

About the *Straight to the Heart* Series

On his eightieth birthday, Sir Winston Churchill dismissed the compliment that he was the “lion” who had defeated Nazi Germany in World War Two. He told the Houses of Parliament that *“It was a nation and race dwelling all around the globe that had the lion’s heart. I had the luck to be called upon to give the roar.”*

I hope that God speaks to you very powerfully through the “roar” of the books in the *Straight to the Heart* series. I hope they help you to understand the books of the Bible and the message that the Holy Spirit inspired their authors to write. I hope that they help you to hear God’s voice challenging you, and that they provide you with a springboard for further journeys into each book of Scripture for yourself.

But when you hear my “roar”, I want you to know that it comes from the heart of a much bigger “lion” than me. I have been shaped by a whole host of great Christian thinkers and preachers from around the world, and I want to give due credit to at least some of them here:

Terry Virgo, David Stroud, John Hosier, Adrian Holloway, Greg Haslam, Lex Loizides, and all those who lead the Newfrontiers family of churches; friends and encouragers, such as Stef Liston, Joel Virgo, Stuart Gibbs, Scott Taylor, Nick Sharp, Nick Derbridge, Phil Whittall, and Kevin and Sarah Aires; Tony Collins, Jenny Ward and Simon Cox at Monarch books; Malcolm Kayes and all the elders of The Coign Church, Woking; my fellow elders and church members here at Queens Road Church, Wimbledon;

my great friend Andrew Wilson – without your friendship, encouragement and example, this series would never have happened.

I would like to thank my parents, my brother Jonathan, and my in-laws, Clive and Sue Jackson. Dad – your example birthed in my heart the passion that brought this series into being. I didn't listen to all you said when I was a child, but I couldn't ignore the way you got up at five o'clock every morning to pray, read the Bible and worship, because of your radical love for God and for his Word. I'd like to thank my children – Isaac, Noah, and Esther – for keeping me sane when publishing deadlines were looming. But most of all, I'm grateful to my incredible wife, Ruth – my friend, encourager, corrector, and helper.

You all have the lion's heart, and you have all developed the lion's heart in me. I count it an enormous privilege to be the one who was chosen to sound the lion's roar.

So welcome to the *Straight to the Heart* series. My prayer is that you will let this roar grip your own heart too – for the glory of the great Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Lord Jesus Christ!

Introduction: God is on the Throne

And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

(Revelation 7:10)

The President of the United States rules from the Oval Office. He sits on a chair behind the impressive Resolute desk and in front of the carpeted Seal of the President. The whole room is designed, in the words of President Bartlet in the TV series *The West Wing*, "to remind guests that this is the office of the President of the United States, and that the person on this side of the desk is the President".¹ Even in a democracy, there is no doubt that one chair tops them all.

Ancient kings were less subtle in the way they demonstrated this fact. King Solomon made a throne of ivory and gold so that he could sit at the top of six magnificently decorated steps, with his feet resting on a footstool of pure gold.² The Persian King Xerxes appears in the film *300* at the top of a massive throne reached by twenty ivory steps, with the whole structure transported at his bidding on the shoulders of several dozen slaves. His herald loudly proclaims him to be "*the ruler of all the world, the god of gods, king of kings*", but his throne already conveyed this claim without words.³ It tells us that Xerxes is in control; Xerxes will prevail; Xerxes is to be obeyed.

¹ *The West Wing*, Season 5, Episode 8: "Shutdown".

² 2 Chronicles 9:17–19.

³ *300* (Warner Brothers, 2007).

That's why thrones and their modern, democratic equivalents play such an important role in times of great crisis. It's why President Reagan addressed America from his chair in the Oval Office after the explosion of the Space Shuttle *Challenger*, and why President Bush addressed America from the same chair on the day that two passenger jets crashed into the Twin Towers in New York. Both presidents chose to address the nation from their "throne" in a show of force that they were still seated in the Oval Office and that they would prevail. In George W. Bush's words: "*They have failed; our country is strong... The functions of our government continue without interruption.*"

We need to understand all this if we are to grasp the message of the book of Revelation. The last book of the Bible is not primarily about weird beasts, strange allegories, or encoded detail about the final years of Planet Earth. It's a book which focuses on one great fact which trumps all others throughout the whole of AD history. It's a simple fact, but a fact which changes everything: God is on the Throne of the universe.

