

The Gospel *From* Patmos



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rev. 1:1–8; John 14:1–3; Deut. 29:29; John 14:29; Rom. 1:7; Phil. 3:20; Dan. 7:13, 14.*

Memory Text: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near” (*Revelation 1:3, NKJV*).

The prophecies of Revelation were revealed in vision to the apostle John more than nineteen centuries ago during his exile on a small rocky island known as Patmos in the Aegean Sea (*Rev. 1:9*). Revelation 1:3 pronounces a blessing on those who read the book and hear and obey the teachings (*compare Luke 6:47, 48*). This verse refers to the congregation assembled in the church to hear the messages. However, they are blessed not only because they read or listen, but also because they obey the words of the book (*see Rev. 22:7*).

The prophecies of Revelation are an expression of God's care for His people. They point us to the shortness and fragility of this life, to salvation in Jesus and His work as our heavenly High Priest and King, and to our calling to spread the gospel.

Biblical prophecies are like a lamp shining in a dark place (*2 Pet. 1:19*). They are intended to provide guidance for our life today and hope for our future. We will need this prophetic guide until the coming of Christ and the establishment of God's everlasting kingdom.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 5.

The Title of the Book

Read Revelation 1:1, 2. What is the significance of the full title of the book? What does the title teach us in terms of whom the book is really about?

Revelation 1:1 states the title of the book as “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” The word “revelation” comes from the Greek word *apokalupsis* (apocalypse), which means “uncovering” or “unveiling.” The Apocalypse is an unveiling of Jesus Christ; it is both *from* Jesus and *about* Him. While it came from God through Jesus Christ (see *Rev. 22:16*), the book testifies that Jesus also is the focus of its contents. The Apocalypse is His self-revelation to His people and an expression of His care for them.

Jesus is the central figure of Revelation. The book begins with Him (*Rev. 1:5–8*) and concludes with Him (*Rev. 22:12–16*). “Let Daniel speak, let the Revelation speak, and tell what is truth. But whatever phase of the subject is presented, uplift Jesus as the center of all hope, ‘the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright and morning Star.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 118.

Also, the Jesus of the Apocalypse is the Jesus of the four Gospels. Revelation continues the description of Jesus and His work of salvation on behalf of His people as first depicted in the Gospels. The book of Revelation focuses on different aspects of His existence and ministry. Essentially, it begins where the Gospels end, with Jesus’ resurrection and ascension into heaven.

Together with the Epistle to the Hebrews, Revelation emphasizes Jesus’ heavenly ministry. It shows that, after His ascension, Jesus was inaugurated into His royal and priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Without Revelation or Hebrews, our knowledge of Christ’s high-priestly ministry in heaven in behalf of His people would be very limited. And yet, besides Hebrews, the book of Revelation provides us with a unique look into the ministry of Jesus Christ in our behalf.

Read John 14:1–3. How does the very broad promise here help us better understand what Jesus is doing for us in heaven right now? What hope can we draw from this wonderful promise?

The Purpose of the Book

Revelation 1:1 also tells us that the purpose of the book is to show future events, *starting from the time when the book itself was written*. Anyone familiar with Revelation will notice that the prediction of events—whether those already fulfilled (at least from our perspective today) or those events still future (again, from our perspective today)—occupies most of the book’s content.

The primary purpose of biblical prophecies is to assure us that no matter what the future brings, God is in control. Revelation does just that: it assures us that Jesus Christ is with His people throughout this world’s history and its alarming final events.

Consequently, Revelation’s prophecies have two practical purposes: to teach us how to live today and to prepare us for the future.

Read Deuteronomy 29:29. How does this text help us understand why some things are not revealed to us? According to this text, what is the *purpose* of the things that are revealed to us? That is, why are we told them? *See also Rev. 22:7.*

Revelation’s end-time prophecies are not revealed to satisfy our obsessive curiosity about the future. The book reveals only those aspects of the future important for us to know. They are disclosed to impress upon us the seriousness of what will happen so that we will realize our dependence on God and, in that dependence, obey Him.

