

# letters from heaven | sermon series

## LUKE TATTERSALL takes a look at Revelation

### A Strange Book

I think if you asked people which book of the Bible they have most difficult understanding then the book of Revelation would probably be the top of the list. There can be no denying that Revelation is a strange book. It's a book that is jam-packed with imagery & symbols – it talks of battles and dragons and beasts. It is a book full of visions – pictures that are used to convey the message.

My guess would be that probably 98% of Christians would rarely or never open the book of Revelation. It just seems a bit to intimidating or confusing. The other 2% of Christians seem to spend most of their time reading it. Sadly they manage to give the book such a bad name that the 98% are even less interested in looking at it.

We need to remember that Revelation is apocalyptic literature – picture language. It is not a cryptic book that needs to be decoded. It is a series visions – pictures that convey a message, that show us something about our world. Poythress offers a great thought to keep in mind as you look through the book of Revelation:

Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't become preoccupied with isolated details.

Rather become engrossed in the overall story. Praise the Lord. Cheer for the saints. Detest the beast. Long for the final victory. (Poythress, p.13)

Revelation is a book that can offer us great encouragement to be more serious about following Jesus. It is a book that can motivate us to be more committed to the Gospel.

### Preaching Revelation

I think when preaching on any book in the Bible you need to try to find the logical divisions: what are the major units. And this is no more true than when looking at Revelation.

There are patterns in the book that can make it easier to break up the book into preachable units. For example Revelation 6:1-11: may seem like a large section – but I think it is one logical unit. (See table below)

The first 4 seals/trumpets are similar to each other. There is an interlude following the 6th seal/trumpet. The 7th seal/trumpet shows a scene in heaven.

Some of the break-ups are simple to see. The letters to the 7 churches (2-3) fit together. It is tempting to make that a 7 week series – but I think it is far better to look at them

all together. Chapters 4 & 5 show us one vision – the scene in the throne room of heaven.

In preparing these sermons I tried something I had not done before: Craig Tucker and I prepared the series together. We met a few times before starting the series, read through Revelation, talks through ideas, shared illustration, etc. We met early each week during the series to talk about the sermon for the coming week. I found this immensely helpful. I felt like I had a good grasp on the book. (For those who are subscribers to Perspective the full text of both Craig Tucker's talks and Luke Tattersall's talks complete with all illustrations will be available in the Subscriber's section of the website).

### Commentaries

There are an enormous number of commentaries on Revelation and they cover the full gannet of theological and doctrinal perspectives. The ones I have found helpful are:

**The Returning King** – Vern Poythress (P & R Publishing, 2000). I found this stimulating, refreshing and helpful. I certainly didn't agree with all this views – but found it the most helpful commentary.

**Gospel in Revelation** – Graeme Goldsworthy (Paternoster, 1984) – Deal more with the themes and big ideas in the book of Revelation. This is not intended as a details commentary but rather an attempt to show that gospel is the key to understanding revelation.

Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Seal 1 - 1st Horseman	Trumpet 1 – Plague on Earth
Seal 2 - 2nd Horseman	Trumpet 2 – Plague on Sea
Seal 3 - 3rd Horseman	Trumpet 3 – Plague on Rivers
Seal 4 - 4th Horseman	Trumpet 4 – Plague on Sky
Seal 5 - Martyrs	Trumpet 5 - Locusts torment
Seal 6 - Day of the Lord	Trumpet 6—Army kills 1/3
Interlude (7:1-17) 144 000 & the Multitude	Interlude (10:1-11:14) Scroll & 2 Witnesses
Seal 7 - Scene in Heaven	Trumpet 7 - Scene in Heaven

**Apocalypse Now & Then** – Paul Barnett (Anglican Information Office, 1989) Barnett leans more toward a Preterist view of Revelation. He gives some helpful insights into apocalyptic literature and also into the Roman empire of the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Talk 1 – I Saw Heaven Opened (Rev 1)**

### **1.0 - Introduction**

(See above)

### **2.0 - Approaching the Book**

(Helpful to see how people approach the book – Preterist, Futurist, Historicist and Idealist). Revelation is Apocalyptic Literature - picture language. Step back and get the big picture. For example, chapters 1 - 7 golden lamp stands, Jesus with hair like white wool, blazing eyes, bronze feet, sword coming from his mouth, gold sash, etc). Don't try to identify every element. If you need to know what things represent the passage will tell you (lamp stands and stars? See Rev 1:19-20).

### **3.0 - The Setting**

Specifically addressed to seven churches (Rev 1:4-5, 10). Misleading to see Rev 2-3 as the letters to the seven churches. The whole book is the letter to the seven churches. John writing from Patmos and he is there because he has been bearing witness to Jesus (1:9)

NB: phrase “word of God and the testimony of Jesus” is important in Revelation.

