

FGBC: The Son and His Churches: Mystery Revealed¹

Revelation 1:1-8
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In Canada everyone is allowed to believe whatever they want. It's one of the great things about being Canadian. We have religious freedom and we need to fight to keep it that way. But the conviction below this benevolent attitude is not that what everyone believes is true. Of course that couldn't be the case because we hold contradictory worldviews. Some of us believe people have walked on water. Some of us believe virgins have had babies – don't get worried young ladies, it only happened once. And some of us live as though death is not the end.

But while most Canadians are content to live beside neighbours who believe different things the unwritten rule in Canada is that in day to day life we need to operate as though only what you can see and touch is real. By and large Canadians are secular.

So what is a Jesus follower to do in a world like that? Do we just throw our beliefs into the pot of equally improbable scenarios – every belief system makes truth claims that go beyond the realm of scientific possibility. Or does Christianity's worldview make sense of life in a way the others do not?

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Well the crazy thing to me is that the Bible saw the world we live in coming. It very simply lays out the thinking of those who stand opposed to the cross in a way that only the supernatural could. So we know that the world we encounter with our five senses isn't the realest world. Just like my children are more real than the Lego cities they create, God is the most real entity in the universe. And He has told us how the story ends.

But He doesn't just tell us how it ends as though all that mattered was living with Him after we die, He wants us to win at life now. And so in the scriptures He lays out the path to victory which He says is found as we live our lives in light of His reality.

Now the whole Bible gives this message, but the book of Revelation is uniquely positioned to speak into it. Revelation is about unpacking the unseen reality we live in and making clear the opaque. Revelation is a book of mystery revealed, and it's the book we will be digging into over the next while.

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If you were part of our gathering here back in 2014 you might remember a series called The Lesson in the Lamps. We looked there at the first three chapters of Revelation and this series is going to rehash that one and then continue on throughout the rest of the book. So there will be a little overlap to start.

¹ This series is an adaptation of Lesson in the Lamps preached through in 2014.

Alright, grab your Bibles, you can use the one on your phone or you can use the one in the pew, and open up to the book of Revelation. This is an easy one to find – it's at the end.

Now I don't know if it counts for much, but I'm excited about this series – my wife is always telling me "you need to stop flapping your arms and being so excited about everything" but I think I'm just irreparably broken in this regard and you're stuck with me. But I really do feel strongly about Revelation. It's an amazing book.

You see Revelation is a book of mystery. It's a book of prophecy. It certainly speaks about the last days. And there is all sorts of imagery in it, some of which can be confusing. But the message of the book isn't a mystery and it's not nearly as complex as it is often made out to be.

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One of my professors at seminary told a story about a group of his students who had arranged with the janitor of a neighbourhood school to let them play basketball in the gym after hours. And while the students played the janitor would borrow one of their Bibles and read.

One day one of the young Bible school students asked him what book he was reading and the janitor replied "Revelation."

Snickering the student replied. "Do you understand anything you are reading?"

"Oh yes" replied the smiling janitor. And then leaning in close to the student's ear he whispered, "It means Jesus is gonna win!"

And he nailed it. That's the point. So while it looks like our world is going to hell in a handbasket. Ice caps are melting and hurricanes are ravaging the Atlantic, mass shootings are in the papers every second week and the globe's financial sector is on the verge of collapse, but the world isn't out of control. Jesus is gonna win. And actually it would be more accurate to say He's already won.

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But it's not hard to lose sight of that is it? All it takes is disaster striking close to home – my relationships fall apart, someone I love gets sick, my future is uncertain – and boom it doesn't feel like anyone is captaining the ship at all.

It's into that kind of world that the book of Revelation speaks – Jesus is alive and in control, not just of the world, but of your life. That's the point of Revelation. So let's jump into the first few verses:

[Read Revelation 1:1-3]

So the Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation. And he's writing as an old man in around 96AD. By this time he's the last surviving Apostle.

And he's seen some crazy difficult stuff. Persecution has been rampant. Nero started ruling in around 60AD. He crucified Peter and Paul and Timothy along with thousands of others. In fact he crucified whole cities of Christians. But he was nothing in comparison to Domitian who came to power in 92.

He demanded that everyone in the Empire worship him as Lord and God. He built temples in his own honour, and everyone had to take a pinch of incense and throw it on the fire and say Kaisaras einai o Kurios – Caesar is Lord.

