

Look! The Doorway into Revelation

Revelation 1:1-20

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It is great to be launching our Autumn sermon series today called 'Heaven Open' studying the book of Revelation, and I am really excited to see what the Lord will share with us over the coming 12 weeks.

As with all our sermon series, I tend to start thinking and praying about what we should study together several months in advance. But it's been fascinating to see people's different reactions when I've told them about this series. Some people are thrilled about the prospect of unpacking the symbolism and rich theology of Revelation. Others are a little nervous because the book has been controversial over the years. Some people go off the deep end obsessively charting the end times and seeing things like the number of the beast in every barcode and every red moon heralding Armageddon. However, others are delighted to be looking at it together hopeful to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church and focus on the beautiful heavenly hope that Jesus has bought for us on the cross.

Finola is one of those who is excited that we are looking at Revelation and she came up to me last week asking what had prompted me to choose 'Heaven Open' as the title. Well, it tracks back all the way to March when I was on a beach in Paphos, praying about All Saints and asking the Lord about the next few years, when I noticed a door-wedge washed up right next to my head. And the verse that came to mind was one from Revelation 3:8:

Revelation 3:8

(NIVUK) 8 **'See I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut'**

At our away day, the staff and PCC were thinking and praying about 2027 being a year of opportunity, as we sense we are preparing to break new ground as a church.

If you read it through Revelation contains lots of references to open doors, leading up to the great crescendo of the doors of the city of God wide open, with God himself providing light to people of all nations streaming in. So, in many ways John wrote it as a great series of invitations for all those hearing it to come up, come in, and come nearer to God. It was written as an encouragement to reassure us that whatever happens, **even if it seems the world is collapsing around us, we needn't be afraid. Jesus Christ already won the victory over sin, death and the devil 2000 years ago, and he invites us to join the winning team.**

We need that encouragement, don't we? Every day there are headlines about existential threats to humanity from Climate change, AI and Geopolitics. Things that were supposed to bring us together like social media have actually polarised society and driven us apart, and it seems there is no rowing back. But amazingly it means that people are starting to come back to church looking for stability, community, purpose and meaning. We could be living in one of the greatest moments of opportunity for revival for generations. *See I have set before you an open door that no-one can shut.*

Just before we moved to Bath, Mims and I had the privilege of spending a few weeks in Italy on a little tour of Tuscany. I particularly liked Siena with its central Piazza where the Palio horse racing takes place in July and August. While we were there, we looked round Siena Cathedral which has beautiful frescos and mosaic floors, but it also offers a famous rooftop tour called *Porta del Cielo* the "Gate of Heaven".

So, we booked our tickets and went off exploring while we waited. But imagine how we felt when we realised we were running late and came back to a sign which said, 'Gate of Heaven: Closed.' (Doh!)

It's one of those times you say a quick prayer to check in with the Lord and ask again for forgiveness and make sure it wasn't a prophetic message! Well thankfully every door we find in Revelation is open, except for one. In Revelation 3 the Lord Jesus says:

Revelation 3:20

(NIVUK) 20 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.'

It is up to us to open the door to what the Lord is saying to us and I hope that during this series we will open our hearts to hear God's voice and respond.

The first chapter gives us some helpful pointers for how we can interpret the rest of the book of Revelation.

Firstly, verses 1-5 tell us that John wrote down what he saw and discerned as a prophetic revelation in the form of a letter to be read aloud to the leaders and people of seven churches in the province of Asia. That's not the continent we know, but Asia-minor, a Roman province in what is now Modern-day Turkey. So, you can imagine their great excitement to receive a letter from John, who was well known and respected as someone who knew the Lord Jesus personally.

Even from the beginning the letter John includes a benediction of grace and peace from God the Holy Trinity: Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. John uses the language of the Seven-fold Spirit of God, which is a reference to Isaiah's description of the Holy Spirit who would come and rest on the coming Messiah:

Isaiah 11:2

**(NIVUK) 2 'The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him –
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord -'**

To understand Revelation, it really helps to see just how many Old Testament references there are. John was saturated by scripture and this all comes out in the way he writes. He often references the prophets including the books of Daniel and Zechariah, and he wants to show emphatically how Jesus is the fulfilment of their words.

