

Book of Revelation

Week 2 — From the Sovereign to his Servants (Revelation 2 – 4)



The Bible Project has animated introductions to several Bible books, including Revelation. Their video will review what we said last week, and introduce the messages to the seven churches (the first 3:45):

<https://thebibleproject.com/product/read-scripture-revelation-1-11-video/>

What's happening at the outposts (Revelation 2 – 3)

In Revelation 1 John introduced us to the main character of the book: Jesus. Jesus is a powerful figure, with all authority: even death and the grave are under his control. He is our Lord, our sovereign, our ruler.

That was such good news for the struggling little churches meeting in people's homes in the seven churches that John cared for. In comparison to the regal authority and heavenly might of the resurrected Jesus, they must have felt like tiny outposts of his kingdom. Compared to the power of the Roman Empire, the kingdom of God seemed insignificant. Rome seemed powerful: they've exiled John, and they're putting pressure on the little churches.

But in John's vision, Jesus' authority is absolute. The earthly powers tried to kill him, but *he's back!* He's alive again! And they can't touch him: death failed to destroy him. He has the keys (1:18)!

This Jesus, this sovereign ruler of heaven and earth, has a message for each one of the tiny struggling outposts of his kingdom! Apparently, what they do in their outposts makes a difference.

The struggles of these churches

Asia Minor was part of the Roman Empire. They were expected to give allegiance to Caesar as their ultimate ruler. At times, they were also expected to pray to Caesar, to sacrifice to Caesar, or to acknowledge Caesar as a god.

... it was not until the last years of Domitian's reign (A.D. 81–96) that there was a systematic propagation of the cult of the Caesar that spanned the entire empire. He had conferred upon himself the official title "our Lord and God" (Suet. *Dom.* 13). In the years A.D. 92–96, Asia Minor, a region in which the ruler cult already had a long-standing tradition going back to pre-Roman times, became a centre of religious worship of the Caesar. Excavations in Ephesus, the metropolitan city of the province at that time, have unearthed remains of a temple to Domitian and an enormous statue of the emperor that had been violently destroyed after his death.¹

¹ Jürgen Roloff, *A Continental Commentary: The Revelation of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 9–10.

Honouring the emperor as a god wasn't a problem for people who had multiple gods. It was a problem for Jews and Christians who gave allegiance to only one God. It was also a problem for people who claimed Jesus was their Lord (so, by implication, Caesar was not).

Christians were a minority who were not well understood. Some of their neighbours viewed them as atheists! Why? Everyone else had little gods they could show you, but the Christians had no visible god!

To give you some idea of how important the imperial cult was, Ephesus was an important seaport and a very impressive town. When you first arrived, you walked up from the coast along the wide path with, with the huge outdoor amphitheatre on your left. Straight in front of you was the temple of Emperor Domitian. Its ruins are still there today.

As a good citizen, you were expected not only to give allegiance to Lord Caesar but also to recognize the traditional religions. Each city had its temples, usually in a high place overlooking the city.

The city of Pergamum is described as “where Satan has his throne” and “where Satan lives” (2:13). That sounds strange to us, but the people who lived there would have understood the allusion. Given pride of place on the hill overlooking Pergamum was the temple of Zeus—head of the Greek pantheon of gods. To the early Christians, the head of the Greek gods was God's enemy—a satan. The foundations of the Temple of Zeus are still there today:



Foundations of the Temple of Zeus at Pergamum
(photo by Allen Browne, 2014)

While Jews and Christians both faced the same social problems as a result of the imperial cult and the Greek religion, there was also a growing animosity between Jews and Christians by the end of the first century. Christians claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, and all that the OT prophets had promised was fulfilled in him. To Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah, Christianity was at best a false Jewish cult, and at worst it was a foreign religion whose gentile practitioners did not observe Torah. Jewish converts to Christianity faced family pressure to turn back to the old ways, and Christians were not welcome at some synagogues.

To John, those who rejected Jesus and ostracised Christians were no longer God's true people. By refusing to submit to Jesus the Lord, they revealed themselves to be his enemies. He therefore calls them a "synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9).

There were other struggles too: heretics (2:6), poverty (2:9), persecution (2:12), false prophets (2:14; 3:20), and self-sufficiency (3:17).

And now the pastor who used to visit and encourage them has been exiled to Patmos, so they're struggling on their own.

Imagine how encouraging it must have been for them to hear from him again! It turns out they're not only hearing from John: the Lord Jesus himself, their sovereign, has sent a message to each of the churches. They feel like far-flung outposts of his empire, but the great Emperor Jesus has acknowledged them and sent his instructions!