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Now Domitian was actually part of the secular elite. I don't think he really believed he was a god, he just wanted to control his empire. And so as long as people added this act to their daily lives he was content to let them believe whatever they wanted. There was religious freedom in Rome as long as you towed the company line – kind of like Canada.

You see most Romans believed in many gods so it wasn't a big deal to them to add one more. But this was a huge deal to Christians and thousands of them ended up fed to lions or cut to pieces as a result.

And John fell into this camp. He was willing to honour Caesar he wasn't going to worship him because there is only one Kurios – one Lord. And so John refused to throw incense on Domitian's alter and ironically was convicted of being an atheist. But instead of being put in the gladiator ring he was banished to island prison of Patmos, the first century version of Guantanamo Bay. And that's where we pick the story up.

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Now the book starts with the word "Revelation" and this is the Greek word "apokalupsis" from which we get our word Apocalypse. Now when we hear this word we think of terrible disasters destroying the world, or maybe terrible B-grade movies which are also destroying the world. But that's not actually what "apocalypse" means.

In the Greek this word refers to something huge and life changing, but primarily positive. It's exciting like curtains on the stage being drawn back to allow the show to begin – hence the English word "Revelation."

So what's the show? Well verse 1 says "The Revelation from Jesus Christ" or some other translations say "The revelation by Jesus or about Jesus." And all of these are accurate. This is a book ultimately written by Jesus – He's the source of what John writes. And it's about Jesus breaking into our world. This is a book about how to see Jesus in the midst of all the opaque craziness that is going on.

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There is one more word I want to bring out of these first three verses is the word "prophecy" in verse 3. And we need to unpack this because Revelation is full of prophecy. But there are two kinds of prophecy in the Bible.

So sometimes prophets or angels predict the future. Gabriel told Mary, “You’re a virgin, but you’re going to have a baby and you are going to name Him Jesus.” And it happened. And some of Revelation is about what must soon take place in the future. But that kind of prophecy is actually rare.

Most prophecy in the Bible isn’t about the future, it’s about God speaking directly into the now. And so throughout scripture prophets are constantly saying “Thus says the Lord.” So for example Isaiah tells Israel:

This is what the LORD says...

“I am the LORD your God,
who teaches you what is good for you
and leads you along the paths you should follow.

Oh, that you had listened to My commands!

Then you would have had peace flowing like a gentle river
and righteousness rolling over you like waves in the sea. (Isaiah 48:17-18)

There is nothing about the future here. This is Isaiah speaking God’s word directly into the now. And God’s word is: “Hey, I’m not holding out on you. I want something awesome for you. So do what I say if you want to really live.” And Israel desperately needed to hear that message right now because they were suffering in Babylon. And incidentally this is the same message we need to hear as we live out our faith in secular Canada. God is still speaking into the now.

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So let me ask you, have you ever been thinking or praying about something and then you show up at church and the message is about exactly what’s going on in your life? Has that ever happened to you? If it has it’s not because I’m a genius. It’s because the Almighty God of the universe has lined up circumstances well above any of our pay-grades to speak directly into your now. That’s prophecy.

So there is some future-telling prophecy in Revelation, but like in the rest of scripture, most of Revelation is about God speaking into the now. And this is where people can make a mistake.

If you treat Revelation like a Crystal ball that can uncover hidden secrets and somehow help you escape the harsh realities of life you are going to come up short. And that’s because Revelation is meant to be read as a down-to-earth manual for how to be a disciple of Jesus in the middle of the harsh realities of life.

We know this because the whole Bible gives this message. The Bible never says figure out some secret code and God will snatch you up out of all the troubles everyone else is facing. It always says Our God is the Good Shepherd who walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. So real life isn’t escaping pain, it is finding joy in the midst of pain while we wait for the day the Lord will ultimately banish pain.

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Let’s keep going. Look at verse 4:

[Read Revelation 1:4-6]

So this letter is from John, and he's addressed it to the churches of Asia because Jesus told him to. So if you look down at verse 11 we get Jesus' first words to John:

"Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea." (Revelation 1:11)

So John's not being creative here, he's just doing what he's told. But there are also layers. So yes, these are the dominant churches in Asian at the time, but there are also seven of them. And throughout Revelation and really the whole Bible, the number 7 means "all of them." So this is Jesus' letter to the universal church. And this is a letter from Jesus to Lighthouse/Fort George.

Now if the God of the universe was writing a letter what would He say to you? Remember He knows you. He knows everything you are about. He knows the difference between what you look like when you role in here at church and what you are like when you are alone. And He's all powerful so He can have a letter penned 2000 years ago that speaks directly, prophetically into your now. So what's His message?

