

Revelation Studies: Introduction to the Book

Introduction: This morning we start our study of Revelation. As tempting as it is to jump right into chapter one and start looking at the message God has for us in this great book, we have to take the time to set up the foundation we are going to be building on for the next few months (years). The planks that we lay down this morning will determine where we end up as we go through the book.

Now, I want to start by warning you that Revelation is a complex book. We have talked before about how the Scriptures are simple, but not simplistic; and Revelation is about as good an illustration of this truth there is. Vast amounts of ink has been spilt writing books about it, churches split over how to interpret it, profiteers make lots of money claiming to have unlocked its secrets, and in general, Revelation can be controversial. And in light of this, let me make something explicitly clear right here at the beginning of this series.

There is no doctrine in the book of Revelation that you have to believe in order to be genuinely saved. Now of course, the clarification here is that yes, Revelation talks about Jesus and you have to believe in Jesus to be saved. Revelation talks about God, and you have to believe in God to be saved. But there is no doctrinal issue that Revelation teaches that is vital to your salvation.

For instance, there are people who believe that everything that goes on in the book of Revelation has already taken place. And believe it or not, they have evidence to back them up in the repeated insistence of John that the things in the book will take place soon, or quickly, or shortly. They would insist that there is nothing futuristic about it at all, that everything John prophesies was fulfilled by AD 70 when Titus destroyed

Jerusalem. They would say that there is benefit in reading it because it is part of the inspired Word of God, but as far as giving us any insight into the future, Revelation has no value.

You are going to be spending eternity in heaven with these people! Now of course, they will have changed their view by then, but for right now, they are genuinely born again followers of Christ.

So in a nutshell, and this is the first plank in our foundation, just keep in mind that how you interpret Revelation has no bearing on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of your salvation. I can promise you that I am going to say things you disagree with. But don't let that throw you for a loop. We can agree to disagree over these issues of secondary importance.

The second plank I want to lay down has to do with keeping your focus on the big picture. When we study the book of Revelation, we run the same risk we had when we studied Leviticus. Leviticus is full of curious, even odd details, and our tendency is to focus on the minutia and miss the main point. I gave you the illustration at the beginning of that series that will serve us well now as we get into Revelation. Do you remember the man who had the house on Long Island with the huge picture window overlooking the ocean? He invited his friend over to show him the view, and the visitor walked over to the window and started examining the molding around the window. He said, "Is this cherry?" And the owner said, "Well, yes it is, but look at this amazing view." And the visitor said, "I've never seen this design before. Did you make this trim yourself? It's exquisite." And the owner said, "Yes, I did make it myself, but what do you think about this view?" And the visitor looks at the corners and says, "You did an amazing job joining these corners – you are an incredible carpenter." And the owner said, "Why, thank you. But what about this view? Isn't it amazing?"

If we aren't careful, we'll spend all our time scrutinizing the incidentals and miss the big picture. So I want to warn you in advance that we aren't going to spend a lot of time speculating about all the bizarre things you will read in this book. What those creatures are that come out of the abyss with the body of a horse that can sting with its tail and has hair like a woman and teeth like a lion isn't important. The point of that passage is in no way tied to their identity. So we are going to keep our focus on the big picture.

The third plank we need to lay down has to do with the type of literature we are dealing with when we read Revelation. When you pick up a book and start reading, and the first sentence says, "A long time ago in a land far away there lived a beautiful princess," you know you are reading a fairy tale and you are going to follow a certain set of guidelines as you interpret it. And those guidelines are going to be very different from the ones you will follow when you pick up a book that says on the cover, "A Thorough History of the Civil War." And the way you read that history book is going to be different from how you read a James Michner historical novel. Because even though the Michner book is rooted in real history, he takes liberties with the facts and it isn't designed to convey genuine history.

In the same way that we have a variety of literature types in the English language, you need to understand that the Bible is comprised of a variety of literature types as well. We have historical sections where the author simply records the events of the age. We have prophetic sections where prophecies of the future are made. We have poetry where the author uses highly figurative language to convey concrete truths. We have what is called wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) and there are special guidelines we follow for interpreting them. We have the gospels and the epistles, two distinctly different types of literature. And then we have a type of literature in the Bible

called apocalyptic, which we'll talk about in a minute. Each of these types of literature has a specific set of rules you need to follow to interpret it correctly.

If you try to interpret the historical sections of the Bible the same way you interpret the epistles, you are going to get into trouble very quickly. If you try to interpret the book of Proverbs the way you interpret the book of James, you are going to have problems. And when it comes to this matter of apocalyptic literature, which is what Revelation is, there are some very specific ways we need to view it.

So what is apocalyptic literature? The full definition is “the communication of a vision using spectacular imagery [do you see how Revelation is already fitting into this definition?] designed to move the recipient beyond his current situation and into a transcendent reality.” What that means is that apocalyptic literature is designed to broaden the readers perspective and help him see reality. “The result is a reversal that makes heavenly mysteries real, and the earthly situation temporary.”

