

## HOW SHOULD REVELATION BE INTERPRETED?

## REVELATION 1

I challenge you to do something this week. Just sit down and read the book of Revelation through from start to finish. I did that again this week and it took me about 35 minutes. There is great value in just reading it through in one sitting. Why? The tendency is to pull out a verse here or a verse there from Revelation – sometimes, frankly, to support something we believe is going to happen in the future – rather than getting a sense of the whole book from the beginning to the end. When that happens, we can lose the forest for the trees. We can easily get bogged down in the details and miss the big picture. Here's a couple of books maybe we should consult: *The Book of Revelation Made Easy*. But the fact is understanding Revelation is not easy. Or how about this one? *The Book of Revelation for Dummies*. That might be more helpful, because you can feel pretty dumb pretty quickly trying to understand Revelation.

Well, last week I started a new message series entitled “In The Last Days: What Does The Bible Say About The End Times?” It's about eschatology which is the study of the end times. We learned that the last days began with the first coming of Jesus and they will continue until His second coming sometime in the future. We thought a bit about why we should care about this subject of the last days at all. The last days reveal God's ultimate and overall plan. The last days help us learn how to interpret the Bible more accurately. The last days help us discern between central and secondary Bible teaching. Most importantly, knowing about the last days encourages us to follow Jesus more expectantly. Today, I want to do a kind of “flyover” of the Book of Revelation, because most people have concluded that this one book in the Bible has the most to say about the end times. I don't know if that's actually true or not, but it's the perception, nevertheless. Now, I realized about halfway through preparing this message this week that trying to cover the subject of how to interpret Revelation is like trying to cover world history in 30 minutes! Good luck! I'd like to accomplish two goals, however. The first one is simply to make us aware of some key facts about the book of Revelation. The second one is to recognize some major themes in this part of God's Word that should be major takeaways for each of us. Here we go!

### KEY FACTS ABOUT THE BOOK OF REVELATION

First of all, the book of Revelation is a letter. That's pretty evident from the fourth verse of the book, “This letter is from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Grace and peace to you from the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come...” (Rev 1:4 NLT) These churches were literal, historical churches located in the Roman province of Asia – the present day country of Turkey. Why's that important? John just didn't decide to sit down one day and write a treatise about the future. Instead, he wrote a letter to real people in real churches dealing with real issues. These were churches dealing with persecution from the outside and some spiritual problems on the inside. What did John want his original readers or hearers to understand? What was his intention? Those are very important questions. In the first chapter, we get introduced to other key characters beyond these seven churches. The author was John, one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. He was exiled on the island of

Patmos, about 35 miles of the coast of Turkey, presumably by the Roman Empire for his role of preaching and teaching about Jesus. The traditional date for when Revelation was written is around 95 AD. But there are a growing number of Bible scholars who believe it was likely written thirty years earlier – in the middle to late 60s of the first century. Frankly, I personally find that conclusion more compelling myself. We'll find out more about why that's important in subsequent weeks. We hear about Jesus, of course, in the first chapter of Revelation. He's everywhere in this book. He's absolutely central to the entire book. More about that later, too.

Second, the book of Revelation is a prophecy. John wrote, "God blesses the one who reads the words of this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to its message and obey what it says, for the time is near." (Rev. 1:3 NLT) There's also this warning at the very end of the book, "And I solemnly declare to everyone who hears the words of prophecy written in this book: If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. And if anyone removes any of the words from this book of prophecy, God will remove that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book." (Rev. 22:18-19 NLT) Now, whenever we hear the word "prophecy" we immediately think of predicting the future or foretelling. Certainly, that's a big part of what the word means in the Bible. But the primary meaning of prophecy in the Bible is not so much predicting the future – foretelling – as it is forth telling, or speaking forth God's Word, God's will, God's direction, God's guidance into the present situation. God used Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea and a New Testament prophet like John the Baptist to challenge, exhort and encourage God's people regarding God's judgment and salvation in their day and time. Yes, because Revelation is a prophecy, there is some foretelling – predicting the future. But there's even more forth telling – getting those first Christians in those seven churches as well as getting us twenty centuries later – thinking and acting differently in light of who God is and what He's already done.

