

# Revelation 1:1-20

*The Revelation of Jesus Christ*

## Political Cartoons

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Friends, I thought that I'd begin our series on Revelation in a strange place.

I want to show you some political cartoons.

Now, since I'm on dangerous ground here, I decided to be even handed.

The first one comes from the previous Labor government.

Julia Gillard is Prime Minister.

It is a take-off of those stickers that have been appearing on the back window of family cars in recent years.

It is called, my dysfunctional family.

There's Julia.

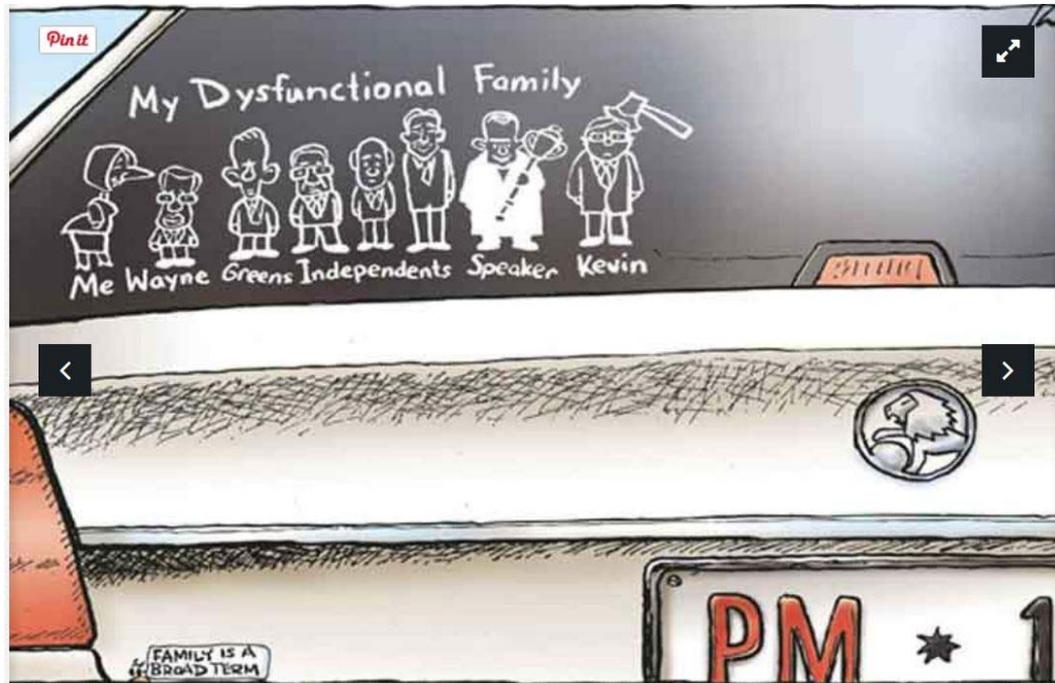
Wayne Swan, the deputy Prime Minister.

The Greens.

The Independents.

The Speaker in Parliament.

And of course, there's Kevin Rudd.



Now the next one comes from Tony Abbott's government.

Now, I need to tell you that I had very few difficulties in coming up with some good political cartoons involving Tony Abbott.

In fact, I'm tempted to spend five minutes showing you the best.

However, I'll just show you one.

It concerns that moment in Tony Abbott's career that leaves millions of Australians just shaking their heads.

It was his awarding of Australia Day honours to the Queen's husband, Prince Philip.

Here it is.



I'll give you a moment to soak it in.

It is very clever, isn't it.

Sharp.

Caustic.

Not a word said.

Simply a picture.

Friends, it is now considered that cartoons are one of the most important weapons in a newspaper's armoury of political analysis.

Unlike a long article, a sharp cartoon has the capacity to almost instantaneously dissect a political issue.

It can often have more potent veracity and insight than hundreds or even thousands of words.

Political cartoons and caricatures have a long history.

They have a long history of being devastating tools in cutting the powerful and proud down to size.

Now, in my view, the Bible's equivalent to the political cartoon is another equally potent form of literature.