John also has an obsession with the number 7 which is the Hebrew number of perfection (think 7 days, 7 colours of the rainbow etc.). There is some debate whether the John who wrote Revelation is the same person who wrote the Gospel of John. Most scholars think they are different. But when you see that the Gospel is structured around seven miraculous signs that demonstrated who Jesus was, and the seven I AM statements of Jesus that declared who he was, then you see more of a consistency between the two.

In Revelation John takes it to a whole new level of sevens and he structures the whole thing around them. After the prologue describing Jesus the source of this Revelation, there are seven scenes of 7 things which describe the past, present and future of the kingdom of God.

Scene 1	7 Churches	chs 2 - 3
Scene 2	7 Seals	chs 4 –7
Scene 3	7 Trumpets	chs 8 – 11
Scene 4	7 Sign-Characters	chs 12 – 15
Scene 5	7 Bowls of Wrath	chs 15 – 16
Scene 6	7 Words of Justice	chs 17 – 19
Scene 7	7 Visions of Ultimate Reality	chs 19 –21

Then Chapter 22 is an epilogue describing the glorious merging of heaven and earth.

Now the key thing to note is that Revelation is not written chronologically. In verse 19 we read: *'Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.'*

Revelation 1:19

(NIVUK) 19 'Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.'

In each scene John describes things that are in the past, the present, and also things relating to the future.

Some interpreters down the centuries, called Preterists, have seen Revelation as Primarily about the Roman Empire – after all John was writing from Patmos after he was forcibly removed from his home and exiled to the Island by the Romans under the Emperor Domitian. Preterists think John was only describing the Roman situation and oppressive Emperors in coded terms, in ways his readers would understand. That may well be some truth in that, but as with a lot of Prophecy in the Bible, it can still be relevant to the further future at the same time. History is littered with tyrannical regimes and oppressive leaders. John's words have been encouragement down the centuries to countless Christians facing persecution.

On the other end of the scale Futurists see the letter as primarily concerned with the end times and the events leading up to Christ's return and God's eternal reign. It certainly keeps you alert to look at it like this, and Jesus did encourage his followers to observe the signs of the times, but we do need to guard ourselves against endless speculation and fanatical apocalypticism.

The truth in my view is that Revelation is what chapter-one tells us it is – it concerns things in the past, present and the future, but as with all scripture the first thing to do is to set the text in context and ask how those listening in those seven early churches would have received it.

They would have instantly recognised the description of the One like a Son of Man as a reference to Daniel 7:13 which was a key Old Testament passage looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus liked to call himself the Son of Man – the Saviour of the world come as a human being. But here in Revelation 1 he is dressed in a long Robe with a gold sash round his chest, hair like wool, white as snow, and eyes like blazing fire. And he is walking among the seven lampstands, holding the seven stars in his hand.

The early church would have been familiar with the idea of the High Priest, tending the Lamps in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. The Jewish Menorah had seven branches on it, and it was the priest's duty to make sure their lamps never went out. So, Jesus is pictured here as the ultimate high priest, dressed with authority not just tending one lampstand but seven. And it reminds us that Jesus himself said let your light shine. He wants his church to shine brightly. He holds the stars or angels of the churches in his right hand. He cares what each church is like. He is holding the Angel of All Saints in his hand today and over the coming weeks we will be listening out for what the Spirit is saying to this church.

But although Jesus is the ultimate high priest, he is not the only priest mentioned in chapter one. Verse 6 says:

Revelation 1:6

(NIVUK) 6 **'and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father'**

Instead of a privileged few, **in the Kingdom of God all believers are now made priests**. I might have a dog-collar on and preside over communion as a Priest/Presbyter but as soon as anyone calls upon the name of Jesus, they have the right to enter into the Holy of Holies and enter his presence. This is what we call the priesthood of all believers.

We all get the privilege of entering into the Lord's presence. We get to experience glimpses of heaven. We start to understand that the reality we experience on earth is not the only reality in the universe. Jesus invites us to go through the door and see that heaven is real, that his kingdom is coming and he loves his church.

We all get the privilege of hearing his voice of reassurance:

Revelation 1:17-18

(NIVUK) 17 ...**'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 18 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.'**

If the Lord is for us, who can be against us!



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