REVELATION

INTRODUCTION

1. We are living in some of the strangest days that man has ever known.
2. This world has passed through terrible times before, but have you never seen the whole earth going through one catastrophe after another after another as today.
3. There have been wars down through the ages, but never wars that have touched so many nations as the conflicts through which we are passing in this generation.
4. There have been political crises, but not on a scale that touched all of the continents.
5. Civilization has brought so many new means of communication that the things that affect one nation affect all.
6. Events that take place in Europe and Asia become news that vitally concerns the farmer in the Mississippi Valley.
7. Bible students agree almost universally that we are living near the end of the age, and that at any moment the prophetic events preserved for us in Scripture will begin its course of fulfillment.
8. The book of Revelation is ***the*** book for the **present hour**.
   1. Generally speaking, there are **two** extreme attitudes toward Revelation.
   2. Some say the book cannot be understood, and therefore should not be *studied*, *taught* or *preached*.
      1. Differences of interpretation, they point out, have divided Christians, and therefore the book should not be interpreted.
   3. Others consider themselves so sure of *every detail* of the book that they set dates and interpretations.
   4. To them Revelation seems the only book in the Bible worth studying...
9. A few questions some of us have today!
   1. Where are We today?
   2. How much longer do we have?
   3. What on earth is happening?
   4. Where are we on God’s prophetic calendar?
10. The book of Revelation is telling us where this world is headed.
11. Given what is happening in the world today, it has never been more important for people to understand Revelation.
    1. But at the same time, many don’t seem to know where to begin.

**Why study the book of Revelation?**

**Why is it important?**

Revelation is like few other books of the Bible

* Is it prophecy?
* Is it history?
* Is it literal?
* Is it figurative?
* Is it art?
* Just what is Revelation?
* There are many people who can't name the first four books of the New Testament but they have heard about **666**.
* Why study Revelation, it is very interesting!
* If you enjoy Bible studies that cause you to search for clues all throughout the Bible then you will love Revelation.
* Some today think we need to add drama to the gospel by presenting dramatic plays in the worship service or by adding dramatic music.
* Simply reading the book of Revelation from the pulpit would provide more drama than any play or musical that man could ever write.
* This book contains images that outdo much of what we find in the movies. Blood and horror?
* In Revelation 14:20 we read of a river of blood approximately 180-200 miles long that comes up to a horse's bridle.
* Fierce creatures? How about seven headed beasts and dragons?

One thing that we can say for sure is that Revelation is a book about **Jesus**. Some of the most wonderful titles and images of the Messiah in all of Scripture are found in Revelation, including:

* The faithful witness
* The first born of the dead
* The ruler of kings on earth
* The first and the last
* The living one
* The true one
* The one with the key of death
* The one with the key of David
* The lion of Judah
* The lamb that was slain
* The King of kings and Lord of lords
* The alpha and omega
* The bright morning star

1. Revelation is a *very Important* book to study, if for no other reason, to see God’s self-revelation to man.
2. It tells us the ending of the story that began in Genesis 1.
3. The greatest value of Revelation is what it teaches us about the future.
4. It shows us where this world is headed, and where we are headed.
   1. this world is headed for a devastating seven-year period of divine judgment;
   2. the rise of a final world ruler;
   3. a global government,
   4. a global economy,
   5. and global worship;
   6. the great war of Armageddon;
   7. the second coming of Christ;
   8. the 1000-year reign of Christ;
   9. the final judgment;
   10. and the new heaven and new earth.
5. The most important thing that Revelation teaches us, is that ***God is in control*** no matter what takes place
   1. It also teaches us that *He has a plan*, and that *He is bringing it to fulfillment*.
   2. It reveals that God alone can foretell the future and that He does so with ***100 percent*** accuracy.
6. **Revelation** unveils the total **depravity** of man, who deserves judgment, and shows man’s desperate need for God’s grace.
7. Nowhere in Scripture do we see a more awful picture of man’s depravity, rebellion, and blasphemy.
8. The book of Revelation provides a divine view of history.
   1. We see that no human empire can endure.
   2. Man’s day will come to a tragic end.
9. Revelation has a great deal to say about angels and demons.
   1. In fact, it talks about angels more than any other Bible book.
   2. Angels are active throughout the chapters, especially in bringing *God’s wrath* to the earth.
   3. The reality and evil of Satan and his demonic host is also evident.
   4. Satan accuses and persecutes God’s people, hates the Jews and tries to destroy them,
   5. empowers the Antichrist and the false prophet, and finally, is doomed to the lake of fire.