That literature is called 'apocalyptic'.

And like the cartoon, it paints pictures.

Oh, not with brush.

No, with a pen that writes words.

Words that paint pictures.

Words that are to some extent caricatures.

But to another extent are deep and timeless truths.

And today we are beginning a series of sermons on the longest piece of apocalyptic writing in the Bible.

It is the book of Revelation.

And as we look through it, I'm going to offer you what some cartoonist offer.

I'm going to take you on a guided tour.

I'm going to give you some headings and tips so that you can understand the pictures and hear the message.

So, let's get started.

## **A Mysterious Book?**

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Now, I need to say that the book of Revelation is regarded by many as a mysterious book.

Perhaps you regard it this way.

Some of the greatest commentators on Scripture have shied clear of it.

John Calvin was among them.

He wrote commentaries on most of Scripture.

However, he did not write a commentary on the book of Revelation.

I don't know why he avoided it.

However, he did.

Anyway, I wonder if you think it mysterious too?

Or maybe you're just frightened of it.

However, I wonder if you have steered clear of it.

Of course, there is a whole other group of Christians for whom Revelation is fascinating.

But my impression these days is that most simply don't know what to do with it.

They simply avoid it.

They don't let it function in their lives like the rest of the New Testament.

Well, if this is you, then let me say that I think your Christian life will be all the poorer for this.

And my hope is that in the coming month you will begin to understand the book.

My prayer is that it will become an open book for you.

A book that enriches your understanding of God and his ways in his world.

A book that renews and refreshes your love for Jesus.

A book that encourages you in your service of the gospel of God's Son.

This is my wish, my prayer.

So, let's stop and pray for a moment that God will hear and answer this prayer.

*Our God and Father, we thank you for the book of Revelation.*

*We pray that in the days ahead, you will be at work in us through your Spirit as we study this book.*

*We pray that you will reveal your Son to us.*

*Please reveal to us your ways in your world.*

*Please help us to hear well.*

*Please encourage and inform us.*

*Please transform us.*

*Please cause your word to do what you have caused it to be written for.*

*We pray this in the name of your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

## **Maybe Not!**

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### **The Introduction (Revelation 1:1-3)**

Friends, let's now get underway.

Now I could speculate on the setting for this book.

However, I think that the best thing is to just get stuck into it.

So, let's do that.

Let's look at the first three verses.

They introduce the book.

They set the scene for it.

#### ***The revelation of Jesus Christ***

First, let's look at the opening words.

Literally, they read...

*An apocalypse of Jesus Christ...*

The word 'apocalypse' literally means an unveiling, a disclosure, a revelation.

But it is also a word that was used for a particular brand of literature that appeared at this time in this part of the world.

That brand of literature had various characteristics.

There were revelations that often came in the shape of dreams.

Persons were often presented in the guise of animals.

Historical events are portrayed as natural phenomena.

Colours and numbers have secret meanings.

Apocalyptic is a style of writing often set in times of persecution.

It is designed to comfort, encourage, and speak to people in a dramatic way to bring them comfort and encouragement.

So, an apocalypse is a particular style of writing that was designed to help people in times when they were tempted to be overwhelmed.

However, it was not designed to be mysterious.

No.

It was designed to live up to its name.

It was an 'apocalypse'.

A 'revealing'.

A 'revelation'.

Something made known ... opened up ... uncovered.

Something disclosed.

But there is more.

Look at verse 1 again.

Our pew Bibles say...

*The revelation from Jesus Christ.*

Actually, a more literal translation is this.

*The revelation of Jesus Christ.*

Now, this could mean what our translation says.

It could mean 'the revelation *from* Jesus Christ'.

Or it could mean 'the revelation *about* Jesus Christ'.

My guess is that we should stick with the ambiguity that is there in the original.

That is, this book is a revelation *from* Jesus Christ.

It originates from him.

It has its source in him.

However, this book is also a revelation *about* Jesus Christ.

That is, tells us about Jesus Christ.

It reveals him to us.

So, that's the first thing about this book we are looking at over this month.

It is a revelation of Jesus Christ.