For centuries, speculation—and even more sensationalism—has accompanied so much of the teaching regarding end-time events. Fortunes have been made by those who, predicting the immediate end, have scared people into giving money to their ministry because, well, the end was near. Each time, though, the end didn’t come, and people were left disillusioned and discouraged. As with all of the good things God has given us, prophecy can be misused, and misinterpreted, as well.

Read John 14:29. What crucially important principle for the purpose of prophecy can we find here in this verse?

The Symbolic Language of Revelation

Read Revelation 13:1, Daniel 7:1–3, and Ezekiel 1:1–14. What is the one thing that all these visions have in common?

Revelation 1:1 further states: “And He sent and *signified* it by His angel to His servant John” (*NKJV, emphasis added*). Here we find a very important word in the book. The word “signified” is a translation of the Greek word *semainō*, meaning “to show by symbolic signs.” This word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) in which Daniel explains to King Nebuchadnezzar that, by the statue made of gold, silver, bronze, and iron, God signifies to the king “ ‘what will take place in the future’ ” (*Dan. 2:45, NASB*). By employing the same word, John tells us that the scenes and events of Revelation were shown to him in vision in symbolic presentations. Guided by the Holy Spirit, John faithfully recorded these symbolic presentations as he had seen them in the visions (*Rev. 1:2*).

Thus, for the most part, the language used to describe Revelation’s prophecies must not be interpreted literally. As a rule, the reading of the Bible, in general, presupposes a literal understanding of the text (unless the text points to intended symbolism). But when we read Revelation—unless the text points to a literal meaning—we need to interpret it symbolically. While the scenes and events predicted are real, they usually were expressed in symbolic language.

Keeping in mind the largely symbolic character of Revelation will safeguard us against distorting the prophetic message. In trying to determine the meaning of the symbols used in the book, we must be careful not to impose on the text a meaning that comes out of human imagination or the current meanings of those symbols in our culture. Instead, we must go to the Bible and to the symbols found in its pages in order to understand the symbols in the book of Revelation.

In fact, in trying to unlock the meaning of the symbols in Revelation, we must remember that most of them were drawn from the Old Testament. By portraying the future in the language of the past, God wanted to impress upon our minds that His acts of salvation in the future will be very much like His acts of salvation in the past. What He did for His people in the past, He will do for them again in the future. In endeavoring to decode the symbols and images of Revelation, we must start by paying attention to the Old Testament.

The Godhead

Revelation begins with a greeting similar to the ones found in Paul's letters. The book was sent ostensibly as a letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor in John's day (see *Rev. 1:11*). However, Revelation was not written for them only, but for all generations of Christians throughout history.

Read Revelation 1:4, 5 and Romans 1:7. What common greeting is found in both texts, and from whom is the greeting given?

Both texts offer an epistolary greeting: "Grace and peace to you." This phrase consists of the Greek greeting *charis* ("grace") and the Hebrew greeting *shalom* ("peace," "well-being"). As we can see from these texts, the Givers of grace and peace are the three Persons of the Godhead.

God the Father is identified as the One "who is and who was and who is to come" (see *Rev. 1:8, Rev. 4:8, NKJV*). This designation refers to the divine name Yahweh, "I AM WHO I AM" (*Exod. 3:14, NKJV*), referring to God's eternal existence.

The Holy Spirit is referred to as "the seven Spirits" (compare with *Rev. 4:5 and Rev. 5:6*). In Scripture, seven is a number of fullness. "The seven Spirits" means the Holy Spirit is active in all seven churches. This image refers to the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit and His constant work among God's people through history, enabling them to fulfill their calling.

Jesus Christ is identified by three titles: "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth" (*Rev. 1:5, NKJV*). They refer to His death on the cross, His resurrection, and His reign in heaven. Then John states what Jesus has done: He "loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father" (*Rev. 1:5, 6, NKJV*).

