

Revelation 1:1-3

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John introduces this epistle as a message to Jesus' "bondservants." He promises a special blessing/reward for any bondservant who reads, understands, then obeys this prophetic word. The emphasis is upon obedient action.

This letter begins with a startling announcement: it is *the Revelation of Jesus, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants*. The Greek word translated *Revelation* is "apokalypsis," from which we get the English word "apocalypse." "Apocalypse" is generally used to describe disastrous circumstances such as war and famine; and soon in this letter we will see a prophetic forecast of dire circumstances. However, that is not the focal point of this book. *God, through His son Jesus Christ had a specific reason to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place. And that is to prepare each bond-servant to be a faithful witness in the face of difficulty, in order that they might be blessed.*

God specifically gave this Revelation to His Son Jesus Christ to show to His bond-servants. In Acts 1, just before Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples (including John) asked Him if He planned to restore the Kingdom to Israel at that time. Jesus answered:

"It is not for you to know periods of time or appointed times which the Father has set by His own authority;"
(Acts 1:7)

In this instance, the Father has authorized the disclosure of future events to Jesus' bond-servants. He gave the message to Jesus specifically to show to His bond-servants.

The purpose of giving this message is to benefit the *bond-servants*. Any *bond-servant* can be a faithful witness and be *blessed* by following the instruction to read, *hear*, and obey the actions instructed within the prophecy. The word translated *bond-servants* is the Greek word "doulos." "Doulos" occurs 127 times in the New Testament. It is most often translated simply "servant" (120 times in KJV). This letter is, therefore, addressed specifically to those who have already believed on Jesus, looking unto Him to be healed from the poison of sin, just as the children of Israel were healed when they had sufficient faith to look upon the bronze serpent, hoping for healing from the poison of vipers (John 3:14-16).

John introduces Himself as a fellow *bond-servant*, or servant, of Jesus. It is clear that the *Revelation* is a message of instruction for believers in Jesus; this letter's basic proposition offers the *bond-servants* the chance to be *blessed* if they make certain choices. This *Revelation* is to aid their decision-making by letting them know what is at stake beyond the realm of what can be seen, and beyond the timeframe of the immediate. The obvious logical alternative is that the *bond-servants* will not receive this special blessing if they don't choose to obey the words of this prophecy.

This *Revelation* will reveal future events *which must soon take place*. The fact that these events *must* take place introduces another major theme of *Revelation*, namely that God is on His throne, and always will be. Nothing happens without His authorization, and all things will happen that He has ordained. Therefore, each servant can rest in the comfort of knowing that God is in control, no matter how out of control the circumstances around them might appear.

The future events will take place *soon*. The Greek word translated *soon* is “en,” which is a preposition most often translated with words such as “in,” “with,” or “by.” In fact, in the KJV, “en” is translated as one of these three words almost 80% of the time. Here, the context fits for “en” to be translated as *soon*. However, the Bible tells us that from God’s perspective, a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day (2 Peter 3:8). In retrospect, we can see that some of these events occurred within the lifetime of the first recipients of this letter, while other events remain in the future.

In addition to introducing himself as a “doulos” (servant) of *Jesus Christ*, John also introduces himself as one *who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, everything that he saw*. Thus, this *John* who wrote *the Revelation* was an eyewitness to *the testimony of Jesus Christ*, His words and deeds; the Apostle John—author of the Gospel of John.

John declares that *He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John*. The word translated *angel* translates the Greek word “angelos,” which means “messenger,” and is sometimes translated in the Bible as “messenger,” depending on the context. If *He* refers to *God*, then *Jesus Christ* would be the *angel* or messenger God sent to deliver the message. This interpretation seems to fit the context, for *Jesus* will soon appear, and speak in first person throughout *the Revelation*. Many believe the “Angel of the Lord” spoken of in the Old Testament refers to the appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ. In this case *angel* would refer to the appearance of the risen and glorified Jesus. This might be an instance where “messenger” would be a clearer translation. This is likely the case throughout this chapter.

The Greek verb translated *testified* is “martyreo,” from which we get the English word “martyred.” The word translated *testimony* in the phrase *testimony of Jesus Christ* is “martyria” which is the noun form of “martyreo.” John is a “doulos” (servant) of Jesus who “martyreo” (*testified*) to the “martyria” (*witness*) of Jesus Christ. *Revelation* invites every believer, every “doulos” (servant), to be a faithful *witness*, testifying of the *witness* of Jesus with their words and deeds. It is not necessary to die physically to become a “martyria.” It only requires being a faithful witness; the cost will differ for each person, depending on their circumstances.

How do the servants of Jesus accomplish becoming a faithful *witness*, following the example of John and Jesus? John spells it out clearly: the “doulos” (servant) can be *one who reads* this message written by John. But reading alone is not sufficient. The “doulos” (servant) who would be a faithful *witness* must also *hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things which are written in the Revelation*. To *read* is to acquire the proposition of the Revelation. To *hear* is to understand its truth and its ramifications. Once this proposition is *read* and understood—that in order to be *blessed*, believers must be a faithful witness—the next thing required is action.

It would make no sense for Jesus to give to His sheep a message to *read*, and write it in a language no one could speak. Similarly, it would make no sense to give a message that could be read but not understood. *The Revelation* is intended to be read and understood. Finally, it would make no sense for Jesus to give His followers a command to do something which they were not capable of doing. No human can take actions in the past or the future. Actions may only be taken in the present. Therefore, while *the Revelation* reveals future events, its emphasis is not for His servants to unravel the future. It is, rather, to spur *His bond-servants* to take actions now, in the present, to be faithful witnesses deserving of His reward.

The Greek word translated *keep* is translated similarly in Matthew 19:17:

“And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you want to enter life, keep the commandments.’”

The clear implication in this passage from Matthew is that the way to enter life is to obey/observe God’s commandments. John sets forth the same basic proposition in *Revelation*. The path to be *blessed* is to *keep* or obey the instructions contained in *the Revelation*. John offers the opportunity to be *blessed*. The rest of the book will make clear that the contemplated blessings are quite stupendous. At the very end of *Revelation*, Jesus includes this proclamation in His wrap-up:

“Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to reward each one as his work deserves. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life, and may enter the city by the gates.”
(Revelation 22:12-14).

The *Revelation* begins with a promise of blessing for reading, understanding, and following Jesus’ admonitions. It ends with Jesus speaking directly, that He is “coming quickly” and His “reward is with” Him. A primary purpose of Jesus’ imminent return is to reward those among His “*doulos*” (servants) who made the choice to be faithful witnesses. To be a faithful witness (“*martyria*”) requires sacrifice. Jesus wants His “*doulos*” (servants) to understand clearly the great benefit they will receive for the difficulty they will endure through their faithfulness. Jesus wants them to deserve the reward by their faithfulness.

This is the message and purpose of *the Revelation*, plainly set forth in its opening verses. *The Revelation* also discloses future difficulties His servants will be asked to endure. But the primary purpose is to equip His servants to be faithful no matter the hardships they experience.

Biblical Text

1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, 2 who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, everything that he saw. 3 Blessed is the one who reads, and those who hear the words of the prophecy and keep the things which are written in it; for the time is near.