### ***The chain involved***

However, did you notice the chain involved in this revelation?

This revelation is a revelation that God gave to Jesus.

God the Father is the origin of the revelation.

He gives it to Jesus, his Son.

It is made clear by God's angel.

That angel brings it to God's servant, John.

But that's not the end.

There are other servants who are the end goal.

God gave this revelation to Jesus who passed it on to his servant John so that other servants might know what must happen very soon.

And how is that going to happen?

Well, it's going to happen by there being a public reading of it.

After all, that's how reading happened in the first century.

People didn't read privately and in silence.

No.

They read out loud and often to an audience who listened.

So, if you come along tomorrow night and hear Revelation read out loud, you will be part of a chain that stretches back to God the Father.

God the Father to God the Son to an angel to John to you, the servants of Jesus Christ.

But look at verse 3.

If you come along to the public reading tomorrow night, the readers will be blessed.

But you, the hearers, will also be blessed as you hear and obey.

Oh, by the way, I should tell you that this is the first of seven blessings in the book of Revelation.

Why don't you see if you can find the others (2:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7).

### ***A testimony***

So, we have a revelation.

We have a chain involved in receiving and passing on that revelation.

But that's not all we have.

Look at verse 2.

John speaks of testifying.

It take it that John is telling us of the content that he receives and passes on.

And he summarises it in three ways.

1. It is 'what he saw'.
2. What he saw is 'the word of God'.
3. What he saw is also 'the testimony of Jesus Christ'.

Now, what do you think that John meant by the term 'the word of God'.

Because of our background, most of us think that the term 'word of God' refers to the Scriptures.

But actually, in the New Testament, the term 'word of God' rarely means the Scriptures.

Mostly, it means 'the gospel', God's word to his world.

And sometimes it means the person of Jesus, the living word of God.

Now, I think that here the two terms are parallel.

'The word of God' is parallel to 'the testimony of Jesus'.

And both amount to the gospel.

So, what John is saying is that this revelation he has been given and is passing on has a central focus.

It's central focus is the gospel, the great news of what God has done in his Son.

Friends, this is what John saw.

He saw Jesus.

He saw what God had done through Jesus.

And he is passing it on.

Verse 3 says he is passing it on to those who will read it, hear it, and take it to heart.

So, friends, what should you be looking for as you read John's work?

What should you be listening for?

You should be looking for and listening for the great news of Jesus.

For the gospel.

The gospel is at the core of the book of Revelation.

Oh, it might be presented in a different form.

But that's what it's all about.

That's at its heart.

The gospel.

God's word.

The testimony of Jesus Christ.

That's what John saw.

That's what we should see also.

**A prophecy**

Oh, by the way, notice something else.

Notice that what John is going to say is not only a revelation.

Nor is it only a testimony.

But it is also a prophecy.

Look at verse 3.

John says...

*<sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of **this prophecy**, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. [Revelation 1:3; NIV]*

Now, I want to explain the term 'prophecy'.

You see, some of us regard prophecy as being something totally future oriented.

But that is not the case.

Prophecy can be about predictions of the future.

But this is not its main meaning.

The main meaning of the term 'prophecy' is a proclamation from God that addressed to a particular context and designed to console, encourage, and instruct.

So, how should you respond to a prophecy?

Well, verse 3 tells us.

Our version tells us that those who hear should 'take it to heart'.

However, the words that are literally used here are 'to keep'.

In other words, what God says here is not just to be listened to.

It is to be kept.

That is, it is to have attention paid to it and to be kept.

***A letter***

But we don't even finish there.

We have...

A ***revelation*** that is meant to be disclosed.

A ***testimony*** that is designed to be passed on.

A ***prophecy*** that is to be read and kept.

And to this we add a **letter**.

You see, in my view we are still in the introduction to the whole book in verses 4–8.

And we see that we are looking over the shoulder of John as he writes to a group of seven churches.

John 4 literally says...

*John,*

*To the seven churches in Asia.*

This is not what we know of Asia but what is known as the province of Asia in Roman times.

Then comes a traditional Christian greeting such as that which begins the letters of Paul.