14 The Greek word *thronos*, from which we get our English word *throne*, is only used fifteen times in the New Testament leading up to the book of Revelation. It's in the background in the gospels when Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom has come, and it moves to the foreground in Acts when the apostles go into all the world to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom.⁴ But it's in the book of Revelation that the Throne of God moves centre-stage. The word is used forty-seven times and in seventeen of the twenty-two chapters. Again and again John's vision picks up on the many Old Testament references to the *Throne of Heaven*, and tells us that one fact is central to the Christian worldview and to how Christians must live within AD history. God is on the Throne; God is in control; God will prevail.

John received this vision while exiled on the Greek island of Patmos in about 95 AD. He was aged about a hundred, the

⁴ Matthew 12:28; 24:14; Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31.

last surviving disciple, and his exile hadn't dented his position as the elder statesman of the Church. Times were bad, very bad, and the Church stood at a moment of extreme crisis. The early apostles had all been killed by beheading, crucifixion or worse. Thousands of ordinary Christians had been martyred in wave after wave of persecution, either as human torches in Nero's gardens or as fodder for the lions at the public games. Even worse than this persecution from the outside was the way that the Church had also become riddled on the inside with false teaching, immorality and corruption. Even the faithful had begun to flounder in disappointment and despair. Whatever had happened to Daniel's picture of the Kingdom of God filling the whole earth?⁵ What had happened to the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the unstoppable advance which Jesus promised to the Church?⁶

It was in this tumultuous context that Jesus appeared to John to give him answers for the Church. The first word of the book in Greek is *apokalupsis*, which means *Revelation* or simply *Apocalypse*, and which literally means *disclosure, laying bare, or unveiling*. The Revelation John received is Jesus' message to his suffering and bewildered Church, which lays bare his plans and purposes for the period between his ascension and his triumphant Second Coming. If at first it seems daunting, inaccessible, and frankly a bit weird, that's because it is packed with divine secrets which are meant *for our eyes only*. Daniel received an apocalyptic vision like John's several hundred years earlier and was told that he received it in a series of strange pictures so that "*none of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand*".⁷ We need to understand John's

⁵ Daniel 2:35, 44.

⁶ Matthew 13:31–32.

⁷ Daniel 12:10. The book of Revelation is "apocalyptic" literature in the same style as parts of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. Such writings were deliberately cryptic and obscure so as to hide their meaning from unfriendly eyes. We should not be surprised, then, that we need help to understand Revelation.

Revelation in the same way, as a deliberately baffling series of pictures and portents, which reveal God's purposes and strategies to his People alone. If the Holy Spirit brings them to life, they provide answers to our deepest questions, but if he does not, they will only yield ideas for fantasy novelists and the writers of computer games. The book can be divided simply along the following lines:

Chapter 1

John's vision of Jesus and the start of the Revelation

Chapters 2-3

A first overview of AD history: The Seven Churches

Chapters 4-5

John's vision of Heaven and the continuation of the Revelation

Chapters 6-7

A second overview of AD history: The Seven Seals

Chapters 8-11

A third overview of AD history: The Seven Trumpets

Chapters 12-14

A fourth overview of AD history seen from three perspectives

Chapters 15-16

A fifth overview of AD history: The Seven Bowls

Chapters 17-20

A sixth overview of AD history which expands on the Seventh Bowl

Chapters 21-22

John's vision of the Age to Come and the end of the Revelation

I have written this book because we still live in the time of John's crisis and because the Revelation he received from Jesus is still the definitive answer to today's big questions. It's God's answer to the questions which face us every day of our lives, and it's time for us to rediscover the book of Revelation and its message of hope.

In a world where an estimated 170,000 Christians are martyred for their faith each year, we still need the Revelation which Jesus gave to John.

In a world where the Church remains terribly flawed and where every week sees another church close down and its building turned into a nightclub, a restaurant or a mosque, we need the Revelation which Jesus gave to John.

It's a Revelation which changes everything. It's a Revelation that God is on the Throne. And he is working out his strategies from the control room of Heaven.



The Vision of Jesus

The Revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1)

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place... that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

(Revelation 1:1–2)

The book of Revelation is about Jesus Christ. I know that some people will tell you that it's all about beasts, barcodes, timelines, trumpets and judgments, but they've missed the point. It's much more than an encrypted account of the last days of Planet Earth. It's a book about Jesus, and John starts it with words intended to clear that up once and for all. He entitles his book very simply, "*the revelation of Jesus Christ*".

