the time of his death and resurrection until the time of his return.

Across the bottom of this first large screen is a row of seven sub-screens. You can zoom in on any of these at any time. Each shows Jesus addressing one of his churches. It is a specific church, but it is also any church at any time that needs to hear this message – it could be *your* church. He knows its situation, he knows its struggles, he knows its integrity or lack of it. He is exhorting and encouraging his church to persevere in faith, in the truth and in obedience. He’s also rebuking and warning where the church has in one way or another succumbed to pressure of various kinds. What he says to each church is what the Spirit says to every church.

This is the reality of the on-going presence of Jesus Christ in his worldwide church until he comes. This is the reality that exists alongside of the other realities. This is the first and foundational truth that Jesus wants his church on earth to know: *I, the glorious and powerful figure you see in Revelation 1:9-20, I am there with you as you strive to remain faithful. I have not left you alone. No matter what happens, I will make sure that you who believe in me receive, at the end, the salvation I purchased for you by my death.*

#2 Revelation 4 – 7 [Pause audio]

You suddenly become aware that a second huge screen is alive with footage coming in from a camera focused on Revelation 4 – 7. Reluctantly you take your eyes off the first screen, but you are quickly riveted to this second screen. The footage is glorious. It's completely overwhelming. You don't know whether to bow in silent awe, or to shout aloud in joy and praise, or to cry your eyes out. Your heart is caught in this intense struggle between joy and sorrow. Your joy dominates, but it's coloured with a deep and heart-wrenching gratitude. You realize that you are here caught up in something far, far bigger than you could have ever dreamed.

You are looking at God in all his glory.

You are looking at the Lamb, with the marks of death upon him.

You are looking at a glorious company of heavenly and earthly beings united in praise and worship of God and of the Lamb.

And while this is running, again there are multiple sub-screens where you can zoom in on several aspects of the time from Christ's incarnation to his return:

There is the victory of Christ, past and present.

There is the persecution of the saints.

There is the physical hardship suffered by the saints.

There is the on-going suffering of the whole world, saved and unsaved.

There is the martyrdom of the saints.

There is the great day of wrath.

There are all the redeemed in their eternal glory.

You begin to realize that what you are seeing here from the perspective of God's throne is what you saw on the first screen from the perspective of earth: That the glorious Christ who walks in the midst of his church on earth is also at the same time the bloodied Lamb who is at the centre of the throne of God in glory. That the Christ for whose name the church on earth is maligned, persecuted and killed, is the Lamb whose name multitudes of creatures from heaven and earth are even now praising and exalting. That the struggles and suffering inflicted on the church by the hatred of men and of Satan are at the same time the instruments by which their loving God refines and purifies his church. That what Christ promised to those who conquer is here in the seventh sub-screen, enjoyed beyond the judgment, by all who are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Your heart is filled with joy and praise and glory. You feel as if you are already 'in heaven'. You feel as though all is right ... that all evil has been removed. God and the Lamb are receiving the honour that is their due. And you see yourself there in that countless multitude, with your robe washed white in the blood of the Lamb, and the palm branch of joy in your hand. And you are listening to the elder describing your eternal blessedness.

#3 Revelation 8 – 11[Pause audio]

You have been so engrossed by the footage streaming onto that second huge screen and its multiple subscreens. There seemed to be nothing at all happening on the adjacent screen showing Revelation 8 – 11, at least there was no sound, just a solemn, waiting silence.

But suddenly a terrible commotion distracts you, and from that third huge screen bright flashes are penetrating your vision. It seems, indeed, that this screen is vibrating with the intensity and clamour of its images and those on its sub-screens. You are disturbed, you are annoyed. You do not want to be diverted from the glorious second screen. You do not want to look at this third chaotic, cacophonous screen that is demanding your attention. Actually, you are afraid to look.

But you cannot *not* look.

And when you look, what do you see?

You see the judgement of God that is in place even now.

You feel both the beauty and the burden of the Gospel.

You see the world's hatred of those who believe in Jesus Christ.

It's difficult to cope with.

But, through it all, not only do you see the guaranteed victory of Christ, you also see something else, something that gives you a grand assurance, something that generates an overwhelming sense of relief. Quite unexpected. Indeed, quite surprising. You see the utter, absolute, security of the redeemed.

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These first three sections of Revelation focus primarily on the struggle of the Church on earth. The next three sections, while still detailing the experience of the Church, give us insight into the cosmic battle that wages between Christ and his enemies. These chapters of Revelation give the background reason for the struggles of the church described in those seven letters in chapters 2 and 3.

#4 Revelation 12 – 14 [Pause audio]

But then, you thought you had seen it all. The reign of Christ had begun. The enemies and all that is evil had been disposed of. You can literally feel the vibrations of tumultuous praise shaking the earth,

reverberating from the surround sound system at the end of chapter 11. You were about to join in the celebration and add your own small but joyful 'Hallelujah!' to the voices of the angels, to the praise of the elders, and the deep, rumbling joy of the liberated universe.

But again there is something intruding, and you are not quite sure where it's coming from. Finally you realize that there is a fourth huge screen, not beside the other three, but above you, on the ceiling. And you find yourself wondering if someone has invented 'surround vision', you feel like you are in an Imax theatre, or that you have put on 3D glasses. So real, so threatening, so enveloping, are the images from chapters 12 to 14. You are overwhelmed, you are horrified, as you watch in the silence and creatures more terrifying than anything you have ever seen or imagined move across the screen. These enemies of Christ and his church are so terrible, so threatening, so twisted in their evil. You wish that you could turn it off, but there is no remote. You wish that you could close your eyes, but you dare not.