*Grace and peace to you...*

Friends, I think that verses 4–8 function as a sort of second preface to this book.

And it tells us that this work is also a letter and should be read as such.

That is, it addresses a particular group of people in a particular time at a particular time.

It will therefore address their needs to some extent.

It is a letter that only ends in chapter 22, with a benediction in verse 21.

John says to the people to whom he is writing.

*<sup>21</sup>The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.  
[Revelation 22:21; NIV]*

Friends, this is how we are to read Revelation.

We are to read it as a revelation...

As a gospel-centred testimony...

As a prophecy...

And as letter to a set of churches bound in history.

Understanding Revelation as all of these things will help us not misunderstand.

So friends, there's the big picture of what we are dealing with here.

Now, I need to say that time is marching away from us.

So, let me tell you what I want to do from here.

First, I want to just take a quick skim through the rest of the chapter.

Then, I want to show you what I think is the big idea of the chapter.

### **The letter from John (Revelation 1:4–8)**

First, let's take a quick skim through the rest of the chapter.

Look at the content of John's initial address to his readers in verses 4–8.

First, in my view, in verses 4 and 5, he speaks of the three person of the trinity.

Then, halfway through verse 5 and on into verse 6, he speaks of the work of Christ and bursts into praise.

Then, in verse 7 he speaks of his coming with the clouds and of a humanity's reaction to his revelation.

Throughout these verses there are quotations, allusions, and echoes of Old Testament passages.

Finally, in verse 8, the voice of God is recorded.

*<sup>8</sup>"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." [Revelation 1:8; NIV]*

## **Encouragement On The Lord's Day (Revelation 1:9–20)**

But now let's move on to verses 9–20.

John continues to write to his people.

In verse 9 he identifies with the people to whom he writes.

He is their brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that belong to being in Jesus.

Then he tells us that he was in Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

We've already identified what that phrase means.

It is a reference to the gospel.

Basically, I think that John is saying that he was either in Patmos to do ministry of the gospel OR he was in Patmos because of his ministry of the gospel.

Since Patmos was a small rocky, mountainous island used by the Romans as a place of political banishment, it could be that he is some sort of prisoner.

We don't know.

We just know that it is gospel ministry that causes him to be there.

Anyway, in verses 10–11 he tells us that he had a spiritual experience and a voice that told him to write on a scroll what he saw.

He was then to send it to the seven churches.

John then turns to see the source of the voice in verse 12.

He sees someone like a son of man.

He is clothed with royal garb.

It is clearly Jesus.

The message is clear.

He is not an absentee landlord.

Rather, he is in the midst of his churches supporting them in their trials and persecutions.

Again, there are host of allusions to and echoes of the Old Testament here.

John falls down before him.

He encourages John by saying that he is the First and the Last.

He is the Living One.

He was dead.

However, he is now alive forever and ever.

Moreover he holds the keys of death and Hades.

He also holds in his hand seven stars, which are the angels of the seven churches.

The seven lampstands are the seven churches.

## **Treasures New and Old**

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### **Things to Know**

Friends, there is the briefest sketch of the second half of the chapter.

Now, I want you to notice two key things.

The things I want you to notice are these.

First, did you notice the multiple references to the gospel?

The reference to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

The references to key elements in the gospel message.

Things like the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Or being freed from sin through the death of Jesus. T

Or people being made to be a kingdom and priests.

Or the second coming of Jesus.

That's the first thing.

This chapter is full of the gospel.

But there's a second thing.

This chapter is also full of the Old Testament.

The key message is that what God has done in Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

It is part of the eternal plans and purposes of God.

And to really understand those plans and purposes, you really should know your Old Testament.

And now I want to dig a bit deeper.

I am going to show you some key passages that sit underneath this chapter.

And I'm going to use them to show you what I think God is saying here.

I am going to do what I think Jesus tells us that Christian teachers of the Old Testament should do.

I want to bring out of the storeroom of the Old Testament treasures new and old.

As I do, I want to tell you that this is only a sample dip into key passages.

There are multiple Old Testament passages that sit under the surface and even on top of the surface in Revelation 1.