**What are the four main views of Revelation?**

The vivid imagery and striking symbolism in Revelation have led to very different views on how it should be interpreted and what time period it describes.

Broadly speaking, there are 5 main ways that people approach the book of Revelation related to how and when its prophecies are fulfilled: past, present, future, timeless, and a mixture of the previous four.

**Preterist View (Past)**

1. This view holds that Revelation is primarily a prophecy of events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.
2. There are two main branches of preterism: partial (moderate) and full (extreme or radical).
3. Preterists believe that Christ returned in AD 70 during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.
4. Preterists argue not only that the kingdom is a present reality, but also that in a real historical event the coming of Christ’s has already occurred.”
5. They believe that Nero was the beast of Revelation 13;
   1. that the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments were judgments on unfaithful Israel;
   2. that Babylon in Revelation 17–18 was Jerusalem;
   3. and that Revelation 19 describes the coming of Jesus in AD 70 to destroy Jerusalem.
6. The primary distinction between partial and full preterists is that
   1. Partial preterists, while maintaining that most of Revelation was fulfilled in the past, still believe in a future second coming of Christ.
   2. Full preterits believe that all prophecies— including those pertaining to the second coming and the resurrection of believers—are past events.
      1. They view the resurrection as spiritual. According to this view, we are beyond the millennium and are presently in the new heaven and new earth.

**Historicist View (Present)**

1. This view, which began with *Joachim of Fiore* in the twelfth century, interprets Revelation as a panorama or overview of the entire church age.
2. This view was very common among the Reformers at the time of the Protestant Reformation.
3. This view was held by John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Sir Isaac Newton, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and Matthew Henry.
4. However, *very few* hold this view today.

**Idealist View (Timeless)**

1. Idealism, also known sometimes as the spiritual approach, does “not look for individual or specific fulfillments of the prophecies of Revelation in the natural sense,”
   1. but believes “only that spiritual lessons and principles (which may find recurrent expression in history) are depicted symbolically in the visions.”
   2. For idealists, the symbols in Revelation picture the ever-present struggle between good and evil and teach ideal, timeless principles to inspire believers as they endure the setbacks and suffering of life.
2. According to this view, the great themes of the triumph of good over evil, of Christ over Satan, of the vindication of the martyrs and the sovereignty of God are played out throughout Revelation without necessary reference to single historical events.
3. The battles in Revelation may be seen as referring to spiritual warfare, to the persecution of Christians, or to natural warfare in general throughout history.
4. The beast from the sea may be identified as the satanically inspired political opposition to the church in any age, and the beast from the land as the opposition of pagan or corrupt religion to Christianity.
5. The Harlot represents either the compromise church or the seduction of the world in general.
6. Each broken seal or sounded trumpet depicts some reality (famine, war, natural disaster) which happens in history on a recurring basis as part of the sovereign outworking of God’s purpose in history.
7. Idealism grew out of the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, upheld by Origen and Clement, and gained traction through the amillennial view held by Augustine. This is probably the predominant view today among scholars.
8. The main appeal of idealism seems to be the desire of its pro-ponents to relate the message of the book to readers in every period of history.
9. However, this aspiration is offset by idealism’s inability to give concrete meaning to the symbols of the book. This is a serious shortcoming.
10. Idealism is not a reliable guide to the meaning of Revelation.