A third fact: Revelation is an apocalypse. This was a specific kind of literature that flourished for some 400 years (between 200 BC and 200 AD) well known to both Jews and Christians. Now, that word "apocalypse" or "apocalyptic" meant something a little different in John's day than what it means today. In our day and time, those words often refer to violent and disturbing events. The events of September 11, 2001 are thought of as apocalyptic at least for Americans. The Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004 killed over 230,000 people in 14 countries was even more apocalyptic. But back in John's day and time, apocalyptic meant to reveal a truth suddenly that had been previously hidden or secret. Such a writing or piece of literature was an apocalypse.

Here's a couple of other characteristics of apocalyptic writings that you should know. They were full of Old Testament images and symbols which is true of Revelation. So, the more knowledge you have of the Old Testament, the more you will understand Revelation. Apocalyptic literature relies heavily on visions and dreams as well. That's certainly true of Revelation. Often those visions were carefully arranged often in numbered sets. For example, Revelation has three sets of visions in chapters 6-16 – the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls – all in sets of seven. It's right there where it's

easy to lose the forest for the trees. It's not wise to get too hung up on the details of each vision. It's better to try and see the vision as a whole and try to discern its meaning or significance. It's wise to realize that the details of the visions are sometimes window dressing – there for dramatic effect, so to speak.

Here's maybe the most important characteristic of apocalypse by far. It's full of symbolic imagery. Now, Christian people can get nervous when you say that some things in the Bible are symbolic and for good reason. Some theologically liberal scholars or preachers suggest that Jesus' resurrection from the dead was symbolic. In other words, it wasn't literal, real, or historical. That's nonsense. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all clearly believed that Jesus literally rose from the dead. Paul argues that if Jesus didn't literally rise from the dead, the entire Christian faith is a lie and a waste of time. By the same token, the Bible is full of symbolic or figurative language. Jesus said His followers are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He said He was the true vine and the gate for the sheep. He said if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out or if your hand leads you into sin, cut it off. Jesus didn't intend you to understand Him literally. His intent was to send a unique message by deliberately using symbols, or figures of speech, that get your attention very effectively. John deliberately used symbols to communicate very real truths, sometimes about historical or literal events. That was his intent. Don't make the mistake of equating what is symbolic with what is not real or not historical.

Just reading Revelation reveals that it's full – as is true of all apocalyptic literature – of incredible, fantastic images. A couple of examples. (Rev. 12:1-4, 13:1-2) Do you really think John wants us to understand those images literally? Many people suggest that we interpret the images in Revelation literally except where the context dictates otherwise. On the basis of the passages we just read and many others, I contend that just the opposite is the case. The essence of Revelation is symbolic imagery. It should be interpreted as such except where a literal understanding is required by the context of the passage itself. Nowhere is this symbolism more obvious than when it comes to numbers – which was yet another hallmark of apocalyptic literature. Numbers are everywhere in Revelation! If you force a literal meaning on them, you will lose the forest of the trees! For example, the number seven shows up all over Revelation: seven churches, seven angels, seven lampstands, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, several titles of God used seven times. The number seven pointed to the idea of completeness. The number four shows up a lot: the four corners of the world, the four winds, a fourfold doxology, and the four gates into the New Jerusalem. Four seems to say something about the world. The number three is also prominent in Revelation. Its significance is a bit inconsistent, but most of the time it points to God in some way. The number twelve – or multiples of twelve - is everywhere in Revelation: the twelve tribes of Israel, the twenty-four elders in Heaven, the 144,000 which is the number twelve squared and multiplied by a thousand. Twelve appears to be a symbol for God's people. Our goal should never be how many words or expression in the Bible we can interpret literally, but instead to find out the author's intended meaning. For a whole lot of Revelation, a symbolic interpretation is John's intended meaning. To take it literally is to misunderstand and misinterpret it.

Now, the next fact I cite about Revelation might just make me open to the charge of being Captain Obvious! Revelation invites different interpretations. No kidding, Rick! Someone has determined that there are at least five major schools of interpretation that exist not to mention significant variations within each of those schools. Aren't you glad that I'm not going to identify and go over all five of them today? I think, instead, it's important that you know about just two of them. First of all, some Christians believe most of Revelation is yet to be fulfilled. They would say beginning at chapter 4:1 or, at the very latest 6:12, to the end of the book is about events that have not yet happened. From their perspective, most of Revelation deals with events leading up to the second coming of Jesus and what happens after that event. This is the dominant view among evangelical Christians in North America. It is a defensible theological position based on love for God, reverence for Jesus, and respect for the authority of God's Word.