I think that they undergird the theology of this whole chapter.

But I just want to show you one of them.

And I want to do so to give you a feel for what is going on here in God's revelation to John.

So, turn in your Bibles to Daniel 7.

It is on page 890 of your Bibles.

I'll just give you a moment to find it in your Bibles.

Now, let's take a skim through it.

And as I do, I want you to keep in mind the language of Revelation 1.

## **Daniel 7**

First, the focus of the chapter is Daniel and a dream.

He dreams of four great and chaotic kingdoms represented by great beasts.

Each is terrifying.

However, the fourth is terrifying and frightening.

It looks out of control.

And it speaks arrogantly against God.

Into that context comes the peaceful solitude of a courtroom.

In it the Ancient of Days took his seat.

This is a clearly a picture of God.

His clothing was white as snow.

The hair of his head was white like wool.

The court was seated and books were opened.

We are now at verse 11 in Daniel 7.

The beast continues to be boastful.

But then, something special happens in verse 13.

One like a son of man comes with the clouds of heaven and approaches the Ancient of Days and is led into his presence.

He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power.

All nations and peoples of every language worship him.

His dominion will be an everlasting dominion.

His kingdom will never be destroyed.

Anyway, in verse 15, Daniel is troubled.

He asked for interpretation.

And it comes in verse 17.

The four great beasts are four kings.

And their kingdom will be given to .... not the son of man this time.

No.

Instead, it is given to the holy people of the Most High.

They will receive the kingdom and possess it forever.

This same note is picked up again in verses 25-27.

## **Back to Revelation 1**

Now, friends, go back to Revelation 1.

Imagine that you know Daniel 7.

Where do you hear Daniel 7 in Revelation 1?

Look at verse 7.

Look at the language of coming on the clouds of heaven.

There's Daniel 7:13.

Scan down further.

Look at verse 13.

The one walking among the churches is one 'like a son of man'.

That's Daniel 7:13 again.

Now look at verse 14 in Revelation 1.

The hair on his head is while like wool, as white as snow.

And there are references to fire.

That sounds like the reference to God himself in Daniel 7:9-10.

Friends, I've just given you some glimpses.

I could also show you references back to Daniel 2, to Daniel 10, to Zechariah, and to others.

But what I want to ask is what the purpose is in this.

What is God doing with John?

## **A Message For Us Who Read**

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Well, I think that the message for us who know our Old Testament and who read is mind-blowing.

God is putting together for us reference after reference,  
allusion after allusion, echo after echo.

He is telling us that what happened in and through Jesus is that  
he has overthrown evil and conquered.

He has given authority to his Son.

His Son is divine.

Jesus has conquered the devil.

He is the First and the Last.

He is the Living one who once was dead but now is alive  
forever more.

He stands as God in God's place.

And he will conquer as he conquered evil on the cross.

At the same time, the message is that the church is in the  
world.

It is a world in which the devil will often look to hold sway.

But the message God is giving John through these Old  
Testament quotations is not to be afraid.

Not to be overawed at the world.

Not to be overawed at the spiritual forces that seem to be  
arrayed against the people of God and the church of God.

No.

Rather, be overawed at he who walks among the churches.

For he is God.

Metaphorically he puts his hand on our shoulders as he did to John.

And he says to those fearful the same as he says to John.

<sup>17</sup>... *“Do not be afraid.*

*I am the First and the Last.*

<sup>18</sup>*I am the Living One;*

*I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!*

*And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

<sup>19</sup>*“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. [Revelation 1:17-19; NIV]*

Friends, the danger as we look at our world...

As we see Christian faith crumbling in various places.

As we see the threats of the godless.

As we hear of the persecution of the saints.

And even as we read the book of Revelation.

The danger is that we become overwhelmed.

But do not be overwhelmed.

Hear the words of Jesus to John.

<sup>17</sup>... *“Do not be afraid.*

*I am the First and the Last.*

<sup>18</sup>*I am the Living One;*

*I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!*

*And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

He is coming soon.

Amen. Come Lord Jesus.