

Revelation is a book that many Christians tend to avoid for lots of different reasons. I think the main reason is because people find it to be a confusing book, something that's very difficult to understand. It's full of all kinds of strange things, after all: dragons and beasts with many heads and strange looking angels. What are we supposed to do with that? What do we make of it? What do they mean? So it's very easy for us to become confused by what the book is trying to say, and as a result, we very often turn to something else in the Bible and read that instead. Or another reason why we might shy away from this book is because we are frightened by it. We think that it deals with the end of the world, and the end of the world is something kind of terrifying, something we don't really want to think about. You could translate the word "revelation" as "apocalypse." That's where the word comes from. And in our time, an apocalypse is always some world-ending disaster. Think of all the movies that have the word "apocalypse" in their title or that talk about some kind of apocalypse. They're always a little bit frightening, always a little bit intense. And as a result, we might think that Revelation is the same way, a scary book, so we turn away from it and read something else in the Bible instead. Or one more reason is because of all the people out there who try to tell us what the book means, especially the people who try to connect the book of Revelation with what's happening in the news. How often have we heard someone say this president or this politician was foretold in the Bible? Or this current war is something that comes from the book of Revelation? We hear that sort of thing all the time. And on top of those wild claims, they're always disagreeing with each other. They never can quite seem to say the same thing. So who are we supposed to believe? Is the book of Revelation just a book for crazy people? So we shy away from it and read something else instead.

But the book of Revelation should not frighten us, Christians. This is God's Word, after all, and God's Word is always meant to instruct us. It is always meant for our good. God did not give us the book of Revelation so that we would be worried about the future. Quite the opposite, in fact. God wrote the book of Revelation to comfort us, even in very dark times. It is a book which is meant to strengthen us, to give us courage and confidence even in the worst of times. The book of Revelation tells us about the victory of Christ over the forces of evil. The book of Revelation tells us how God is in control, even when it seems like everything is going out of control. The book of Revelation tells us that our suffering as Christians is not pointless. It is not in vain, because God will reward those who endure to the end. The book of Revelation shows us that what happens to us does not happen apart from God's plan. This is the message of the book of Revelation, not only for those who first heard it nearly two thousand years ago, but also for us today and for the church in every time. So Revelation is a book that we should read, a book that we should study, even if we have to work at it to understand.

Indeed, Christians, God promises a great blessing to all of those who study this book. Verse 3 of our reading says: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near." So it will be beneficial for us if we read this book and if we think about it. But it will be especially beneficial if we hold on to its message, if we take the words of Revelation to heart. Because the book of Revelation is not just a book about the future. The book of Revelation also shows us how to live as Christians now. Because when we know what's going to happen, Christians, when we know what the future's going to hold, that changes how we deal with our problems right now. If we know that Christ will be victorious over all the forces of evil, then we know that there is no reason to be afraid of them right now. There's no reason to fear tyrants. There's no reason to fear governments. There's no reason to fear evil. There's no reason to even be worried about how bad things are

getting. Christ is the king. All things belong to him. He will conquer all things, so we don't have to be afraid. Even Satan himself will fall in the end. When we know these things, Christians, we will be able to endure the very worst of times, and it will prepare us even to die for Christ if we have to, because we know that he is in control.

So if we want to understand this book, then, there are two things that we need to keep in mind: first of all, how the book of Revelation speaks, and second of all, who the book is speaking to. And regarding that first one, how the book speaks, it's best to understand the book of Revelation as a book which speaks in pictures, a book which speaks in symbols. If we forget that the book is symbolic, we will misunderstand what it's trying to tell us. We have to always keep that in mind. A very good example of this actually comes in our reading in verse 4, where it says "the seven spirits who are before his throne." Now, the seven spirits is a symbolic way of talking about the Holy Spirit. Now, if we understand that seven spirits as seven actual spirits, we won't understand this, because that'll actually go against everything else that the Bible says. But when we see it as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, then we understand the point. Seven is a perfect number in the Bible. God rested on the seventh day, after all, after the six days of creation. Seven is a number of completion. It is a whole number. It is a complete number. And so to call the Holy Spirit "the seven spirits of God" says something about him. He is perfect, perfect in who he is, perfect in what he does. And we learn something about him in the process. Now, we often have to study these symbols in order to understand them, yes, but they teach us. And that's something that we need to keep in mind as we go forward through this book.