What you may not know, but should is that there is at least one other position that is also defensible theologically, based on love for God, reverence for Jesus, and respect for the authority of God's Word. It's a minority viewpoint among evangelical Christians in North America, but that number is growing. These folk believe that most of Revelation has already been fulfilled. Full disclosure time. I happen to be in that number. We believe that just about everything John predicted through about the middle of chapter 19 has or will be fulfilled in one of two ways. First, most of its already been fulfilled in the incredible persecution and suffering unleashed upon the followers of Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century itself. We believe John primarily wrote Revelation to give believers God's perspective on their tribulations as they faced terrible persecution by the Roman Empire. And we can learn so much from that. Just like the rest of Scripture, we believe the Bible was written for us and for all of God's people down through the ages. That doesn't mean it was written to us. We don't believe Revelation was written primarily to explain things that might happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century or beyond. Second, we believe John may well have been describing successive cycles of persecution of God's people and God's judgment upon those who persecute His people between the first and the second coming of Jesus, however long that might be. We certainly believe in the literal, physical return of Jesus and that it's in the future. We certainly believe in the new Heavens and the new Earth predicted in chapters 21 and 22 and that all that's in the future as well. Nevertheless, we believe most of Revelation is about what happened in the past and, also, what keeps on happening over and over again between the first and second coming of Jesus, but not as much about what will happen in the future.

Now, please do something regardless to which one of those interpretations you subscribe. Insist on exegesis before interpretation. Do that for anywhere in the Bible, but especially in Revelation. You already know that Revelation has inspired many popular books and movies. In most cases, these popular books do no exegesis of Revelation. In other words, they make no effort to discover or explain what a particular verse in Revelation meant to John or a member of one of those seven churches to whom he first addressed this letter. Instead, an immediate jump is made to interpreting that verse which can often result in the most fanciful, "out there" speculations. Let me give you one example. Many of you know the name Hal Lindsey. Like many of you, I,

too, read his book *The Late Great Planet Earth* when I was a young man. Hal is a prophecy specialist. He may well be a great Christian and a fine man, but he tends toward the bizarre and spectacular when it comes to interpreting Revelation. Let's look at one passage as an example. (Rev. 9:7-10) What is that about? Good question! In one of his books, Hal claims that through "special insight", he has determined that what John saw back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century as locusts were actually attack helicopters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the crowns of gold were the elaborate helmets worn by helicopter pilots, and the women's hair was the whirling propeller of the helicopter. Not a shred of exegesis. Just, I think this means that. What was John's original intent? The primary meaning of Revelation is what John, aided by the Holy Spirit, intended it to mean for the original recipients. True, the full meaning may not be exhausted by the original intent, but please make the connection between what John meant to say so that we have some adequate ground or foundation to apply it to ourselves today. Now, secondly, let me say some things quickly about...

### **MAJOR THEMES THAT ARE MAJOR TAKEAWAYS**

These are great points of personal application regardless of what eschatological camp you belong to. First, the primary activity of Heaven is worshiping God. There are some amazing passages in Revelation that give us glimpses into how God is worshiped in Heaven. Let's just look at one. (Rev. 4:1-11) I'm both challenged and intrigued by what I read there. I believe we'll do more in Heaven than worship God directly, or to put it another way, maybe everything we do in Heaven will be a way of worshiping God. But when I read that passage, I feel like my own worship of God is pretty meager and limited. How about you? Do you worship God directly other than on Sunday morning in this service? If you do, what does that look like? Do you worship Him more than you did a year ago? Is your capacity and ability to worship God growing?

Here's a second major takeaway for me. Persecution and suffering is part of being Jesus' disciple. That was true back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and it's still true in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I can't remember a time in my own life when there has been such an upsurge in the imprisonment, torture, and killing of Christians around the world. It seems as if every other day we hear about some new, unbelievable atrocity committed against our spiritual brothers and sisters in places like Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Kenya. John had to educate those first Christians that this was to be expected. After all, hadn't Jesus said, "And everyone will hate you because you are my followers. But the one who endures to the end will be saved"? (Mk 13:13 NLT) John's readers were asking: Why was God allowing followers of Jesus to suffer persecution? How should they deal with the fastest growing "religion" of the time – the worship of Caesar, the Roman Emperor? Should they resist? Were Christians wasting their time following a crucified Jew rather than the one who was so obviously "lord of the world" - Caesar?