On one level John is telling us that this is the revelation which belongs to Jesus because the Father has given it to him. That's true, but it's not all that John is saying here. He is also telling us that this is "*the revelation **about** Jesus Christ*", and that makes a massive difference. It prevents us from majoring on minors, fascinated but confused, and it turns Revelation into a book which can really change our lives.

Before John ever arrived on Patmos, he knew all about Jesus the baby and Jesus the child. He had read Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospels, and he even counted Jesus' half-brothers among his friends. Jesus had asked him to take his mother Mary into his home and to look after her as if she were his own mother;¹ so no one alive knew more about Jesus the baby and Jesus the child than John.

John also knew more about Jesus the man than anyone

¹ John 19:26–27.

else on earth. He had been one of the first people to follow Jesus, chosen to be one of his twelve disciples, and later to be a member of his inner circle of three.² He knew so much about Jesus' adult life that he even wrote the last of the four gospels about him, a gospel in which Jesus gets excited, tired, thirsty and so sad that he weeps.³ No one knew more about Jesus' humanity than John, yet Jesus knew that he needed more than this if he were to live the Christian life to the full.

John also knew first-hand Jesus crucified and raised to life. He was the only one of the twelve disciples who had watched Jesus' trials and who had stood at the foot of the cross to watch his crucifixion.⁴ Later that same weekend, he had raced with Peter to find Jesus' tomb empty except for his grave clothes.⁵ Jesus had appeared to him, risen from the dead: twice in a locked room, once at Lake Galilee with a miraculous catch of fish, once on a mountain in Galilee, and once on the Mount of Olives where he ascended to heaven.⁶ No one alive knew more about Jesus crucified and raised to life than John did – and yet Jesus still knew that he needed more.

Something was missing from John's view of Jesus, and we need it ourselves if we are to live as Christ-followers today. Knowing Jesus the baby, Jesus the man, Jesus the suffering sacrifice, and Jesus the risen Son of God is essential – that's why he is revealed in such detail in the four gospels – but our view of him is too small unless we also see him ascended and in heavenly glory. Without this view, John reclined happily on Jesus' chest at the Last Supper.⁷ When he saw Jesus in his post-

² Mark 3:17; 5:37; 9:2; 14:33.

³ John 2:17; 4:6; 19:28; 11:35.

⁴ John 18:15; 19:26.

⁵ John 20:1–8.

⁶ John 20:19–25, 26–31; 21:1–25; Matthew 28:16–20; Luke 24:50–53.

⁷ John 13:23–25. The KJV captures the intimacy expressed in these verses in Greek.

ascension glory, however, he tells us in 1:17 that *“I fell at his feet as though dead.”*

We need to grasp that Revelation is as much a book about Jesus as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Although *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever”*,⁸ he appeared humbly as a man at his incarnation and received glory and power at his ascension.⁹ There is a real danger that unless we see Jesus in the pages of Revelation, we will worship him as he walked on the earth yesterday and not as he reigns in heaven today. That’s the great tragedy when Christians treat this book like a fantasy novel or a secret code for someone other than themselves. They have missed the point as much as a person who watches the movie *Jaws* and thinks it is about the seaside. *Jaws* is about a movie about a shark. Revelation is a book about Jesus Christ, the King of Glory.

We need the book of Revelation to save us from the sin of idolatry – from worshipping Jesus as someone less than he really is. It takes the baby who sleeps in Bethlehem’s manger and reminds us that he has grown up and is coming back to judge the earth in his wrath. It takes the great teacher and healer from Galilee and tells us he is now riding out to victory wearing a robe dipped in blood. It reminds us that Jesus is not just the weak and suffering Saviour depicted on a crucifix, because he is also the one who holds the keys to Death and Hades, and who rules over the whole earth with irresistible strength.¹⁰

Is your view of Jesus too small? It may well be too small for you to worship without being guilty of idolatry, and too small to sustain you through the ups and downs of AD history. That’s why Jesus appeared to John to give us a complete picture of the real Jesus. That’s why we need *“the revelation of Jesus Christ”*.

⁸ Hebrews 13:8.

⁹ Some key verses on this are John 17:5; Philippians 2:5–11; Acts 2:36; Hebrews 2:9.

¹⁰ Revelation 6:15–17; 19:13; 1:18.