### **4.0 - John Writes...**

Opening chapter is dominated by this vision of Jesus in all his splendour. We should be in awe. *The Lion, the Witch & The Wardrobe* – Susan is about to meet Aslan and has just found out he is a lion not a man:

“Ooh!” said Susan, “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“That you will, dearie, and no

mistake,” said Mrs Beaver; “If there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, their either braver than most, or else just silly.” “Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy. “Safe?” said Mr Beaver; “Don’t you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he is good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Look at the picture of Jesus: Eyes blazing like fire, sword coming from his mouth, keys of death and Hades in his hand – of course he is not safe – but he is good – he’s the king. He is Lord of the past present and future (Rev 1:8). John gives three titles to describe Jesus (Rev 1:4-5): faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

### **4.1 - Our Example – Faithful Witness**

Pressure in the empire to worship the emperor. But here is Jesus who has been faithful to his father – even to death on a cross. Bearing witness to Jesus in the 1st century may cost you your life. Jesus is the faithful example in the face of persecution.

### **4.2 - Our Hope – First Born from the Dead**

Our hope is that Jesus died and rose again (1:5, 18) and that he will come to take his people to be with him forever. Jesus is coming again (1:7)

### **4.3 - Our Confidence – Ruler of the Kings of the Earth**

This is exactly what the readers of this letter needed to hear. Jesus is the one who walks among his churches. They are his and he is their King. Here is Jesus – our example and our hope – but above all our confidence.

### **5.0 - John, Jesus & Us**

A distant and remote book? I don’t think so. The problems they face are ours. What John shows his readers is what we need to see: a clear picture of Jesus – who he is, what he came to do and the fact that he is king. He is our example, he is our

hope and he is our confidence.

## **Talk 2 – Letters from Heaven (Rev 2)**

### **1.0 - Being Assessed**

We get assessed all our lives: tests at school, piano exams, HSC, University, etc. Many of those assessments don’t matter – who cares how you did in your 4th grade piano exam. Once you start work no-one cares how you did at school or uni. Revelation 2-3 is Jesus’ assessment of these seven churches – this assessment does matter. And we need to listen: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches”

### **2.0 - Jesus Among the Churches**

Chapter 1 – Jesus walking among the lamp stands. Jesus knows his church. Each of the letters introduced with an element from the opening vision – and the aspect of the vision most relevant to their trouble/problem.

### **3.0 - What Does Jesus Value in a Church?**

#### **3.1 - Holding to the Truth**

Ephesus praised for being theologically sound. Thyatira criticised for accepting false teaching. Pergamum – accepted false teaching. The influence of false teaching is serious. You will have Jesus to contend with (2:14-16)

#### **3.2 - Being Godly**

False teaching leads to ungodly behaviour. What you believe shows itself in how you live (2:14, 2:20) Jesus praises those who live a godly life (Sardis).

#### **3.3 - Pressing On & Bearing Witness**

Ephesus – persevered, endured hardships and have not grown weary. Pergamum – remained true to the name of Jesus. Smyrna endured suffering. Philadelphia even when they felt they had no strength left didn’t deny God’s word or the name of Jesus.

The reason many of the churches were suffering was that they were committed to the Gospel. We will suffer for the same reason today.

#### **4.0 - To Him Who Overcomes...**

Each letter finishes with a promise to the overcomers, Overcoming is about being faithful to the end – even if things get hard. Overcoming is about being faithful to Jesus – even if it costs you your life. Overcoming is about continuing to bear witness to Jesus. Overcoming is about knowing that there is something greater that waits us when this life comes to an end – a crown of life (Smyrna), a name written in the book of life (Sardis), sit with Jesus on the throne (Laodicea)

#### **5.0 - The Most Disturbing Thing...**

Three of these churches *think* they are doing well (Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea). Yet Jesus gives these three the harshest criticisms and warnings.

NB: it is not your assessment of your church that counts (e.g. National Church Life Survey). It is Jesus' assessment that counts.

#### **6.0 - "To The Angel of the Church in ? Write..."**

How would Jesus see our church: Committed to his word? Committed to godliness? Committed to pressing on and bearing witness?

### **Talk 3 – The View from the Tower (Rev 4-5)**

#### **1.0 - Opening**

Two views in an airport: ground level – chaotic. Tower – calm and controlled, everything happening as it should. Revelation 2-3 – view from the ground. Not looking that good. Revelation 4-5 view from the tower.

#### **2.0 - Tips for Reading Revelation – Tip #2 – Keep Your Old Testament Open**

Revelation is full of Old Testament imagery and allusion (Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, etc). If you try to keep your

Old Testament in mind it will help you understand the visions/images or pictures that John sees.

