

REVELATION

THE LAMB UPON
HIS THRONE

A 13-LESSON STUDY

REFORMED EXPOSITORY
BIBLE STUDY

ZACHARY GROFF
and **RICHARD D. PHILLIPS**


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REFORMED EXPOSITORY BIBLE STUDIES

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To Dr. C. Brown Caldwell,
who endured hardship, did the work of an evangelist,
fulfilled his ministry (2 Tim. 4:5), and showed me Jesus (John 12:21).

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

Studying the Bible will change your life. This is the consistent witness of Scripture and the experience of people all over the world, in every period of church history.

King David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps. 19:7–8). So anyone who wants to be wiser and happier, and who wants to feel more alive, with a clearer perception of spiritual reality, should study the Scriptures.

Whether we study the Bible alone or with other Christians, it will change us from the inside out. The Reformed Expository Bible Studies provide tools for biblical transformation. Written as a companion to the Reformed Expository Commentary, this series of short books for personal or group study is designed to help people study the Bible for themselves, understand its message, and then apply its truths to daily life.

Each Bible study is introduced by a pastor-scholar who has written a full-length expository commentary on the same book of the Bible. The individual chapters start with the summary of a Bible passage, explaining **The Big Picture** of this portion of God’s Word. Then the questions in **Getting Started** introduce one or two of the passage’s main themes in ways that connect to life experience. These questions may be especially helpful for group leaders in generating lively conversation.

Understanding the Bible’s message starts with seeing what is actually there, which is where **Observing the Text** comes in. Then the Bible study provides a longer and more in-depth set of questions entitled **Understanding the Text**. These questions carefully guide students through the entire passage, verse by verse or section by section.

It is important not to read a Bible passage in isolation, but to see it in the wider context of Scripture. So each Bible study includes two **Bible Connections** questions that invite readers to investigate passages from other places in Scripture—passages that add important background, offer valuable contrasts or comparisons, and especially connect the main passage to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The next section is one of the most distinctive features of the Reformed Expository Bible Studies. The authors believe that the Bible teaches important doctrines of the Christian faith, and that reading biblical literature is enhanced when we know something about its underlying theology. The questions in **Theology Connections** identify some of these doctrines by bringing the Bible passage into conversation with creeds and confessions from the Reformed tradition, as well as with learned theologians of the church.

Our aim in all of this is to help ordinary Christians apply biblical truth to daily life. **Applying the Text** uses open-ended questions to get people thinking about sins that need to be confessed, attitudes that need to change, and areas of new obedience that need to come alive by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. Finally, each study ends with a **Prayer Prompt** that invites Bible students to respond to what they are learning with petitions for God's help and words of praise and gratitude.

You will notice boxed quotations throughout the Bible study. These quotations come from one of the volumes in the Reformed Expository Commentary. Although the Bible study can stand alone and includes everything you need for a life-changing encounter with a book of the Bible, it is also intended to serve as a companion to a full commentary on the same biblical book. Reading the full commentary is especially useful for teachers who want to help their students answer the questions in the Bible study at a deeper level, as well as for students who wish to further enrich their own biblical understanding.

The people who worked together to produce this series of Bible studies have prayed that they will engage you more intimately with Scripture, producing the kind of spiritual transformation that only the Bible can bring.

Philip Graham Ryken
Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

INTRODUCING REVELATION

The message of Revelation—a book written to a persecuted and afflicted church—may best be understood by those who are lowly in the world. Consider the example of the janitor at a seminary. When some students found him reading Revelation, the smug scholars asked the lesser-educated but better-informed man whether he understood the meaning of the book. He confidently answered, “Yes! . . . Jesus is gonna win!”¹

Not everyone in church history has shared a positive view of Revelation. Martin Luther was so dismayed by its contents that he argued for the book’s removal from the Bible.² Ambrose Bierce defined Revelation as a “famous book in which St. John the divine concealed all that he knew.”³ Yet John’s own opening words lead us to think of the book in the opposite way: “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (Rev. 1:1). God gave this revelation “to show to his servants the things that must soon take place,” and he “made it known” to his servant John in particular. Far from being intended to conceal or confuse, Revelation reveals, shows, and makes things known. As do other New Testament letters, it presents a wealth of information in even its opening verses. Immediately we see that Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy, a historical letter, and a gospel testimony to Jesus Christ. These three pieces of information are vital to our study.

The word that is translated as “revelation” in Revelation 1:1 is *apokalupsis*, which is why the book is sometimes known as the Apocalypse

1. See Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (P&R Publishing, 2000), 14.

2. See Martin Luther, “Preface to the Revelation of St. John,” 1522, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, rev. E. Theodore Bachmann, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Fortress, 1960), 398–99.