And then you are glad you didn't. For again you see multiple sub-screens, and there you hear a loud voice announcing the triumph of God; there you hear the overwhelmingly powerful and beautiful song of the redeemed; there again you see the day of God's wrath, the day of God's justice.

#5 Revelation 15 & 16 [Pause audio]

As you gaze at the fourth screen and its sub-screens you realize that out of all the competing sounds from those sub-screens one is beginning to dominate, to become so over-powering that it distracts you from all of the others. Then you recognize that this dominant audio is not coming from that sub-screen at all but from another huge screen presenting Revelation 15 & 16. Like the fourth screen this fifth screen is above you, surrounding you, enveloping you. You feel that you are actually there, part of this countless multitude that is singing the same unbelievably powerful and beautiful song as those on that earlier sub-screen. You are there with them in the presence of God with God-given joy in your heart. You are singing the song of Moses and you are singing the song of the Lamb. You are praising God, and you are praising him for your deliverance, your salvation, not only from sin and judgment but also from the pressures and persuasions of the dragon and the beast. But more than this, you are also praising God for his justice. Again there are sub-screens, seven of them each displaying live feeds of a major global disaster. Although you are aware they are there, you don't really look at them for you are totally engaged in the song of the Lamb.

#6 Revelation 17 – 19 [Pause audio]

Gazing at the fifth screen, caught up in the crescendo of praise, you hadn't thought that there could be anything more overwhelming. But you were wrong! A sixth screen, Revelation 17 – 19, begins to dominate the whole room, and its sound pulses through your body. It so occupies your mind that you can think of nothing else. You feel that nothing else exists, just you and the sound, and even you yourself seem to be part of the sound, so overpowering, so intense and passionate is this sound of the whole universe lifting their voices in praise of the Lord God Almighty. You recall that once you listened to Handel's 'Messiah', and

felt the great and awesome power of it, but that was nothing compared to the reality in which you are now involved. By now you know there are multiple sub-screens accompanying this main screen, but you have no interest in them. So powerful is this main screen that anything else, in comparison, is less than nothing. The main screen says it all: The battle is over. God has brought justice to the universe. Evil has ended. The bride is ready for the Lamb, clothed with his gift of perfect righteousness. Hallelujah!

And your heart is almost bursting with joy and gladness.

#7 Revelation 20 – 22 [Pause audio]

When we turn to Revelation 20 -22, suddenly all the screens go black and the sound seems to have been turned off. But you realize that this dark and silent void is only so by way of contrast. Certainly there are no secondary screens now, only the seven large screens that surround you. On the seventh screen there is a faint, almost indiscernible, pin point of light, and as your eyes become accustomed to the dimness you see that it's positioned on a huge map of the world spread across the seven screens. This one dim point of light is shining in Jerusalem. The rest of the world is in darkness. As you gaze at that small solitary light, for one exceedingly brief moment it disappears altogether and there is total darkness. But then it flashes with a brilliance that almost blinds you, and at that same moment you hear again those loud 'Hallelujahs'. The pinpoint of light is now quite intense, and you see it spreading dot by dot, gradually, gradually, across the whole world ... Judea, Samaria, Syria, Ethiopia, Galatia, Macedonia, Italy ... on and on these intense pin-points of light are spreading over that huge map. The darkness cannot stand before the Light, and as it spreads the Hallelujahs become louder and louder, building up and up until all the nations, all the tribes, all the peoples of the earth, all the language groups hidden away in the ghettos of the mega cities and in the dark unknown valleys of the tropical jungles are reached by the Light, and their voices join in the praise of God and of the Lamb. And then it is complete: the Light has reached the ends of the earth. There is no people group that has not heard the Gospel. The Light, the true Light, has come to them. The glory of God in Christ has been proclaimed to the ends of the earth. His praise is resounding in every language.

The praise continues unabated, but you are appalled by what you see: quickly, oh so quickly, a murky darkness reclaims the earth trying to put out the light, but before you have time to think about this horrible thing, there is a terrifying and blinding cosmic flash, there is a deafening roar, a Lion's roar of intense ferocity. His voice is saying 'It is done!' For a moment you cannot see anything at all. You cannot hear anything at all. Your senses have all been numbed. Just for a moment.

When your senses recover the screens surrounding you reveal a totally new reality: everything is changed, everything is new.

There is no darkness left anywhere – it has ceased to exist. There are no enemies left – God's final judgment is past. There is no pain. There is no suffering. There is no separation.

The hand of God is reaching out to you and you hear his voice saying 'Come! All is ready! Enter into the joy of your Lord!'

For a moment you are afraid, you know that although you have believed in the Lamb, you are a sinner, unworthy, disqualified from such an invitation, disqualified from such joy. But then you realize that not only the whole universe but you yourself have been instantly transformed, instantly renewed, instantly perfected, as perfect and as pure as the Lamb. Nothing at all remains of your sin. And a smile that will never leave you brightens your face.

Together with the uncountable multitude of the redeemed you step into life, life with God and the Lamb, forever.

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And now, with all this in our minds, let's pray:

Father, at the end of this book of Revelation, we hear the words of Christ calling out to us, assuring us "Yes, I am coming soon." After all we will see in this book, after all we learn from this book, may we all say with joyous anticipation 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.'

Father, may a deep confident hope arise in the depth of our being, and may the peace of God encompass us, because of what you have revealed in this book. May we all, filled with joy, filled with peace, filled with assurance, go confidently back into our place in the world – back into the suffering, back into the kingdom, back into the patient endurance that are all ours because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Our fears forever stilled by your redeeming love. Our minds and hearts full of praise and wonder and glory. Because of Jesus, the Lamb who was slain. Because of Jesus, your Son, King of kings, and Lord of lords.

Forever. Amen.