**Futurist View (Future)**

1. Futurists interpret Revelation 4–22 as describing real people and events yet to appear on the world scene.
2. Many of the luminaries in the early church adopted a futurist view: Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Victorinus.
3. Some contemporary futurists are John Walvoord, John MacArthur, Charles Ryrie, Tim LaHaye, J. Dwight Pentecost, and Thomas Ice.
4. One main objection to the futurist view is that “it removes Revelation from its original setting so that the book has little meaning for the original audience.”
   1. After all, some would argue, how can Revelation have been relevant to the original readers if the events described in it wouldn’t take place until more than 2000 years in the future?
   2. There are two answers to this objection. First, one could make the same argument about hundreds of Old Testament prophecies.
      1. For instance, Isaiah’s prophecies about the coming Messiah, such as the virgin birth in 7:14, were written 700 years before His birth.
      2. Micah’s prophecy about the birthplace of the Messiah in Bethlehem (in Micah 5:2) was also written about 700 years before His coming.
      3. Many of Daniel’s predictions weren’t fulfilled for centuries.
   3. All these Old Testament prophecies were relevant at the time they were given because the readers did not know when they would be fulfilled.
   4. Likewise, the believers in Asia Minor who first received the book of Revelation didn’t know these events wouldn’t be fulfilled for over 2000 years. They believed the prophecies could very well take place in their lifetime. And each subsequent generation that has read and studied Revelation has lived with the hope that the prophecies within it could be fulfilled in their generation.
   5. Not knowing when these events will come to pass makes them relevant for every generation.
   6. Second, knowing how history will end, whether it is in our lifetime or not, gives great comfort and hope.
   7. Revelation teaches us that God is sovereign, that He rules from His throne in heaven, that He has a plan, and that His kingdom will ultimately come to earth.
   8. These great truths apply to people of every generation for as long as we await the consummation of the ages.
   9. Most people believe the futurist approach is far superior to the other views. It is the only view that consistently follows the principles of interpreting Scripture literally.
   10. Moreover, it makes sense that the final book of God’s Word would focus on the future and tell us how everything finally comes out in the end, just as Genesis told us how everything began.
   11. The futurist approach is summarized in this way:
       1. The Apocalypse reveals the future.
       2. It is God’s Road map to help us understand where human history is going.
       3. The fact that it points to the time of the end is clear throughout the entire book.
       4. It serves as the final consummation of biblical revelation.
       5. It takes us from the first century to the last century.
       6. From persecution to triumph.
       7. From the struggling church to the bride of Christ.
       8. From Patmos to paradise.

**Eclectic View (Mixture)**

1. This is a newer approach to Revelation that attempts to combine the four other views to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses.
2. Some of the more prominent eclectics are Greg Beale, G.R. Beasley-Murray, and Craig Keener.
3. Proponents of this view seek to understand the message to the original audience and take special note of the historical-cultural context of Revelation.
4. They also acknowledge that some of the events will be fulfilled in the final consummation. While claiming to be eclectic, it seems to me that most who adopt this approach still lean primarily toward idealism.
5. The strength of this view is its desire to avoid the weaknesses of some of the other positions and present a balanced approach.

**What are some of the keys to interpreting Revelation, especially all the symbols?**

1. The book of Revelation may be the *most neglected* book in the Bible.
2. There are undoubtedly many reasons for this, but a chief one is that there are people who either *claim* or *assume* that *no one can really understand what it means*.
3. They view Revelation the same way that Winston Churchill once described the Soviet Union: as “*a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma.*” With all the mystifying symbols and striking images that appear throughout the book, many people despair of ever understanding the book.
4. Many pastors never preach on Revelation. Or if they do, they preach only from the first *three chapters*.
   1. This neglect of God’s revelation to man is tragic. Because Revelation gives us the end of the story just as Genesis gives us the beginning.
5. To not take the time to understand Revelation would be like reading a mesmerizing novel but not finishing it to see how the story ends.
6. There are **3** practical keys to unlocking the meaning of this great book—keys that can help every reader understand it better.

