

Revelation

an introduction

Preaching the Book of Revelation

We live in a day when society is mounting increasing pressures against the Christian faith. Each year brings more demands upon our time and our integrity. The New Testament concludes with a book written to believers under just such pressure. That is why we must study the Book of Revelation.

I realize that there is more controversy and confusion surrounding this book than any other in Scripture, but I do not intend for these sermons to become a lecture series that analyses the book to death. We must focus on its message and respond to it. I won't have time to constantly explain why I have chosen one interpretation over another, so I have written this introduction to explain my overall approach.

Not that I claim to understand every reference and detail in Revelation. I do not; my understanding is very much a work in progress. Nonetheless, I am deeply convinced that the book has a message necessary for us today, a message that is just as much obscured as it is explained by sensational novels. We need the Book of Revelation. We need to hear John's voice. We need to hear God's voice.

So, how do I believe we should approach the Book of Revelation?

First, we must approach it as drama. This influences both how we understand it and how we should interact with it. Revelation is written in a literary style that is virtually non-existent today. "Revelation: is a translation of the word "apocalypse." The apocalyptic style is a unique form of drama that deals with the meaning of life, and where the world is going. When we think of

drama, we think of a story with characters. Apocalyptic drama is different, however. It seeks to create a divine lens through which we can look at reality and see it as it truly is. In an apocalyptic drama, you might look at seats of economic or political power and see ravenous beasts, or you might look at the church and see a perfect Temple. To understand apocalyptic as drama, we should not think of these images as symbols of an allegorical story (like the Chronicles of Narnia). Rather, apocalyptic is a literary lens that enables us to see the true nature of things – see things the way God sees them.

God inspired John to use the apocalyptic style to dramatically reveal the true nature of the struggles we face in this life. Rather than use the chapter divisions (which we inherited from Latin Bibles of the later Middle Ages), we might better view the work as eight scenes – eight epic pictures or tapestries. In the first scene, Jesus comes to earth to encourage His struggling church. In the seven scenes that follow, John (and we) are invited up to heaven to see this struggle from God’s point of view. These scenes do not link in chronological order to give us a crystal ball vision of the future. Instead, they give several heavenly views of the trials the church must face until Christ returns.

Studying the book as drama will help us understand it, and it also suggests how to encounter it. More than any other biblical work, Revelation is meant to be experienced as well as analyzed. It is designed to affect our thinking and our feeling and our decisions by exposing us to truth through a succession of verbal images. Ideally, Revelation should be read aloud and pondered and discussed. We will simply not have time to do this in sermons. I encourage everyone to listen to each section of the book read aloud (by a family member or through a professional recording), followed by a discussion of personal application and prayer.

Secondly, Revelation is a letter to the church. It begins and ends like any other letter, and was addressed to a group of literal churches in Asia. But just because it was written to specific churches does not mean that it has no message for us. Quite the contrary, just like 1 Corinthians or Romans, the teaching given to particular churches have equal meaning for us today. As with

any other apostolic letter, we should expect to find teaching in Revelation that is timeless, applicable to the church in any age.

Or, to come at it from a different angle, the book must also have been understandable to the original hearers. The Gospels, Acts and Epistles were not written to be understood *only* by the last generation before Christ's return, and neither was Revelation. Again, we should expect its message to be universal, with specific applications to the first century, but with equal application to the 9th or 15th or 21st.

This leads me to a third important interpretive point. Revelation is not supposed to be something we "figure out." It is not a puzzle we are supposed to solve. The idea that it is a puzzle stems from a misunderstanding of the word "mystery." Several times in Revelation, we are told "mysteries," and many unfortunately assume that we have been given clues with which to solve a puzzle. But in the Bible, the word "mystery" does not mean "something we don't know, that we have to figure out" but rather "something that we didn't know, that God has now revealed to us." (cf. Eph 3:1-10). The word *apocalypse* is translated "Revelation" because it refers to something *revealed*, not hidden. It may take serious thought to appreciate why God sees human society as a prostitute riding a ravenous beast, but the point is not to figure out hidden references to Rome or nuclear missiles so much as to ponder why God sees our world that way. To remain faithful under pressure, we need to see reality as God sees it.

Fourthly, like the rest of the New Testament, Revelation is firmly grounded in the Old Testament. It uses commonly understood Old Testament images or patterns to convey meaning. In particular, I see significant parallels with the Book of Daniel – truths which Daniel stored away for the future (Dan 12:4) were becoming realities in John's day (Rev 22:10). Therefore, when images must be interpreted, we will rely on a common knowledge of the Old Testament, along with common sense.

Fifthly, Revelation predicts the future – in the same way that the rest of the New Testament does. It assumes that Christ will return, that there will be a final judgment, and the creation of new

heavens and new earth. The age between Christ's ascension and His return will be a time of tribulation that will end with a final surge of evil just before its demise. God's people will be sustained through this entire period and find eternal blessing. None of this is "new" information with Revelation, and John is not attempting to add further details.

It may be argued that I am reading my own view of biblical redemption into my interpretation of Revelation. Of course I am. Revelation is a book of pictures, not a sermon or even a poem. Everyone will understand those images according to what he/she believes is taught in the rest of the Bible. This is not a bad interpretive method (though it warns us against using the Book of Revelation to "prove" the interpretive scheme we used to analyze it!).

Because of established views brought to the book, others will see the Apocalypse in "futurist" terms, as if it deals almost exclusively with events surrounding Christ's return. Others will see it in "preterist" terms, as if all but a very small portion of it deals with events of long ago. Still others will see it in "historical" terms, as if it sketches a blueprint of history. I apologize if my own approach (sometimes called "idealist") discourages or frustrates those with different convictions. Those who wish to read a fuller treatment of the approach I'm following might want to pick up *The Message of Revelation* by Michael Wilcock, from "The Bible Speaks Today" series of commentaries by InterVarsity Press (I am particularly grateful to that source for pointing out the "scene" structure).

The best I can do is to tell you where I am coming from. I will treat the book as a drama of several scenes. These scenes do not link together as a chronological historical sequence, but rather look at the trials we face today from different divine perspectives. The scenes are filled with Christ-centered Old Testament images that expose this world as God sees it. These scenes, these revelations of God's mind, speak to God's people throughout the last days, that is, from Christ's ascension to His return. In particular, they speak of our world today, and not just of ancient Rome or of the days of final judgment.

Indeed, it is my prayer that God's Revelation will *speak* to us, dramatically shaking us out of the twin evils of hopelessness and complacency that have so much of the church in their grip.



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