#### **3.0 - God On His Throne**

Revelation 5 – magnificent picture of God on his throne surrounded by 24 elders. Sight and sound (rumbling and thunder – Moses on Sinai, Elijah on Horeb). Four living creatures (Ezekiel and Isaiah). Everyone is singing God's praises in heaven.

#### **4.0 - Not What You Are Expecting**

Illustration about the 3-year old running out onto home plate in the fifth game of the 2002 World Series. Not what you are expecting. Revelation 5 – not what you are expecting.

#### **4.1 - Surprise # 1 - A Scroll that no-one can open**

Scroll = plan for the future (Ezek 2).

#### **4.2 - Surprise # 2 - A Slain Lamb**

John expecting to see Lion of Judah but he sees a slain lamb.

#### **4.3 - Surprise # 3 - Everyone Worships the Lamb**

The greatest surprise? Everyone worships the lamb as God. And what makes him worthy of this worship? His death. He purchased men for God.

#### **5.0 - The Prayers of the Saints**

Side point on the prayers of the saints (5:8). Three important things about prayer.

#### **5.1 - There is a connection between Heaven & Earth**

God hears our prayers.

#### **5.2 - Our Prayers may seem Useless**

Sometimes when we pray we can wonder if there is a point. Your prayers are valued by God

#### **5.3 - Lets make sure we think carefully about what we pray**

We should take advantage of the great privilege we have in prayer. But we should also be careful what we pray about.

#### **6.0 - Remembering the Big Picture**

View from the tarmac or view from the tower? We need to remember that from where God sits everything is under control - no matter how things look here. Don't lose sight of the big picture. The big reality in life is that God is on his throne. But Revelation 4-5 takes us by both shoulders, shakes us, points us to heaven and says: This is reality.

### **Talk 4 – Riding Through History (Rev 6-11)**

#### **1.0 - Ground Hog Day**

Bill Murray movie about living the same day over and over again. Revelation can sometimes feel like ground Hog Day. John Chapman thinks that Revelation was written for stupid people and for old people. Stupid people because it is the same message over and over. Old people because everyone is speaking in a loud voice (Rev 1:10, 5:2, 5:12, etc)

#### **2.0 - 7 Seals**

Jesus has taken the scroll and begins opening the seals. First four seals are the four horsemen. Fifth seal – souls of those who have been slain saying "How Long?" Not the most comforting answer (6:11f). Sixth seal – Day of the Lord language. Day of hope and day of judgement. Future event? Makes more sense to see it as looking at the cross. Chapter 8 – seventh seal is broken.

#### **3.0 - 7 Trumpets**

Similar to the seven seals – but it sounds worse. When the trumpets

are sounded it has an Exodus quality about it. But the sad thing is found in 9:20-22. The judgement that should cause people to repent has only hardened them toward God. With the seventh trumpet (Rev 11) there is some finality. The Kingdom of the world is taken over by Christ and there is rejoicing in heaven (11:15-19).

#### **4.0 - What Do We Make of All This?**

Similar to chapters 4 and 5: God is in control. Jesus is the one opening the seals. People want to make unhelpful direct identification: Plagues? World War 2: 50 million people killed. WWI 1: 8 million dead. Flu Pandemic (1918-1919): 50 million dead. Potato Famine, Ireland (1874) – 1 000 000 people died. Black Plague (1347-1355): 75 million. It could be any event in history. This is just life in the world we live in. Horrible things have happened and will continue to happen until Jesus comes again.

#### **5.0 - The Pattern & The Interludes**

Chapter 7 and the parts of chapter 10 and 11 (see pattern above). The interludes (Rev 7 and Rev 10:1-11:14) serve a purpose. 144 000 marked out as God's people. The two witnesses are killed – but God raises them to life. Both those visions should encourage the readers. God will keep his people.

#### **6.0 - Conclusion**

This passage has direct application for us: When you open up the news paper and read that 20 000 people were killed in a flood in Bangladesh... When you listen to the radio in the morning and hear that that planes have been flown into the World Trade Centre... When you watch the television at night and see that 200 people have been killed in a terrorist bombing in a Nightclub in Bali... don't be surprised. That is what the world we live in is like. But it goes further than that

#### **6.1 - Don't Worry**

It is easy to look at what happens in the world and be overwhelmed by

it. This passage reminds us that God's people need not worry. Bad things will continue to happen – even to God's people. But God has them under control

#### **6.2 - Keep Testifying**

We are the ones who have a message of hope so let's keep preaching it. Don't be upset by the terrible things in the world. Use them as an opportunity to testify about Jesus.

### **Talk 5 - Beware of imitations (Rev 12-16)**

#### **1.0 - Beware of imitations**

Nothing worse than getting caught with a fake or counterfeit when you think you have the real thing. This section is about counterfeits that the world seems willing to accept.