**1st** key is to recognize that the Lord meant for us to understand Revelation.

* To say that it can’t be understood by believers denies the truth behind the title of the book - “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”
* The word “revelation” is a translation of the Greek word *apokalupsis* which means to uncover, to unveil, or to take the lid off something.
* In other words, the purpose of this book is ***not to hide*** the truth from us or make it confusing, but for ***Jesus Christ to uncover or take the lid off*** ***the future*** so we can know about the end times.
* **Remember**, the Lord promises a **special blessing** on those who study and apply the message of Revelation to their lives: “God **blesses** the *one who reads this prophecy to the church*, and he **blesses** *all who listen to it* **and *obey*** *what it says*” (1:3).
* The fact God chose to mention this blessing seems to anticipate that the subject of Bible prophecy—especially in connection with the book of Revelation—would be ignored and neglected by many.
* This final book of the Bible contains seven blessings or beatitudes throughout its pages (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). The blessing in 1:3 is the first and most comprehensive one. It is a blessing that anyone reading Revelation can experience. And notice that it is threefold:

*The one who* ***reads***

*The one who* ***listens***

*The one who* ***obeys***

In the early church **not,** everyone had a copy of the Scriptures, so someone would **read them aloud** to the people. Today this blessing extends to all who read this grand climax to God’s prophetic program.

Just to hear the book of Revelation read (and other prophecies of the Bible) is a great blessing in troubled times like today.

It is not only important to read and hear Bible prophecy but also to *observe*, *pay attention to*, and *obey* what is written. After reading and listening to what Revelation is teaching us, we should pay attention and watch for the events that signal the coming of the end times.

The fact that those who hear the words of this book are to keep, practice, and obey what it says presupposes that they must be able to understand what it means.

**2nd** key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation is to realize that most of what is in the book is *not new* information.

* There’s an old saying that Revelation is the Grand Central Station of the Bible because it’s where all the trains of thought throughout the whole Bible come in.
* While it is certainly true that Revelation looks ahead and reveals the future, it also looks back and brings together all the threads running through the first 65 books of the Bible.
* Revelation contains 404 verses, and 278 of them allude back to the Old Testament.
* Revelation has no direct quotations from the Old Testament, but contains a total of 550 references (which appear in 278 verses) back to the Old Testament.
* So, a significant portion of Revelation brings together content from the Old Testament into a comprehensive sequence of events.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum observes:

* The majority of things found in the first twenty chapters of Revelation are found elsewhere in the Old Testament.
* Only the last two chapters deal with things totally new.
* If this is true, what is the importance of the book of Revelation?
* The Old Testament prophecies are scattered throughout the books of Moses and the various prophets and Writings.
* It would have been impossible to develop these prophecies into any chronological sequence of events.
* The value of the book of Revelation is not that it provides a lot of new information, but rather that it takes the scattered Old Testament prophecies and puts them in chronological order so that the sequence of events may be determined.
* This book provides a framework for the under- standing of the order and the sequence of events found in the Old Testament prophecies.
* This is the reason for so many references to the Old Testament. However, the material found in the last two chapters is totally new material which describes the Eternal Order.
* The Old Testament prophets never foresaw anything beyond the Messianic Kingdom. Indeed, the Kingdom was the high point of Old Testament prophecy and no prophet ever saw anything beyond that.
* But the Eternal Order is the high point of New Testament prophecy, and Revelation 21 and 22 provide new information, as they describe the Eternal Order.

**3rd** key to understanding Revelation is to correctly interpret the symbols in the book.

* When we come to Revelation, we often feel like *Alice in Wonderland*, who ran down a rabbit hole and stumbled into a world of fantasy, make-believe, and enigma, a world of talking caterpillars, rabbits, etc.
* People often feel like they have fallen into another world when they step into the book of Revelation, for it includes a broad assortment of symbols, such as horns, beasts, stars, and varied colored horses to graphically communicate its meaning.
* This has led some people to end up adopting one of two extremes in interpretation.
  + Some say that the presence of so many symbols means that the book cannot be understood at all. They say that we are able to discern that the book talks about a cosmic struggle between good and evil, but that none of the specific details can be understood.
  + The other extreme is unchecked speculation and sensationalism that manipulates all the symbols so they represent certain people or events of our time—in other words, the reader makes the text mean whatever he wants. Those who follow this method can best be described by the old saying, “Amazing things in the Bible I see, especially those put there by you and by me.”