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Verse 4 sets the tone. The message starts "grace and peace to you from Him who is, and who was, and who is to come." Grace and peace from Jesus who is the ruler of the kings of the earth and the firstborn from the dead.

Friends, God's not mad. He's not an angry ogre in the sky. He's for you and for His church. He loves you and wants the best for you, and He's totally in control so He can bring this about. That's what's revealed in this book!

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But it begs the question. How are you living in light of this reality? Are you excited about the prospect of Him breaking into your world and changing you to better bear His image? Does that sound exciting because you trust that He is good and really does know what is best for you? Or is it scary because there are certain aspects of your life that you don't really want to give up to Him?

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I ask this because this is what Jesus asked the church of the first century. You see in the seven letters to the churches that we are going to look at we are going to see how while every church was different, they shared a single struggle: they loved Jesus and wanted to follow Him, but they loved some other stuff too. They wanted Jesus as long as He didn't mess up their other plans.

So how does that sit with you? Does the idea of Jesus breaking into your world to transform you into His image make you excited, or are there things in your life that you love, but you know Jesus wants to change?

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If you were with us over the last couple months we just spent time in the book of 2nd Peter. It's a short book with one theme running through it – If you've received Jesus' grace then make every effort to live your life in response to this grace.

It's not about being good enough to be saved. And it isn't about losing our salvation if you don't measure up. But it is very much about the reality that throughout scripture saved people look more and more like their Saviour or they aren't saved. And that's where Jesus is going here as well.

Jesus wants to be God in your life. In fact He demands it. And by God He means He wants to be your main passion and focus. He isn't interested in sharing His spot with your girlfriend or your job or your retirement savings or your friends. He isn't interested in being a major part of your life, He wants to be your God. He wants you to worship Him.

And if you will submit to this then He commits Himself to changing your heart and your passions. You see none of us naturally want to submit to God. All of us want to be our own gods. All of us want to direct our lives. That's called sin, and it's been the dominant theme of human history since Adam voted God off the island.

But the message of scripture is that if we will submit to Jesus then He will change this about us. He will write His law on our hearts and that means we will start wanting to live our lives in a way that brings Him glory. And when this happens we find ourselves living in light of real reality and enjoying the good things He desires for us. This is where abundant life is.

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Now we will get into more of that over the next few weeks, but for now let's look at what we need in order to arrive here. How do we guard ourselves from missing out on the good things God wants for us?

Look at verse 7:

[Read Revelation 1:7-8]

Jesus is coming back. And there are two sides to the picture. It's an encouraging picture for people who are living for Jesus. But it's not just a picture for people who believe this, it's a picture for everyone.

Friends, real reality doesn't care whether you believe it or not even if you're Canadian. Jesus is coming back and there will be no non-believers on that day. Every knee will bow, every tongue will confess. There won't be debate. There won't be confusion. But there will be deep mourning from all those who did not live their lives for Jesus' glory.

It's going to be awesome when the Almighty comes. And it's going to be terrible.

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But this isn't just about some day in the future. John's point is that even though Jesus hasn't made Himself visible yet, this is real reality right now. Things aren't what they seem. The natural world we are living in is not the most real thing out there. There is another reality that is far more real even though every day we are at risk of losing sight of it. But it is breaking into our world and it has broken in.

Friends, not only is Jesus returning in the clouds, but He is here right now.

And here we come across one of the biggest mysteries in the book – a mystery we are going to grapple with over the next several weeks – and that mystery is that being a Jesus follower isn't primarily about following the rules, it is about seeing Jesus.

40 times throughout the book of Revelation John is going to say "I saw", and 25 more times he is going to say "look" or "behold". And the reason for this emphasis is that keeping our eyes on Jesus – like Peter did when he first stepped out on the water – seeing Him in the midst of the storm, is absolutely central to life as a Christian.

I mean, don't you think John was able to live out his last days in "Guantanamo Bay" totally at peace with his earthly reality? He had just seen the Alpha and Omega show up. Patmos is nothing in light of that reality. Do your worst Domitian, you can't hurt me. Revelation is about living with eyes that see real reality.

And that's what the church needs and that's what you need in order to really live. Friends, Jesus is on the move. He's at work here in our church and in this city. And He wants to give you eyes to see Him so that you can enjoy the blessing of living within His will. So will you live your life in light of real reality?