

## 4. The first three and a half years

### **The book of Revelation**

The first book in the Bible, Genesis, describes how everything began. The last book, Revelation, describes how it will all end, at least so far as this earth is concerned. Its full title is ‘The Revelation to John’.<sup>39</sup>

Revelation is a series of visions John received from the risen Lord Jesus, mostly describing events leading up to Jesus’s return and God’s re-creation of the earth. John wrote the book while he was in exile on the island of Patmos, almost certainly

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<sup>39</sup> Although Bible scholars disagree about who this John was who wrote Revelation, my feeling is that it was the original apostle John. The author calls himself simply ‘John’, so he must have been writing to people who knew him well. Revelation begins with letters to seven churches, the first to the church at Ephesus and the rest to churches in neighbouring towns, and the apostle John had settled in Ephesus. Furthermore, if the author was not the apostle John it is unlikely that he would have identified himself simply as ‘John’ without explaining that he was not the apostle whom they all knew. Finally, because the Greek of Revelation appears to be so bad, some Bible scholars believe that it was originally written in Aramaic (the local language of Palestine that John the apostle would have spoken) and was then translated by someone else very literally into Greek. John the apostle was uneducated (Acts 4:13), so writing in exile without the assistance of a scribe who could have translated into good Greek what he dictated, he would either have had to write it in Aramaic or else in his own bad Greek.

in or around the year AD 68.<sup>40</sup> It was not long after a terrible persecution of Christians by the emperor Nero.

John's overwhelming motive in writing Revelation was to encourage Christians to remain faithful to Christ, even if it cost them their life. '*Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life*' is a constant refrain, in those or similar words. (e.g. Revelation 2:10)

Near the end of the book, Jesus shows John a vision of the life to come, when mourning, crying, and pain will no longer exist, and death will finally be abolished. Then God himself speaks, encouraging John's readers to hold on to their confession that Jesus is Lord, even when threatened with death unless they deny Him. He says: "*He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.*" (Revelation 21.7,8). In other words: "Whatever you do, don't be among those people. Something much, much better awaits you."

Between 2000 AD and 2010 AD, a million Christians worldwide are known to have been murdered for their faith. The actual number was probably even higher.<sup>41</sup> Today some 200,000 people may lose their lives each year for their faith in Christ. More than ever before, the book of Revelation is needed to encourage followers of Jesus to maintain their hope

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<sup>40</sup> Some scholars believe Revelation was written around AD 96 in the reign of the emperor Domitian, but others date it around AD 68 during the brief reign of the sixth Roman emperor, Galbus. Revelation 17:9,10 speaks about seven Roman emperors, and says that the first five had died at the time of writing. The book's closing words, 'Surely I am coming soon!', also support the earlier date, for the other New Testament writers had abandoned hope in Christ's imminent return well before AD 96.

<sup>41</sup> *An Insider's Guide to Praying for the World*. B.C. Stiller, Bethany House, 2016, p.176.

of resurrection and an inheritance of life in all its fullness in the new world promised by God.

If you found what I wrote in Chapter 1 alarming, I'm afraid you'll find this chapter positively terrifying, unless you hold on to the repeated message of Revelation, that the Lord Jesus will keep those who trust in him safe in the tumultuous days to come. That is one reason why it's so important to know Jesus for yourself. A yet better reason is that if you remain faithful to him in spite of everything life throws at you, he promises you a reward exceeding anything you or I could ever imagine, a reward which is not for this short life only but until the end of eternity.

Revelation uses a literary style with which John's contemporary readers would have been familiar, but which sounds very strange to our ears. From chapter 4 onwards, nearly all his teachings and visions are drawn from the Old Testament or from other Jewish writings in circulation at the time.

For example, in Revelation 6:12-17 John sees an awesome preview of the coming Great Tribulation, including the words, *'...the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up...'* This echoes Isaiah 34:4: *'All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.'*

Similarly, Revelation 7:16,17 describes the happy state of believers who have come out of the Great Tribulation. *"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."* Most of this is an exact repetition of Isaiah 49:10 and 40:11.

Again, Revelation 22:2 is almost identical to Ezekiel 47:12.

Some Bible scholars maintain that the visions in Revelation are not intended to describe in chronological order what is going to happen, but provide little evidence for such a claim.

John's repeated use of phrases related to time, such as, 'When the Lamb opened one of the seven seals', 'After this I saw', 'Then came one of the seven angels', all seem to demonstrate that he was describing the various visions in the order he saw them. And in that order, they generally provide a logical chronological sequence of events, which is supported by other scriptures.

Perhaps the one exception is Revelation 7:9-17, in which John sees a multitude of Christians 'who have come out of the great tribulation'. As I'll shortly explain, I believe it's chapters 8 and 9 which describe John's vision of the Great Tribulation, so the passage in chapter 7 should come after chapters 8 and 9.

Table 4 lists the principal events described in the book in order.

Table 4: Principal end-time events from the book of Revelation

Symbol	Duration	Event
7 churches 2:1 - 3:22	Brief period in the first century	Letters to seven churches in Asia Minor
7 seals* 5:1 - 8:1	Not specified	Prophesied events – the world, Israel and the Church.
6 trumpets 8:2 - 9:21	Brief period	<b>The Great Tribulation</b>
10:1 - 11:14	Three and a half years	Two prophetic witnesses in Jerusalem speak about Christ's return.
The 7 <sup>th</sup> trumpet 11:15 – 12:17	Brief period	<b>The resurrection of believers in Christ</b>
7 bowls 13:1 – 16:21	Three and a half years	A satanically inspired ruler commonly called Antichrist takes over the world, supported by a false prophet

		<p>and of course the devil. Only people who give their allegiance to him can buy or sell anything. Most people continue to reject any belief in God, but many Jews and others believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Those who do turn to him are persecuted or murdered.</p> <p><b>God's wrath</b> is poured out in the form of worldwide plagues.</p>
19:11 – 20:3	Brief period	<p><b>The return of Jesus Christ</b> in power and glory, accompanied by angelic armies and resurrected believers.</p> <p>The destruction of Rome, or possibly the destruction of worldly political, economic and religious powers.</p> <p>The Antichrist, the false prophet and their supporters are destroyed.</p> <p>Satan is bound for a thousand years.</p>
20:4 – 20:6	A thousand years	Christ's millennial rule on earth
20:7 – 21:8	Brief period	<p>The final battle</p> <p>The destruction of Satan, death and Hades</p> <p>The resurrection of unbelievers</p> <p>The last judgement – everlasting life for the</p>

		righteous, final death of body and soul for the unrighteous A new heaven and earth
21:9 – 21:17	Eternity	The kingdom of God is inaugurated fully on the earth under the everlasting rule of Jesus Christ, with a permanent end to sin, suffering, sorrow and death.
* Wax seals on a prophetic scroll, not seals as in sea creatures!		

### Prophesied events

So let's look at these events in more detail, as foretold in the Bible as a whole.

In the world there will be stress, materialism, rebellion, godlessness; anarchy, terrorism and wars; famines and earthquakes. (Always present, but perhaps a little more so now.)

In the church there will be religiosity, loss of faith, false prophets; the persecution and murder of true Christians, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the gospel preached throughout the world. (Always present, but the last in particular now.)

In Israel there will be the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple; the return of exiled Jews to the land of Israel, the re-establishment of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, a restoration of the Hebrew language to common use, planting of trees, conversion of deserts to fertile land, protection from enemies; possibly the rebuilding of the temple. (All accomplished, except for the last.)