The proper method of interpreting the symbols in Revelation involves ***2*** steps.

**1st** remember that when symbols are employed, they refer to something that is literal. Symbols are not just symbols of nothing.

* They aren’t meaningless. They aren’t just symbols of symbols. They refer to something that is literal.

Paul Benware notes,

* Symbols are valuable tools of communication.
* Symbols communicate truth concisely, and they communicate it graphically.
* In Revelation 11 the apostle John could have spent a great deal of time describing the spiritual and moral conditions of Jerusalem.
* Instead, he called the city “Sodom and Egypt.”
* Quickly and vividly, he communicated a volume of truth that remains graphically fixed in our minds.
* Symbols and figures of speech, then, represent something literal. It is the task of the interpreter to investigate this figurative language to discover what literal truth is there.

There’s a clear example of this at the very outset of Revelation as Jesus stands in the middle of seven golden lampstands holding seven stars in His right hand (1:13,16). At the end of the chapter, Jesus identifies the seven lampstands as the seven churches of Asia and the seven stars as seven angels (1:20).

Jesus Himself is providing us with a key to unlock the meaning of symbols in Revelation—that is, when we see a symbol in prophecy, we are to look for the literal referent, or the literal person, place, or event that the symbol represents.

**2nd** is properly interpreting a symbol in Revelation is to recognize that all the symbols in the book are explained either in Revelation itself or in other parts of the Bible. We cannot make them mean whatever we want them to mean. No interpreter has the freedom to make a symbol mean whatever he wants. Scripture sets the parameters for our interpretation of symbols. The infallible guide to the meaning of these symbols is God’s Word.

As another Bible scholar says,

* While recognizing the existence of symbols, there will be no resorting to guesswork. Rather, this study will proceed on the premise that all symbols in the Book of Revelation are explained elsewhere: either in a different part of the Book of Revelation or in some other part of the Bible.
* There are symbols, but the Bible itself will explain what these symbols mean either by direct statement or through a comparison of the usage of the symbol elsewhere in the Scriptures.
* The meaning of the symbols will not be determined by *speculation*.
* The first place we should look when we encounter a symbol is the immediate context to see if there’s a built-in interpretation.
* Often, we don’t have to look any farther for the meaning of a symbol than the immediate context.
* The example of Jesus in Revelation 1. Jesus tells the reader the meaning of the seven lampstands and the seven stars in the same chapter (1:20). This kind of built-in interpretation occurs often in Revelation.
* Frequently, the meaning of a symbol is given by John in the immediate context, sometimes even in the same verse.

**Symbols Examples**

the seven stars (1:16) = angels of the seven Churches (1:20)

the seven lampstands (1:13) = they are seven churches (1:20)

the morning star (2:28) = Christ (22:16)

the seven lamps of fire (4:5) = the sevenfold Spirit of God (4:5)

the seven eyes (5:6) = the sevenfold Spirit of God (5:6)

the incense (5:8) = the prayers of God’s people (5:8)

the great city, Sodom and Egypt (11:8) = Jerusalem (11:8)

the stars in the sky (12:4) = fallen angels (12:9)

the woman and the child (12:1-2) = Israel and Christ (12:5-6)

So, the first step to discerning the meaning of a symbol is to look at the immediate context for clues as to its meaning.

Symbols, therefore, are *not meaningless*. Neither are they an open invitation to let our imagination run wild.

*They do not give the interpreter free rein* to make the symbol mean whatever he wants it to mean.

The bottom line is this: *Don’t be afraid* of *or intimidated* by Revelation.

God wants you to understand and apply the truth of this book to your life.

Ask the Lord to open your heart and mind to the precious truths about our coming King!