3. In *The Devil’s Dictionary*, quoted in J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (InterVarsity Press, 1997), 13.

of John. *Apocalypse* refers to the unveiling of something hidden. It might be used of a sculpture covered with a cloth that is suddenly pulled away. The apostle Paul used the word to describe Jesus’s second coming (see 2 Thess. 1:7). Revelation will say much about Christ’s return as well—yet it touches on much more than the final days of history. The book is, more accurately, an “unveiling of the plan of God for the history of the world, especially of the Church.”⁴

The *apocalyptic* part of the book’s designation as an apocalyptic prophecy describes a kind of ancient literature that employs vivid imagery and symbolic numbers to depict the spiritual reality that is unfolding behind the scenes of history. Apocalyptic materials in Scripture tend to focus on something dramatic God is going to do in history to overthrow evil and deliver his suffering people. When we know that Revelation belongs to this literary genre, we will approach the book with certain reading strategies. For instance, while a strictly literal approach is appropriate for other forms of biblical writing—such as histories—apocalyptic material heavily employs symbols and fantastic imagery. This is not to say that the symbols Revelation employs mean that its visions do not depict real events, since they do; rather, these events are symbolically rather than literally presented. And a proper interpretation of such symbols is an essential aspect of reading Revelation. Fortunately, John draws his imagery entirely from earlier books in the Bible, so readers are not left to conjure meanings from it on their own. This means that, using the principle that Scripture is able to interpret Scripture, we can interpret difficult portions of Revelation by comparing them with clearer teachings from elsewhere in the Bible.

Note that this first piece of information we are discussing tells us not only that Revelation is apocalyptic but also that it is *prophetic*. Biblical scholars classify it this way following John’s own description of his book—five times he identifies it as a prophecy, starting in 1:3: “the words of this prophecy.” A prophecy was a message from the Lord, delivered by a prophet, which demanded an obedient response. Often such a message involved predictions about the future. Revelation’s own predictions foretell not

4. William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (1940; repr., Baker, 1967), 51.

only far-off events but also some that were soon to break upon its original readers. John said he was writing about “things that must soon take place” and urged his readers that “the time is near” (Rev. 1:1, 3). The prophecy of Revelation, therefore, involved challenges that were immediately before John’s readers.

There is little doubt that John saw his letter as being closely connected with one of the most important prophecies of the Old Testament: Daniel’s interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (see Dan. 2). God showed the Babylonian king a series of four symbolic earthly kingdoms—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome—that would rise up in succession, only to then be destroyed in the days when “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (Dan. 2:44). John is saying, then, that since the fourth kingdom of Daniel’s vision—Rome—had arrived, what had been distant to Daniel “must soon take place” (Rev. 1:1). Thus, Revelation is focused not only on the final years before Jesus returns but on the entire church age, which was inaugurated by Jesus’s resurrection and ascension into heaven and will continue until he returns at the end of history. Revelation is the prophetic unveiling of what happens between Jesus’s first and second comings.

Revelation’s first verses also tell us that it is a historical letter grounded firmly in the times in which it was first written. The letter properly begins in 1:4–5 and follows the customary format by giving the name of its writer, as well as its recipients, along with a greeting. It also ends as a letter would (see Rev. 22:8–21). This is why it is appropriate for Revelation to appear at the end of the New Testament Epistles. Michael Wilcock writes, “It is in fact the last and grandest of those letters. As comprehensive as Romans, as lofty as Ephesians, as practical as James or Philemon, this ‘Letter to the Asians’ is as relevant to the modern world as any of them.”⁵

The **author** of Revelation is traditionally understood to have been the apostle John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, who wrote it during the time of his exile to the island of Patmos. A considerable body of evidence supports this view: Witnesses from as early as the second century A.D. confirm

5. Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened: The Message of Revelation*, The Bible Speaks Today (InterVarsity Press, 1975), 28.