Now, the other thing that we need to keep in mind is who this book was first written to. John was writing to Christians who were going through a very difficult time, in some ways far worse than our own. Now, as we move forward through this book, we will learn more about their struggles. We'll learn more about what they were going through. But generally speaking, they were Christians who were living in a time when it was very difficult to be a Christian. Because on the one hand, they were frequently persecuted or even killed simply because of what they believed. Christians refused to worship the Roman gods. They refused to participate in their worship services, which in those times meant they couldn't even do everyday things. They couldn't go to the theater. They could barely go to the marketplace. They had to be separated from so much of Roman society. And for that reason, the Romans thought of them as terrorists, as people who were a threat to their whole way of living. And so these Christians were always living with this constant threat of death over their heads, and that's a very difficult thing for anyone to deal with, even today.

But on the other hand, and probably much more difficult for them, was this constant, overwhelming pressure to conform, to go along with what everyone else was doing, to stop being different, and to start doing what the world was doing, even if that meant going against what God said. That pressure on them came not only from their society. It also came from groups within the Church who said that it was okay to compromise, that it was okay to do all of these things. And they also had an overwhelming pressure from their own family and friends to conform, constantly pushing them to stop following Jesus and to start following the world. That was probably much more difficult for them to deal with, just as it is difficult for us to deal with the same thing today.

But to those struggling Christians, and to us who go through similar troubles, the book of Revelation brings a word of hope. It gives hope to them first of all because of who God is. Verse 8 of our reading says: "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'" Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, similar to our A and Z. And so God calls himself the Alpha and the Omega to show that he is the one who is above all things, the one who is in control of all things. Just like when we say "from A to Z" and mean everything by it, God is saying the same thing. Nothing happens apart from him. Everything is in his control. And that "who is and who was and who is to come" is the same sort of thing. God is the one who has always existed. God is the one who exists right now. God is the one who will always be. He is outside of everything. He is in control of everything. Nothing happens apart from him. And knowing that, Christians, we can be confident, because we are in his hands. Nothing happens to us apart from God allowing it to happen. Even the evil that we go through, even the evil times that we live in only happen because God allows them to happen. And he also knows how to end them. So why should we fear what the world can do? The world is powerless to do anything on its own.

The book of Revelation also gives hope because of who Jesus is. Verse 5 of our reading says: "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth." Think about how all of those titles are comforting to Christians undergoing persecution and suffering. Jesus is the faithful witness. He suffered the same as we have, but he was faithful until the end. He endured through it all. And he shows us how to endure as well. He shows us how to be faithful to the end, no matter what we may be going through. Jesus Christ is the firstborn of the dead. He died, yes, but he also rose from death. And he has destroyed the power of death, not only for himself, but also for those who trust in him. Death has no more power over those who believe in Jesus. Because even death means that we get to be with Jesus, and we will rise with him too! Think of how that takes away fear, Christians, to know that death has no power over us. Jesus is the ruler of kings on earth. No one is greater than him. All must answer to him. Every king, every government, every authority who sets themselves up against Jesus will fall, and they will have to answer for what they have done. They will be judged for their sins. Knowing all of these things, then, why should we be worried about the days ahead? Jesus gives us hope, even in the very worst of times.

But Jesus also gives us hope because of what he has done for us, Christians. Verse 5 again says: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." Jesus has freed us from our sins. He's forgiven us. He has destroyed the power of sin in our lives. Jesus has made us part of his kingdom. We reign as kings with him, even when it seems like the world is the one in control. Jesus has made us priests, those who serve God and who worship him forever. He has done all of this for us, Christians, because of his love for us, a love which we have even in the darkest of times. Knowing all of this, why would we lose hope? God will not abandon us in our time of need. Even if it is his will that we suffer, our suffering will quickly come to an end. Because we belong to God, and we know that because of the love which he has shown to us in Jesus Christ, his Son.

So Christians, let us not shy away from this book. The book of Revelation is a wonderful book, one which gives light in dark times. No matter how bad it gets, Christians, no matter how evil the days are, no matter how much we suffer, no matter what happens in the world out there today, we

will not be overcome, because God is in control. God commands our steps and directs our ways, and he will be victorious over all things forever. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen!

Let us pray. Almighty God, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, bless us through your Word so that we will be confident in the face of evil. Teach us to trust in you, knowing that you hold us in your hands, and that nothing happens apart from your will. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the Faithful Witness, the Firstborn of the Dead, and the Ruler of Kings. Amen.