From a historical perspective, what is curious is that apocalyptic literature flourished when God's people (both Jew and Christian) were being persecuted (in Daniel's day during the Babylonian captivity, inter-testamental period between Malachi and Matthew, the 60's AD). So what we see is that the purpose behind apocalyptic literature is to bring assurance and comfort to those in doubt or undergoing persecution. The overall message of Revelation is that God wins! Good ultimately triumphs, evil ultimately is punished, so don't throw in the towel when things seem hopeless. Yes, you may die in the process, but that is when you really start living! That is the basic message of Revelation and it is seen in the 12 references in the book to “the one who overcomes.”

Let me give you two things to keep in mind about apocalyptic literature. 1) As a form of communication, it is even less direct than poetry. 2) The message uses symbols,

drama, cataclysmic images, vivid imagery and hyperbolic language. One author puts it this way, “In apocalyptic, nothing is revealed in a straightforward fashion.” And it is because of this intentional vagueness that followers of Christ have interpreted the book with such diversity over the years. As I said earlier, there are some who think that everything in the book has already taken place – there is nothing futuristic about it at all. This is the preterist viewpoint.

The historical perspective is that the events of the book describe world events starting from the days of the Apostle John and going through the end of the age. For instance, the breaking of the 7 seals in Rev. 6 and 7 refer to the Barbarian invasions that sacked the Western Roman Empire, the scorpion / locusts that come out of the pit in Rev. 9 are the Arab hordes attacking the Eastern Roman Empire, and the beast of Rev. 13 was the Roman Papacy. Interestingly enough, this was the prevailing perspective in the church for hundreds and hundreds of years. In fact, the biggest names in Christendom held to this perspective: Wycliffe, Knox, Tyndale, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, C. H. Spurgeon, etc.

The predominant school of thought today in evangelical circles is the futuristic perspective. This is the idea that all the events from chapter 4 through the end of the book have yet to take place. They say the symbolism and imagery is an attempt by the author to describe things that could not be expressed in the vocabulary of the day (i.e. a nuclear explosion being described as a star falling into the sea). Unfortunately, this preoccupation with interpreting the symbols and imagery has caused this perspective to come into some disrepute. I can remember hearing sermons about a special breed of red heifers being bred in Arkansas for use in the temple sacrificial system, and a special limestone being quarried in Tennessee for use in rebuilding the temple, and a computer in Belgium that is called the beast, and the list goes on and on. It’s all rumor, and

speculation, and sensationalism and the net effect is that of discrediting the futuristic view.

The final perspective on how to interpret Revelation is called the idealist method. You could also call it the “spiritualists” method, or the “allegorical” method, or the “symbolic” method. However you want to label it, the focus is on a non-literal interpretation. The idealist doesn’t focus on either historical or future events, but on the spiritual truth that underlies the story. He would say that the text isn’t about swords and dragons but about God’s Word and Satan.

So the obvious question is, how are we supposed to interpret it? Out of the four possibilities, which one am I going to follow? And the answer is, none of them exclusively. Each one of these viewpoints has merit, which is why each perspective has godly adherents. But if you try to follow any of them rigidly, you will eventually run up against indefensible interpretations.

I want to close with a word of warning. After all this talk about how difficult this book is, and how there no consensus of opinion in the evangelical world about what much of it means, and how it is purposefully vague, and about how there are no critical doctrines in it, our response may be to throw up our hands and say, “Why bother?” Let me give you three reasons why we are going to do this.

First of all, Revelation is in the Bible and therefore worthy of our time and effort. Secondly, Revelation is the only book of the Bible where we have an explicit promise given to us if you hear it read out loud. I want that blessing for us! And finally, by way of illustration, if you knew that the IRS was going to audit you this coming Dec. 21, when would you start getting ready for that audit? Probably sometime in Oct. or even November. On the other hand, if you got a notice from the IRS that said, “we are going to audit you soon,” when would you start to get your books in order? Right away, right?

The uncertainty of when the audit was going to take place would keep you in a place of readiness and expectation.

That is a large part of what is going on in Revelation. God is coming back and He is going to judge the world in righteousness and justice and we better be ready. If Revelation was as clear and straightforward as the epistles, and if we could interpret the symbols and figures and ascertain when all these things would take place, we'd be lulled into a sense of complacency. God doesn't want that. He wants us on our toes. He wants looking for His return. This is why He tells us in Rev. 3:2, "Wake up!"

We do not know when the end is going to come, nor can we figure it out from what we see in Revelation. So we are going to whet our appetite for the Lord's return by studying this book, and we are going to follow the advice Jesus gives in Mt. 24:42 – "Be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is returning."