John's authorship, including Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, and Irenaeus. Far from being in doubt, Revelation's authorship is one of the most clearly substantiated of all the New Testament books.⁶

The **date** of Revelation's writing is also important to its historical context. Evangelical scholars hold a strong consensus that John wrote Revelation during the last years of the emperor Domitian's reign—probably around 95 A.D. This date agrees with the early church's tradition: Irenaeus said the book had been given “not a very long time since, but almost in our own day, toward the end of Domitian's reign.”⁶ This approximate time frame is further supported by impressive evidence from within the book itself, such as its allusions to Domitian's imperial cult and to the persecution that was taking place in the Roman province of Asia during that same period, as well as the fact that its description of the churches in chapters 2 and 3 fits the circumstances of the late first century.⁷

Realizing that Revelation was a historical letter shows us the error of those interpreters who view most of the book as if it speaks only about events in the distant future. It is instead a real letter to real ancient people, which John penned to encourage the persecuted believers of his own time. Our reading of Revelation must therefore account for its original setting and the needs of its original readers.

The third and last vital piece of information John tells us within Revelation's opening verses is that it not only is the Word of God but also bears a gospel witness to Christ. The book's message came not from John but from God, through Jesus Christ. The **theological themes** it conveys about Christ include his sovereignty over history and his identity as the Lamb who alone is worthy to open the seals of God's scroll and who thus receives the worship of heaven (see Rev. 5:1–14). It concludes by portraying him as the conquering Christ, whose sword cuts down his enemies (see 19:11–21), who sits on the throne of God's judgment on the last day (see 20:11–15), and whose radiant bride, the church—because of his blessing—dwells in

6. In *Against Heresies*, included in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and Arthur Cleveland Coxe (1885; repr., Hendrickson, 1999), 416.

7. For a full discussion of the dating of Revelation, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1999), 4–27.

the light of God's presence forever (see 21:1–22:21). This is why, over and over in Revelation, the angels and worshipers above break out in praise to Jesus. We should respond to the worship of Revelation by offering praises of our own.

Our study of Revelation, more than perhaps of any other Bible book, will be greatly shaped by our understanding of its **structure** and organization. For much of the twentieth century, evangelical scholars insisted that Revelation be interpreted literally (despite its obvious symbolism) and that its message progresses sequentially from chapter 4 to the end of the book. Reformed scholars, however, have identified a particular structure within Revelation that better reflects its contents. The book is organized into seven parallel sections, or cycles—seven being the number of completion—that develop and expand Daniel's vision of how Christ's kingdom overcomes the kingdoms of the world. Each section highlights a feature of Revelation's story and portrays its drama advancing to its climax. Each of these cycles also speaks relevantly to John's own time while simultaneously illustrating aspects of Christ's rule throughout the church age (and increasingly, as they progress, concentrating on the end of that age and Christ's return).

While outlines of Revelation can be complicated and vary from author to author, I would propose the following structure for John's letter:

- Christ Amid the Lampstands (1:1–3:22)
- The Throne of God and the Seven Seals (4:1–8:5)
- The Seven Trumpets as Warnings of Judgment (8:6–11:19)
- The Symbolic Histories (12:1–14:20)
- The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath (15:1–16:21)
- Final Judgment and Victory in Christ's Return (17:1–21:8)
- The Great Consummation and Eternal Glory (21:9–22:21)

As you study Revelation, I offer one final word of advice: Approach it not as a puzzle book but as a picture book. Look at the visions it presents and think about what they are showing you. This, after all, is how John experienced this prophecy's message. He was praying on the Lord's Day when he heard a loud voice. Turning, he saw a vision that granted peace to his troubled life: "I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the

lampstands one like a son of man” (Rev. 1:12–13). Make sure that you also see how this book displays Jesus’s glory, by revealing that he is sovereign over this age of history to redeem his purified and persecuted church and to bring them victory from God’s throne in heaven.

Richard D. Phillips

Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Commentary series

Coeditor of the Reformed Expository Bible Study series

Author of *Revelation* (REC)

LESSON 1

O SPLENDOR OF GOD'S GLORY BRIGHT

Revelation 1:1–20

THE BIG PICTURE

Many Bible interpreters approach the book of Revelation the same way many people tackle puzzles. They start by dividing up all the parts. Then they shuffle them around and place them in groups. Finally they try to put them together to “solve” the puzzle. Such solutions often involve visual charts and graphs that, while rarely (if ever) elegant, can produce a sense of satisfaction for the interpreter who puts them together. Yet however well-intentioned, such an approach to the book of Revelation is woefully misdirected.

The book of Revelation is a letter to the church, not a puzzle to be solved. Its opening verses lay out a purpose statement that spotlights the central figure of the apostle John’s visions: Jesus Christ (1:1–2). As its Spirit-inspired message proceeds, one vision cascades into the next like an ever-expanding river, leading to the glorious victory scene of the Lamb on his throne (22:1–3). Along the way, these visions are punctuated by divine benedictions and glorious songs of praise to God. (This is why each of our thirteen lessons is titled after a great hymn of the faith.) Rather than a puzzle, the book of Revelation is something of a divine liturgy in letter form—one that recounts a heavenly worship service pulsing with life and wonder. It is no surprise that a special blessing attends all those who read it, who hear it, “and who keep what is written in it” (1:3).