The pattern of the prophetic oracles

We can't examine each of the seven oracles in detail, but each one follows this pattern:

- a) *To the messenger of the church in [place] write*: defines who this specific oracle is given to (2:1). Note the chain of command: Jesus => John => church messenger => church.
- b) *The words of [description of Jesus]*: Prophecy always lifts up our eyes to Jesus, our commander-in-chief. Each message then zooms in to focus on some aspect of his authority (2:1).
- c) *I know you [aspect of this church]*: Our ruler knows his people. Nothing is hidden from this gaze. The prophetic oracle is personal and specific, tailored to this group (2:2).
- d) [What you're doing well]: For most of the churches, Jesus gives a word of encouragement—a commendation for the way they are representing him (2:2-3).

- e) [Where you're off-track]: For most of the churches, Jesus gives a word of correction—an instruction on what he wants them to do differently (2:4).
- f) [Solution]: A clear, imperial command, explaining the change the king requires his people to make (2:5-6).
- g) *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches*: A call to everyone in the church to recognize this as a valid prophecy and so heed what their king said (2:7).
- h) [Additional promise]: For some churches, the message concludes with a promise of what the king will do for his people when they implement the change he commanded (2:7).

If you want to learn about prophecy, digest that pattern. Prophecy is always from our heavenly King. It always focuses people on him. It is specific enough for the recipients to know that God knows them personally and intimately. The message can be an encouragement, a correction, or an instruction from the king to his servants. The recipients should always weigh the prophetic message to decide whether the Spirit has spoken (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22), and respond accordingly.

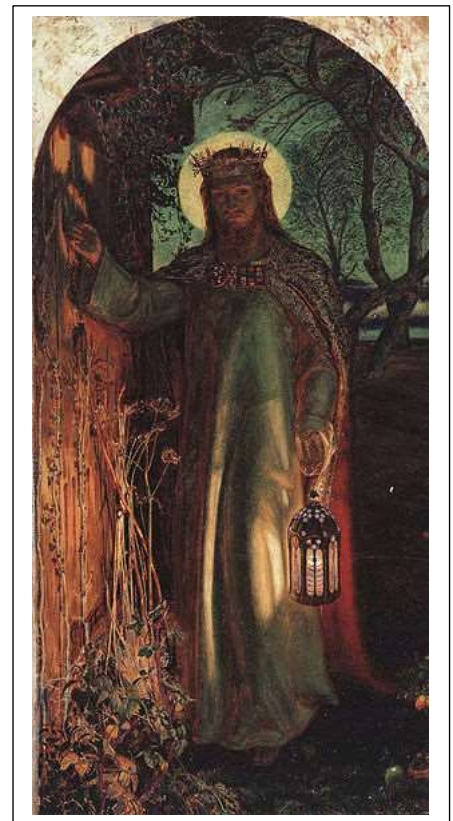
Applying the message

These oracles were given by Jesus to churches in first-century Asia Minor, so how do we apply them today?

Other than learning about how prophecy works, we will recognize some of the characteristics of these churches in our own experience. For example, if you've been walking with Jesus for many years, it's possible that you could hear a word of rebuke that you have **"lost your first love"** as the Ephesians had (2:4). If so, it's appropriate for you to respond as they were instructed to do: make a change (repent) and do the things you used to do (2:5). "Losing your first love" doesn't mean that you have ceased to feel as romantically about Jesus as you used to do: it's about whether you are expressing your love for Jesus in acts of generosity for people around you. Faith is expressed in acts of love, and if your acts of love have dried up, then get back to doing those things again.

The other mistake people regularly make with these oracles (as with the rest of Scripture) is to read it individually instead of corporately. Consider **Revelation 3:20**.

In the mid-1800s, Holman Hunt drew a picture of Jesus standing outside a door that lacked a door knob. He explained that the door can only be opened from the inside. Only you can open the door and allow Jesus into your heart.



But this is a very modern interpretation. No one in John's world would have considered the door to be the door of an individual's heart. The oracle is addressed not to an individual but to a church! The horror of Revelation 3:20 is that the church of Laodicea had become so self-contained, so rich and self-sufficient, that they had locked Jesus out of the church!

So, Jesus confronts the church: it only needs one person in the church to realize what they have done, to come and open the door and invite Jesus in, to re-start table-fellowship with Jesus. The rest of the church will then realize what they are missing.

The verse is not an invitation for individual salvation. It's a reminder that we cannot run the church as a social club. It's an outpost of Jesus' empire. We can't leave Jesus out: the church exists for him, not for us.

What's happening at the palace (Revelation 4)

Having received the messages from the sovereign for the outposts, John is invited into the palace! The king (the one who has already spoken to John) wants to reveal his plans to John:

4¹ After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

After this? So everything after Revelation 4:1 must refer to the future? No: future for them doesn't mean future for us! In any case, what's happening is that King Jesus has invited John into his palace to discuss his plans. It's not a list of things that were supposed to happen on earth: when John walks through that door, he saw what was happening *in heaven*.

What John notices in heaven is ... God, and his authority. The most obvious, remarkable, important thing about heaven is ... **God!**

4² At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

What was the first thing John noticed about God? His **throne!** This is really important. We make the mistake of conceiving of God as just a spiritual entity, but in John's vision he has political power. He is a ruler. His kingly authority over heaven and earth is paramount.