In the original Greek, He "loved us" refers to Christ's ongoing love, which embraces the past, the present, and the future. The One who loves us has released us from our sins by His blood. In the Greek, the verb "released" refers to a completed act in the past: when Jesus died on the cross He provided a perfect atonement for our sins.

Ephesians 2:6 and Philippians 3:20 describe the redeemed as citizens of heaven who are raised up and made to sit with Jesus in heavenly places. What might these texts mean, and how do we presently enjoy this glorious status in Christ as "kings and priests" (*Rev. 1:6, NKJV*) while still in this sin-cursed world? How should this answer impact how we live?

The Keynote of Revelation

The conclusion of the prologue of Revelation points to the true focus of the whole book: the return of Jesus in power and glory. Christ's promise to come again is reiterated three times in the conclusion of the book (*Rev. 22:7, 12, 20*).

Read Revelation 1:7, 8. The wording of this text is derived from several prophetic texts: Daniel 7:13, 14; Zechariah 12:10; and Matthew 24:30. What do these texts tell us about the certainty of the Second Coming?

In Revelation, the second coming of Christ is the end point toward which history moves. The Second Coming will mark the conclusion of this world's history and the beginning of God's eternal kingdom, as well as freedom from all evil, anguish, pain, and death.

Like the rest of the New Testament, Revelation 1:7 points to the literal, visible, and personal coming of Christ in majesty and glory. Every human being alive on the earth at the time, as well as "those who pierced Him" (*NASB*), will witness His coming. These words point to a special resurrection of certain people right before the return of Christ, including those who crucified Him. While Jesus will, with His coming, bring deliverance to those people waiting for Him, He will bring judgment to those inhabitants living on the earth who have spurned His mercy and love.

The certainty of Christ's coming is affirmed with the words "Even so, Amen" (*Rev. 1:7*). The words "even so" are a translation of the Greek word *nai*; and *amen* is a Hebrew affirmative. Together, these two words express certainty. They also conclude the book in two similar affirmations (*see Rev. 22:20*).

"More than eighteen hundred years have passed since the Saviour gave the promise of his coming. Throughout the centuries his words have filled with courage the hearts of his faithful ones. The promise has not yet been fulfilled; the Life-giver's voice has not yet called the sleeping saints from their graves; but none the less sure is the word that has been spoken. In his own time God will fulfill his word. Shall any become weary now? Shall we lose our hold on faith when we are so near the eternal world? Shall any say, The city is a great way off?—No, no. A little longer, and we shall see the King in his beauty. A little longer, and he will wipe all tears from our eyes. A little longer, and he will present us 'faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.'"
—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Nov. 13, 1913.

A promise is only as strong as the integrity of the person giving it and his or her ability to fulfill it. How does the fact that the promise of the Second Coming has been given by God, who has kept all His promises in the past, provide you with assurance that Christ will return as He has promised?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Study of the Books of Daniel and the Revelation,” pp. 112–119, in *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*.

“This revelation was given for the guidance and comfort of the church throughout the Christian dispensation. . . . A revelation is something revealed. The Lord Himself revealed to His servant the mysteries contained in this book, and He designs that they shall be open to the study of all. Its truths are addressed to those living in the last days of this earth’s history, as well as to those living in the days of John. Some of the scenes depicted in this prophecy are in the past, some are now taking place; some bring to view the close of the great conflict between the powers of darkness and the Prince of heaven, and some reveal the triumphs and joys of the redeemed in the earth made new.