Over and over again, Jesus through John tells those believers in those seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 to "overcome." Discipleship is the way of the cross for all of us, but for some Christians that means literal martyrdom. God hasn't promised any of us freedom from suffering and death, but instead triumph through it. Revelation is God's

Word of comfort and encouragement to persecuted Christians back then and today. The Book of Revelation reminds us that the greatest heroes in eternity are those who give up their lives for Jesus. “When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their testimony. They shouted to the Lord and said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge the people who belong to this world and avenge our blood for what they have done to us?’ Then a white robe was given to each of them. And they were told to rest a little longer until the full number of their brothers and sisters—their fellow servants of Jesus who were to be martyred—had joined them.” (Rev. 6:9-11 NLT) What an encouragement Revelation must have been to those who first read or heard John’s letter! What an encouragement this book should be to our fellow brothers and sisters who are called by God to make the ultimate sacrifice as well! God will vindicate them. I expect them to have a kind of elevated honor or recognition in Heaven that I will never have unless I, too, am called to give my life for Jesus. What a reminder to us to pray for those who are imprisoned, tortured, and killed for Jesus!

Third, Jesus is revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords. Yes, He’s also depicted as the Lamb slain for our sins, but our most exalted understanding of Jesus comes from the book of Revelation. Look with me at just a couple of passages. (Rev. 1:12-18 and 19:11-16) Right now, our culture prefers just a partial picture of Jesus which, frankly, we Christians can encourage. Jesus is my friend. Jesus is tolerant of all kinds of diversity. Jesus is cuddly and cosy. Jesus makes me happy inside. But Jesus is far more than any of that and Revelation helps to correct our inadequate images. When John saw Jesus, he was so overwhelmed he just fell down before Him as if he were dead. This is Jesus the conquering general. This is Jesus before whom one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is King and Lord of the entire universe whether you want to or not! Is that how you think of Jesus? Is that how you relate to Jesus? Maybe it’s time you enlarged and expanded your understanding of who Jesus really is. Revelation will help you to do that.

A final takeaway. God is always in control despite appearances. Those believers facing Roman persecution in those seven churches must have felt like God had either abandoned them or wasn’t powerful enough to help them. I have to believe that if you were a Christian living in Iraq, Syria, or Egypt today, you might have similar questions. John tells them in Revelation not to give up. God will ultimately triumph and His people will triumph through Him. Satan is a defeated enemy, but his final end has not yet come. He can still do damage. Hang in there. Be faithful right to the end. Know that God will have the last word. Remember that you’ll reign in Heaven with Him for all eternity. Of course, John was talking about all of this on a macro level. God is always in control of this planet despite appearances. God never surrenders His sovereignty. But what’s true on a macro level is also true on a micro level. Are there parts of your life that seem out of His control today? Do you have a major health concern? Do the effects of aging make you anxious about the future? What about that broken relationship? What about that temptation that just seems irresistible? What about those difficult job or financial issues? God is always in control despite appearances. God is always in control despite appearances. God is always in control despite appearances.

I don't know his real name, so let's just call him Joe. Joe was a janitor at a seminary. He was also a follower of Jesus who loved to read his Bible and meditate on its meaning. A couple of times a week, some of the students at the seminary would enjoy a game of pick-up basketball in the seminary's gym. Joe would often stay late to clean up after them and turn out the lights before heading home. Sometimes he would just sit on a bench by the court and read his Bible waiting for the game to end. On one occasion, during a water break in the basketball game, one of the students noticed Joe reading the book of Revelation. That both amused and intrigued him. What did Joe, this ordinary lay person, think of Revelation? He didn't have the same access to all the learned books, articles, and other resources available to the seminary student. After the game was over and everyone was preparing to leave, this student came up to Joe and asked him, "Joe, I see you've been reading the book of Revelation. What do you make of it? How should we understand it?" Joe pondered the question for a moment. Then he looked at that student, smiled, and simply said, "Jesus wins."

That might well be the best and most succinct interpretation of Revelation out there. Jesus wins. That's true regardless of what eschatological camp you belong to. Jesus wins. Here's a question as we close today. Is Jesus winning in your life? Is He your King? Is He your Lord? Will you share in His triumph one day? Jesus wins.