Not convinced that God's political power is his most important characteristic? Just count how many times the word *throne* turns up in this chapter! (14 times). Count how many times *throne* turns up in Revelation (47 times). *Throne* is a keyword: God's political power is what the Book of Revelation is about.

That shouldn't be surprising: God's authority as our sovereign ruler is central to the whole Bible. We miss that only because, in our Western democratic world, we miss the Bible's kingdom message.

One of the foundational concepts of Western democracy is the separation of church and state, i.e. not to mix political and religious power. It's like that for good reason: just look at the abuse of power in the Holy Roman Empire and in states since then when there was no toleration of other religions. Human beings are very good at abusing power. In fact, that's almost a definition of what sin is: sin is grasping at power that ought to belong in God's hands.

As a result, we diversified power in our democracy. History teaches us that humans can't handle power: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts completely.

But we can't project that human failure to handle power onto God. God is our sovereign, and we are his kingdom. He has the throne, and he doesn't just rule over heaven: he rules earth as well!

John's picture of God incorporates imagery from so many places in the Old Testament (OT). He is glorious, shining, powerful, and surrounded by human beings (24 elders) as well as spiritual entities (4:3-5). The kingdom he rules is like a perfectly calm, crystalline sea.

He is surrounded on all four sides by powerful creatures whom we know from the OT as cherubim—the king's body guards (4:6-7).

4⁸ Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying: “ ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,’ who was, and is, and is to come.”

These body guards keep announcing his holy presence (4:8):

- He's holy in the sense that no evil can stand in his presence, and he's holy in the sense that he is devoted to his people.
- “Lord God Almighty” focuses on his absolute power. He has all political clout. No Caesar, no other ruler has any authority.
- He alone is eternal and reigns forever (unlike human rulers). Even when they tried to kill him, he returned from the dead.

There are also 24 “elders” before God's throne. Throughout Revelation, twenty-four consists of two groups of twelve: the elders of the twelve tribes of Israel who represent the people of God in OT times, plus and the twelve apostles who represent the people of God in NT times. In other words, the people of God, both in OT and NT times, recognize and submit to the authority of God:

4⁹ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne ...

Look what these people do! They keep removing their crowns and giving their authority back to their sovereign (4:10)! That's brilliant! If earthly rulers behaved like this, there would be no more fighting or war! Everything that's wrong with the world would be set right if people submitted to God's authority like this!

The people of God celebrate his regal authority:

4¹¹ You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

God rules! Every other claimant to authority on earth needs to step aside and acknowledge that ALL authority belongs to the one who created us. We are created creatures, so there are no grounds for us to claim power over each other or over God's world. ALL glory, ALL honour, ALL power belongs to the one who has the throne.

But, here on earth ...

Well, that's how it is in heaven. But is it like that here on earth? Did you see the news tonight? People killing each other in wars. People dying of starvation while others are so bloated they could never use the wealth they have accumulated. Ask these people whether they're happy to say, "God's in his heaven, and everything's right with the earth." That won't do.

Here on earth, people don't behave like the twenty-four elders do. Humans have tried to take power that should belong on God's hands, and we don't handle it well. As soon as we have power, we use it abusively—to enslave and crush and demean each other, even killing each other if necessary to gain or maintain our power. That's evil. When humans grasp at power that belongs to God, evil results.

That evil disrupts the plans our wonderful omnipotent sovereign has for his creation. It's as if he wrote the script for how life on earth should work, but we've not followed his script: instead, by following evil desires, we've really messed up his world.

So how will God's reign be re-established on earth as it is in heaven? That's the big question. That will be our topic next session.

Memory verse

Revelation 4:11 (NIV)

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

Take home exercise

In preparation for next week, please read the next four chapters (Revelation 5 – 8).

How do you understand prophecy? Prophecy is not about predicting the future; it's about receiving a message from our heavenly sovereign and delivering it to his people. That's what happens in Revelation 2 – 3. Jesus—our resurrected and enthroned ruler—gave John specific messages to deliver to each of the seven churches in his care. John was instructed to send the prophetic message from Jesus to his people.

Of all the spiritual gifts, prophesy is the one we're instructed to earnestly seek (1 Corinthians 14:1). So what can we learn about the nature of prophecy from Revelation 2 – 3? Nowhere else in the New Testament do we have seven consecutive prophetic oracles as examples. Read through them again. Look at the pattern they follow (as discussed on page 4 above). Meditate on what King Jesus is saying to his servants.

If Jesus was sending a message to us, what do you think he would say? Ask him. Jot down your thoughts. In what ways would he encourage us, correct us, or direct us? The message he gives you probably won't be directed to the whole church. It's much more likely he'll give you something for you yourself to respond to, or for your family, small group, friends, or neighbours. What do you hear the Spirit saying?

Why does it matter that we hear what Jesus is saying and do it? It matters, because the place where Jesus is seen in the world is the lampstands.