“Let none think, because they cannot explain the meaning of every symbol in the Revelation, that it is useless for them to search this book in an effort to know the meaning of the truth it contains. The One who revealed these mysteries to John will give to the diligent searcher for truth a foretaste of heavenly things. Those whose hearts are open to the reception of truth will be enabled to understand its teachings, and will be granted the blessing promised to those who ‘hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 583–585.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 If Revelation is the unveiling of Jesus Christ, why does the word *apocalypse* have a negative meaning today? What does this negativity tell us about the popular perception of Revelation among Christians? Why is the word *fear* often associated with Revelation’s prophecies?
- 2 Think about some of the failed predictions that certain people have made just in the past 20 years regarding end-time events and the second coming of Jesus. Regardless of the hearts or motives (which we can’t know anyway) of those individuals who make them, what are the negative results of these failed predictions? How do they make the ones who believed in those predictions feel? How do these failed predictions make Christians in general appear to those on the outside who see these failed predictions? As a people who believe in prophecy and who look for end-time events as waymarks, how do we strike the right balance in how we understand prophecy and how we teach it to others?

Power of a Testimony

By MIGUEL MANUEL MAFUGULA

I was born into a Sunday-keeping family in Milange, a town located just two miles (three kilometers) from Mozambique’s border with Malawi.

My introduction to the Seventh-day Adventist Church came through a girl named Adelina. She was 16 and in the seventh grade, and she asked me for help with her homework. I was 21 and in the 10th grade.

After I helped her, she started talking about the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She told me about the Sabbath and explained that God set aside Saturday, not Sunday, as the day of worship.

Later, Adelina presented me with a Bible. She had underlined the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8–11 and Ezekiel 20:20, which says, “Hallow my Sabbaths, and they will be a sign between Me and you” (*NKJV*). On one page of the Bible, she wrote, “Go read Mark 2:27, 28.”

I turned to Mark and read Jesus’ words, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.”

When I read this, I realized that I had been observing the wrong day of the week.

I decided to go to church with Adelina to learn more, and soon I was worshipping on Saturday.

This caused problems at my Sunday church, where I had been serving as youth director. The church’s pastor went to my father, and my father ordered me to return. When I refused, my father declared, “If you can’t obey your parents, then you can’t live with them.” He kicked me out of the house.

I told Adelina’s parents what had happened, and they gave me a place to live until I finished high school. I was baptized two years later.

God helped me to graduate from high school and college and to get hired as a chemistry teacher at the public high school in Milange. Later I married Adelina, the girl who introduced me to the Sabbath.

God has been able to use my personal testimony in amazing ways. I’ve shared it with the young people from my former Sunday church, and two have become Adventists. I also told my parents, and they were baptized.

I tell everyone: trust in the Lord daily. Nothing is impossible for Him.



Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help open the first Seventh-day Adventist elementary school in Miguel’s hometown of Milange. Thank you for your mission offering.

Part I: Overview

▶ **Key Text:** *Revelation 1:1*

▶ **Study Focus:** In this lesson, our focus will be the prologue (*Rev. 1:1–8*) and the book of Revelation, as a whole.

▶ **Introduction:** The prologue to Revelation (*Rev. 1:1–8*) introduces the main themes of the book in relatively plain language. These verses contain no terrifying beasts, no heavenly journeys, and no sevenfold sequences. Instead, they describe how the book got here (*Rev. 1:1–3*), who sent it to the churches (*Rev. 1:4–6*), and how the events described by the book will turn out in the end (*Rev. 1:7, 8*). The prologue expresses the centrality of Jesus Christ to the whole book and prepares the reader for what is to come in straightforward language.

▶ **Lesson Themes:** The prologue to the book of Revelation introduces the following themes:

I. Jesus Is the Central Figure of Revelation.

His centrality is made clear by the title of the book (*Rev. 1:1*), His qualities and actions (*Rev. 1:5, 6*), and His central role at the Second Coming (*Rev. 1:7*).

II. The Book Concerns Future Events.

These events are not just end-time events. In fact, most of the events described herein, relative to John's day, were events through future history (*Rev. 1:1*).

III. The Visions of the Book Are Given in Symbolic Language.

This fact is clear from one of the key words in Revelation 1:1 and its allusion to Daniel 2.

IV. The Threeness of God

There is a threefold description of the Trinity of God's persons, qualities, and actions in Revelation 1:4–6.

V. The Return of Jesus

Revelation 1:7, 8 addresses this ultimate culmination of all the events in the book.