Read Revelation 1:1–20.

GETTING STARTED

1. What expectations do you bring with you when you attend corporate worship week by week? Whom should you expect to meet there?

2. Whether you are solving a puzzle, painting a picture, or participating in a worship service, what must you keep front and center in your mind?

OBSERVING THE TEXT

3. What four titles does the salutation of John's letter ascribe to Jesus (1:5)?

4. Why was John "on the island called Patmos" (1:9)?

The Relevance of Revelation, pg. 8

Revelation is considered an *apocalyptic prophecy*. While taking an apocalyptic form, it delivers a prophetic message that is directly relevant to its original readers, as well as to Christians of all times.

5. To whom did John address this epistle (1:4, 11)? What did the “one like a son of man” (1:13) command John to write (1:11, 19)?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

6. John describes his letter as the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). How should we understand what “of” means in this phrase: Is this book about Jesus, was it given by Jesus, does it belong to Jesus, or is it some combination of these?
7. What, if anything, do you know of the historical and cultural context of the original audience who would have read or heard “the words of this prophecy” (1:3)? What was happening to the church at that time?
8. In 1:9, what does John communicate about his standing in relation to the readers of his letter?

BIBLE CONNECTIONS

12. Read Isaiah 11:2 and Zechariah 4:2–6. What do these verses suggest about the identity of the “seven spirits” that John refers to in Revelation 1:4?

13. The visionary book of Daniel serves as indispensable background for Revelation. Read Daniel 2:28 and 44. What does Nebuchadnezzar’s vision of “a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” and that would arise “in the latter days” have to do with God’s servants and with “the things” Revelation addresses “that must soon take place” (1:1; see also vv. 2–3)? Now read Daniel 7:13–14. What does Daniel’s vision of this “one like a son of man” indicate about the nature of the “one like a son of man” Revelation 1:13 also describes, who is standing “in the midst of the lampstands”?

THEOLOGY CONNECTIONS

14. The doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement affirms that Christ died to satisfy divine justice. The nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian R. L. Dabney defended this teaching against those who

attack it, for its apparent moral horror, by writing, “Had there been in God’s heart the least lack of infinite mercy, had there been a single fibre of indifference to the misery of his creatures, Christ would never have been given to die for the guilt of men. The Messiah is our complete theodicy!”¹ In other words, Christ’s sacrificial death proves the reality of God’s sovereign goodness in the face of the world’s evil. What do Dabney, and Revelation 1:5, suggest that the death of Christ demonstrates about God’s concern for his creatures?

15. The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that the visible church “is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ” (25.2). What is our role in this kingdom (Rev. 1:6; see also Ex. 19:5–6; Ps. 110:3; 1 Peter 2:5–9)?

1. Robert L. Dabney, *Christ Our Penal Substitute* (1898; repr., Sprinkle Publications, 1985), 114.

With a Vision Glorious, pg. 64

When the day of tribulation comes, the only way for us, like John, to patiently endure is to receive from God’s Word a vision of Christ as Divine Lord, sovereign over Caesar and Christians alike, mighty to save and zealous to judge.

18. From the outset, Revelation leaves no doubt: Jesus Christ is divine. Together with the Father and the Spirit, God the Son is perfect in holiness, power, judgment, and glory. Therefore, it is no surprise that John, echoing the prophets of old, “fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17). Why did John react to him in this way? How can, and should, we ourselves respond when we encounter the revelation of our thrice-holy God today?

PRAYER PROMPT

The sin-atonement death of Christ enables us to bow before the Father in his name and to make our petitions known to him in prayer. Both when we pray as individuals and when we pray together as the church, we call out from our own places as lights that have been fixed on lampstands. So let us pray for the unity of the church—a unity that Christ himself has secured (see John 17:11). Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to fuel the righteous spiritual brilliance by which we “shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15) and as “the brightness of the sky above” (Dan. 12:3). Let us pray for the holiness to increase that allows us to render fitting worship to our God, both “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23) and also “with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28). Let us pray to be able to endure and persevere when we are persecuted “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9). And let us pray that the Spirit’s grace will illumine us as we open God’s Word, whether alone or assembled, to “taste and see that the LORD is good”—for indeed it is blessed to take “refuge in him” (Ps. 34:8)!