#### **2.0 - A Battle in Heaven**

Chapter 12 and 13 – central to the book in a few ways. Big idea? A Battle in heaven

#### **2.1 – Woman about to give birth**

Child born – we see later it is clearly Jesus (12:10)

#### **2.2 – Red Dragon**

Terrifying sight. At war against God/heaven. Also at war against earth. Defeated and cast down to earth. Red Dragon = Devil (12:9). Once cast down the Drago goes to make war against those who follow Jesus (12:17)

#### **3.0 - A Future Event?**

Reading this should not surprise us. And we shouldn't think that this war will be some future event. Nor should we think that this war is only happens in major conflicts or major times of crisis. This is the world we live in (See Eph 2:1-2, 6:10-12). Christians are continually involved in a battle with Satan. There is no Switzerland in this war. You are either on God's side or on the side of Satan.

#### **4.0 - How Does Satan Wage War?**

Satan uses counterfeits. Satan summons up the 1st beast (13:1).

The description sounds like a counterfeit Jesus (fatal wound but alive, given Satan's throne/authority/power, etc).

Satan = Counterfeit God.

Beast #1 = Counterfeit Jesus.

Beast #2 = Counterfeit Holy Spirit.

Unholy Trinity. This is anything that will lead us away from worshipping God – anything that seeks to provide security other than God.

### **5.0 - The Mark of the Beast**

People make a lot of the mark of the beast – that we must avoid it. But why don't they help us find the mark of God (7:3, 14:1)? Because there is no literal "mark". Everyone belongs to someone – you either belong to God or Satan.

### **6.0 - The Judge of All The Earth is Just**

God promises serious punishment for those who worship the beast (14:9-11). Chapters 15-16 provide more judgement. Some people think this sounds unfair. But the fact is our choices will have eternal consequences. We live in a world where people want to ignore God most of the lives and then blame him when bad things happen (Rev 16:21). But God is just in his judgements (16:4-7)

### **7.0 - Patient Endurance &**

### **Faithfulness**

All this calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints (13:10, 14:12). Satan is at war against those who are faithful to Jesus. Beware of the counterfeits – those things that will lead you away from worshipping God. What are you tempted to worship?

### **Talk 6 – The End of the World as we know It (Rev 18-20)**

#### **1.0 - It's The End of the World As We Know It**

Hollywood has made a lot of movies and money out of the end of the world idea (*Devil's Advocate, End of Days, Terminator, Armageddon*, etc). But how is the world going to end?

#### **2.0 - The Fall of Babylon**

What does Babylon represent in the Old Testament: the enemy of God's people, the place of exile, a

kingdom opposed to God's Kingdom.

Babylon is about to fall. Babylon is described as a woman – a prostitute – dressed in a flamboyant manner. She is clearly the enemy of God's people (17:6). Babylon teams up with the beast.

People want to make direct identification of the seven kings (seven empires, seven kings, seven Popes) but that is not necessary or helpful. Whoever they are they are destined for destruction along with Babylon

#### **3.0 - A Tale of Two Cities**

Who is Babylon?

NB: 2 cities are contrasted in the closing chapters of Revelation. Babylon and Jerusalem. Jerusalem – Bride – beautifully dressed – marked by acts of righteousness – destined to stand forever. Babylon –

Prostitute – gaudy dress – marked by adulteries – destined for destruction. Babylon is the counterfeit or alternative to God’s people.

#### **4.0 - Mourning & Rejoicing**

##### **4.1 – Mourning**

Kings (18:9), Merchants (18:11) and Ships Captains (18:17). Babylon is anything that offers you security and confidence outside of God.

NB: within 1 hour of September 11 the US Stock Exchange was closed. Sounds a bit like merchants mourning.

##### **4.2 – Rejoicing**

But there are those who rejoice at the fall of Babylon (19:1). I am sure that the souls under the altar who cry “How Long” (6:10) would be among those rejoicing. Their question has been answered.

#### **5.0 - The Millennium, Binding Satan & The Final Battle**

When was Satan bound? (Rev 20)

Jesus says he was bound through his death and resurrection (John 12:31).

Paul says that Satan is defeated by

the death & resurrection of Jesus (Col 2:15). Jesus says he has bound the strong man and his house is being plundered (Matt 12:29). How is the house plundered? Through the preaching of the Gospel – as people more from Satan’s Kingdom to God’s Kingdom (See also Luke 10:18-20). That is not to say that this is a Satan Free World. But Satan is bound and his house is being plundered. People get carried away about Satan being released for a short time (Rev 20:7). They may march out against God’s people but he is defeated without a battle. (19:117f – another non-event battle.) Opposition to God is futile.