▶ **Life Application:** The concluding questions that follow the commentary section invite students to balance the powerful insights of the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of Revelation with the centrality of Jesus Christ throughout the book.

Part II: Commentary

The “Overview” to the standard edition Bible study guide tells us that the entire set of lessons is based on the Seventh-day Adventist concept of Inspiration, the historicist method of prophetic interpretation, the unique organizational structure of Revelation, and a Christ-centered approach to interpretation.

The historicist method is supported by the broad structure of Revelation itself. The book begins with the seven churches (*Rev. 1:9–3:22*), which concern the situation of John’s day and which prophetically portray the situation of the church through history to the end times. The seals and the trumpets also cover the period from the time of John to the end of time (*Rev. 4:1–11:19*). Finally, the last half of the book (*Rev. 12:1–22:21*) focuses mostly on the last days of earth’s history and beyond. This method also is supported by the allusion to Daniel 2 in the first verse of the book (see the elaboration on this point in theme III below).

Main Themes of Lesson 1 Elaborated:

I. Jesus Is the Central Figure of Revelation (*Rev. 1:1, 5–7*).

The book opens with a chain of revelation that centers in Jesus. He is the first Person mentioned in the book and the One who passes the revelation on to John (*Rev. 1:1*). What God gave to Jesus is called “the Revelation of Jesus Christ” (*Rev. 1:1*). What Jesus passed on to John is called “the testimony of Jesus” (*Rev. 1:2*). What John passed on to his readers was “the words of this prophecy” (*Rev. 1:3*).

This chain of revelation is important for Seventh-day Adventists. It indicates clearly that the testimony of Jesus here includes the book of Revelation itself, as well as the visionary gift that John received (*Rev. 1:2*). The remnant of Revelation 12:17 also will later have the testimony of Jesus, a visionary gift similar to the one John had, which also produced inspired writings.

So the prologue points to Jesus as the central figure of Revelation. The book is a revelation from Jesus and about Jesus (*Rev. 1:1*). Jesus is qualified for His special role by His death, resurrection, and heavenly reign (*Rev. 1:5*). In the end, He also will come with the clouds (*Rev. 1:7*).

II. The Book Concerns Future Events.

Revelation 1:1 tells us that a major purpose of the book is to “show to his

servants what must soon take place” (*RSV*). These events are in the future, from John’s perspective. But what does the text mean by “soon”? The 2,000 years that have passed since Revelation was written do not seem like soon! So the word “soon” must clearly be from God’s perspective, in which 1,000 years is like a day (*2 Pet. 3:8*).

But from our perspective the return of Jesus has always been soon, as well. We don’t know when Jesus will actually come, but we do know that, in terms of our own personal conscious experience (*Eccles. 9:5*), He will seem to come an instant after we die. For each of us, individually, the Second Coming is no more than a few moments after death. So the opportunity for us to get ready for His coming is now rather than sometime in the future. If Jesus’ coming were not portrayed as soon, many people would delay getting ready for His return.

III. The Vision Is Given in Symbolic Language.

Generally, the best way to approach Scripture is to take everything literally, unless it is clear that a symbol is intended. In Revelation, the opposite approach is indicated by the first verse. There, it tells us that the entire vision given to John was “signified” (*Rev. 1:1* [Greek: *esêmanen*]) by either God or Jesus. The primary definition of the word “signified” means to make something known by *signs*, speech, or actions. So in Revelation the best way to approach the text is to treat everything as a symbol, unless it is clear that a literal meaning is intended (for example, “Jesus Christ” in Revelation 1:1 should be taken literally).

This insight takes even clearer shape when the reader discovers an allusion to Daniel 2 in the first verse of the book. The only other place in the Bible that combines the word “signified” with the unusual expression “what must soon take place” (*Rev. 1:1, RSV, NIV* [from the Greek: *a dei genesthai*]) is Daniel 2:45. Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a great image embodies the incident in which God “signified” (*Dan. 2:45, Rev. 1:1*) to him what must take place in the last days. What was to be “in the last days” in Daniel is now “soon” in Revelation.

