

Dr. David L. Mathewson, Revelation, Session 4,

Revelation 1

6-Min. Video Overview

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Alright, today we're tackling one of the most famous and, let's be honest, famously misunderstood books in all of history, the book of Revelation. But what if I told you the key to the whole thing, its user guide, is hiding in plain sight right there in the very first chapter? So let me ask you, when you hear the word Revelation, what's the first thing that pops into your head? Because for a lot of us, it's a pretty specific set of images, usually thanks to movies and pop culture. I'm guessing it's stuff like bizarre, multi-headed beasts, right? Terrifying predictions about the end of the world.

Or maybe just this incredibly complex and confusing timeline of the future that feels impossible to figure out. This whole view has made the book seem, well, kind of inaccessible. Something you either fear or try to decode like some ancient puzzle.

But here's the thing. According to scholars like Dr. Dave Matheson, that's not really the main point. He argues that the book tells us exactly how to read it, right from the get-go.

The first chapter isn't just a warm-up; it's the instruction manual. So you know what? That's what we're going to do for the next few minutes. We're going to take that key and see if we can unlock this thing.

We're going to look at Revelation chapter 1 not as the start of a scary story, but as the guide that can open up the meaning of the entire book. So the author, a man named John, starts his work by basically giving us four different labels for it. And these aren't just random tags.

They're like a four-part lens that he wants us, the readers, to look through. First he calls it an apocalypse. Now I know what you're thinking.

In our world, that word means catastrophe, the end of everything. But in the original Greek, apocalypse simply meant an unveiling or a revelation. It's all about pulling back the curtain to show the real situation his readers were facing.

Second, he says it's a testimony. The Greek word for this is *martyria*, which, yeah, is where we get our word martyr. But back when John was writing, it didn't automatically mean dying for your faith.

It meant being a witness, you know, testifying to the truth, even if that act of testifying could lead to some pretty serious consequences. Third, it's a prophecy. And again, we tend to think prophecy is all about predicting the future.

But for John, and in the whole Old Testament tradition, a prophecy was a message from God that you were supposed to take to heart and actually obey. It's a call to be faithful and to endure in the here and now. And finally, and this one is so important, it's a letter.

Revelation isn't some abstract document floating in space. No, this was a real message written to seven specific historical communities in what is now modern-day Turkey. These were real people dealing with the very real pressures of living under the thumb of the Roman Empire.

And this is where all these ideas start to click together. Because once you realize Revelation is a letter to people living under Roman rule, you start to see that it's actually a deeply political and, well, counter-imperial book. Just look at this contrast.

It shows the central conflict perfectly. On one side, you have all the things the Roman emperor claimed. On the other, you have the claims John makes just in this first chapter.

Caesar says he's on the throne. John says, nope, God is. Caesar is the ruler of the world.

John says Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth. Caesar demanded to be worshipped as a god. John insists that only God is worthy.

I mean, these are direct challenges to the empire's power. John uses these incredible titles for God that he pulls from the Old Testament, like the Alpha and the Omega, which means the first and the last. In its original context in the book of Isaiah, this title was a declaration that the God of Israel has exclusive power over all other gods and idols.

So by using it here, John is making a really radical statement. The God of the Bible is the one true sovereign, not the emperor in Rome. Okay, let's shift gears to the second half of the chapter and see how John builds on this.

He describes this vision he has of the resurrected Jesus, and it is absolutely packed with symbolism designed to give his readers both comfort and a whole lot of courage. He sees one like a son of man standing in the middle of seven golden lampstands. And just in case the symbolism is too subtle, John is later told that the lampstands are the seven churches.

The message couldn't be clearer. Christ isn't some distant god. He is present with his people, walking among them right in the middle of all their struggles.

And the description of this figure is intense. Hair as white as snow, eyes like fire, a voice like a waterfall, and a sword coming right out of his mouth. Now, these aren't just random scary images.

Every single one is a carefully chosen symbol, and each one gets its power from the Old Testament. And here's the really crucial part: where John gets this imagery. In the Old Testament book of Daniel, it's God himself, called the Ancient of Days, who is described as having hair as white as wool.

But here, John takes that same description and applies it directly to Jesus. That is a profound statement about his divinity. Let's look at another example.

In the book of Isaiah, God declares this absolute, exclusive title for himself. I am the first, and I am the last. Apart from me, there is no God.

You really can't get a stronger statement of monotheism in the whole Bible. And then, what does Jesus say to John in this vision? Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last.

John takes the unique, exclusive title of God the Father and places it directly on the lips of Jesus Christ. For his first-century readers, the implication here would have been absolutely staggering. So the message of this vision is crystal clear.

The one who is present with these struggling churches isn't just a prophet or a messiah. He shares the very identity of God. He has conquered death; he holds the keys, and because of that, he has the ultimate authority over life, death, and yes, even the Roman Empire itself.

So what does this all add up to? What's the takeaway? The first chapter of Revelation isn't about scaring people with predictions of the future. It's about equipping them for the present. It lays out a really clear mission for the churches.

First, see reality for what it is. That's the apocalypse, the unveiling. God, not Caesar, is really in charge.

Second, find your place in that reality as a kingdom of priests who represent God's rule. Third, live faithfully. Your whole mission is to be a faithful witness just like Jesus was.

And finally, hold to hope because Christ has already won the ultimate victory over the biggest enemy there is, death itself. You see how this reframes everything? It transforms Revelation from a confusing blueprint of the future into a powerful survival guide for people living under immense pressure. It's a call to courage, to endurance, and to an uncompromising faithfulness in the face of a hostile empire.

And so the real question it leaves us with is this. How does seeing the book this way change how we might read all the rest of it?