At the very opening of the book of Revelation, therefore, one finds a powerful allusion to Daniel 2. This allusion ties the two books together as companion volumes. While Revelation alludes to many of the prophets, there is a special bond between Revelation and the book of Daniel. So we should expect some of the symbolism of Revelation to point to sequences of history that run from the prophet’s time until the end of time.

IV. The Threeness of God

Revelation 1:4–6 opens the book with a threefold description of the Trinity. First of all, there is a description of Persons: the Father (the One who is, was, and is to come), the Holy Spirit (represented by the seven spirits), and Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is mentioned last because He is the subject of the next two descriptions.

Next comes a description of qualities that ground the role Jesus plays in Revelation. He is the one who died (He is the faithful witness/martyr—from the Greek: *martys*), rose (the “first-born of the dead,” [*RSV*]), and joined the Father on His throne (“ruler of the kings of the earth,” [*NIV*]). The death and resurrection of Jesus provide the foundation of His heavenly reign.

The final description is of actions. Jesus loves us (Greek, present tense), has freed, or “washed” (two different Greek words that sound the same, but are one letter different), us from our sins by His blood, and made us kings and priests to God. The ultimate outcome of Jesus’ love, as expressed in His death and resurrection, is to raise His people to the highest possible status: kings and priests.

V. The Return of Jesus

The picture of Jesus’ return in Revelation 1:7 is based on allusions to Daniel 7 and Zechariah 12. The “He” of Revelation 1:7 (*NKJV*) clearly refers to Jesus, as He has been the subject of the previous two verses. “Coming with the clouds” (*NIV*) recalls the Son of Man who comes with clouds to the Ancient of Days and receives dominion over the kingdoms of the earth (*Dan. 7:13, 14*). In Revelation, Jesus’ right to rule over the earth is recognized in heaven at His ascension (*Revelation 5*) and on the earth at the Second Coming (*Rev. 1:7*).

The allusion to Zechariah is particularly interesting. Notice the parallels between Zechariah 12 and the book of Revelation. In Zechariah 12:7, 8, it is Yahweh who comes. In Revelation, it is Jesus who comes. In Zechariah 12:10, it is Yahweh who is pierced; in Revelation, it is Jesus who is pierced. In Zechariah, it is the inhabitants of Jerusalem who see God come (*Zech. 12:8–10*); in Revelation, it is the whole earth that sees Jesus come. In Zechariah 12:11, 12, it is the clans of Jerusalem that mourn; in Revelation, it is the tribes of the whole earth that mourn.

In Revelation’s use of the Old Testament, therefore, there is a shift in emphasis from Yahweh to Jesus. There is a similar shift from the literal and local things of Israel to the spiritual, worldwide impact of the gospel and the church.

Part III: Life Application

1. The lesson focuses on the opening to the book of Revelation, or the prologue (*Rev. 1:1–8*). One way to begin the lesson would be to ask, “What is your favorite Bible story opening?” Students might give such answers as “baby Moses in the bulrushes,” “the diet test for Daniel and his three friends in Daniel 1,” “the anointing of David, the shepherd boy,” or “angels visiting the shepherds at Jesus’ birth,” as examples. *How does the opening of a Bible story or book affect the way you understand the rest of the story?*

2. The lesson brings out two things that are very important throughout the book of Revelation: (a) the centrality of Jesus Christ and (b) the historicist reading of Revelation. The teacher can invite his or her students to discuss such questions as *What value does the historicist approach offer in today’s world? How do the historical details of the historicist interpretation of Revelation uplift Jesus Christ as the center of all hope?* Some answers to the first of these questions: The historicist approach (a) answers the three great philosophical questions: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? (b) helps us see the hand of God in history; (c) gives us confidence in the midst of chaos that God is still in control of history; and (d) gives us confidence that, because God has been active throughout history, the hope that we have for the end also is sure.
