

# “New Testament Prophecy”

Revelation; Revelation 1:12-19 <sup>1</sup>

And so we come to the End. This morning we complete our ten-week overview of every book in the Bible, and I hope that the journey has been both interesting and helpful. As usual, I'll post many more slides this afternoon than you'll see this morning; and then I plan to join all ten sermons and all ten PowerPoints into one document that covers the Bible “from cover to cover”—kind of my version of “Cliff Notes,” if you will.

Our tenth and last section of the Bible is New Testament Prophecy. While the Hebrew Scriptures contain seventeen prophetic books, the Christian Scriptures contain only one, the book of Revelation.

What thoughts do you have as we begin our study of Revelation? Some people do all they can to avoid the book of Revelation, while others have a preoccupying fascination with it. Martin Luther rejected the book of Revelation because he thought it didn't present the message of Jesus. John Calvin left it out of his commentary on the Bible.

One despairing commentator –Jerome, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century—said that Revelation “has as many riddles as it has words,” and another said that “the study of Revelation either finds a man mad or leaves him mad”! There's certainly no doubt that the book of Revelation generates at least as much heat as it does light, and we must begin by acknowledging that this is one of the most complex books in the Bible.

Revelation takes its name from its first word, “apocalypse.” Actually, its first three words are *Αποκαλυψις Ιησου χριστου*, which means, “*the revelation from Jesus Christ.*”

As you may know, “apocalypse” refers to the removal of the cover from something that is hidden (Luke 12:2), or the pulling back of a curtain to show what is behind it, and apocalyptic writing is done in code language. This code language was used in times of persecution or other trouble, so much so that apocalyptic writings are sometimes called “tracts for hard times.”

When nations are at war, they use codes. In World War II, we used Navajo Code Talkers. Today we use computer-generated encryption, as is in the news in one way or another almost every day. Codes are meant to both conceal and to reveal—to conceal their message from outsiders but to reveal their meaning to the initiated.

Apocalyptic writing focuses on judgment, on reward, on future restoration. And so it is that Revelation speaks of bizarre images, vivid pictures of death, supernatural creatures, catastrophic judgment, of a future blessed life, of a new heaven and a new earth. These themes are also part of the prophetic tradition, as the Old Testament prophets tried to bring about repentance, to warn of judgment, and to offer hope for the future.

Apocalyptic writing flourished among the Jews from about 300 B.C. to 100 A.D., and we have dozens of examples of it. The last part of the book of Daniel is written in apocalyptic style, as is the entire book of Revelation. The original readers of Revelation understood its code; we understand some of it. Some of it we simply guess at.

The book of Revelation is actually a letter that the apostle John wrote to the churches of Asia Minor (what we know as western Turkey) at the end of the first century. John wrote the letter about A.D. 95, while he was an old man exiled to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on September 22, 2013.

The letter records a series of visions that John—the beloved disciple—received from the Risen Christ, visions whose primary purpose was to assure believers who were experiencing or anticipating persecution that God still cared for them. I think we could summarize the essential content of the book in just four words: **BE FAITHFUL! GOD WINS!**

Revelation presents itself as a letter written to seven churches, and the order in which the churches are listed corresponds roughly to an ancient Roman postal route that began at Ephesus, then ran north, east, and south to Laodicea. Each church received and read the letter in turn, probably made its own copy, and then sent it on to the next church.

At the same time, the number 7 was a very special number that symbolized perfection. We know that there were at least fifteen churches in that area, so John’s selection of seven probably indicates that he intended for the letter to have a wide distribution beyond just those particular churches.

While Revelation is indeed a letter, it’s a very special kind of letter, since it’s written in the apocalyptic style. Most writing today is either prose or poetry. But if we approach Revelation as prose or poetry we will misunderstand it, because Revelation is neither of these.

We have to read Revelation differently from any other writing in the New Testament. John used apocalyptic systems that employed colors, numbers, and animals to encode his message, codes that were known to his readers, but that looked like the foolishness of an old man to the Roman censors past whom the message had to go.

It seems to me that any study of Revelation must begin with the assumption that this letter had as much meaning for its original recipients as the Corinthian letters had for Corinth, and unless we can discover what the letter meant to them, finding out what it means for us is pretty hopeless. Fortunately, Revelation was not just cooked up out of nowhere. It rests squarely in the stream of the biblical story, and it is dependent on the Old Testament for many of its ideas and much of its imagery. No other book in the New Testament is so filled with the ideas of the Old Testament—mostly the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.<sup>2</sup>

The visions of Revelation are addressed to the imagination, even as Romans is addressed to reason and the Psalms are addressed to emotion. The great New Testament scholar, A.T. Robertson, said that if you read the book of Revelation to a child, the child understands it better than an adult does, because she hasn’t yet learned how to restrain her imagination. The child allows her imagination to follow the story.

The book unfolds as a pageant of visions that are symbolic from start to finish, deploying special effects similar to what Stephen Spielberg or Peter Jackson create on film.<sup>3</sup> The language of Revelation “works, not by imparting information, but by helping the reader to experience what John experienced.”<sup>4</sup>

Much of what we see in Revelation is the stage setting, not the drama itself, and one danger in studying Revelation is that we can get caught up in the scenery and miss the message of the drama—as one might rather easily do when watching *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>5</sup> Because Revelation was written to encourage Christians experiencing persecution, interest in Revelation has always increased whenever there have been times of danger, crisis, or great difficulty. The

<sup>2</sup> One commentator found 518 Old Testament references in Revelation’s 404 verses!

<sup>3</sup> *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway, 2008), p. 2455.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell Reddish, “Revelation,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary*, ed. R. Scott Nash (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), p. 29. My colleague at Southern Seminary, James Blevins, made a compelling case that the book is actually a carefully crafted drama written as though presented on the famous stage in Ephesus (James L. Blevins, *Revelation as Drama*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> As early as A.D. 250, Dionysius wrote that this book “cannot be understood in the literal sense.”

arrival of nuclear and biological warfare during the lifetimes of many of us has made apocalyptic themes seem far more relevant than is comfortable.

Much ink has been spilled and much money has been made by those who purport to understand the intricacies of biblical apocalyptic, and I'm not going to try to cover all that might be said in so short a time as this. I do want you to know, though, just a bit about some of the most frequent approaches to understanding this enigmatic book.

The study of Revelation and of apocalyptic literature in general is sometimes referred to as "eschatology," or the study of Last Things. While there have always been sharp differences of understanding and opinion about these matters, such differences have never been a test of fellowship among Baptists. Baptists encourage one another to study hard and seek God's guidance as we sort these things out for ourselves.

There is, though, one crucial principle of interpretation that is important to remember as we attempt to understand Revelation. Whereas it is usually the best practice to take things in the Bible literally (i.e., at face value) unless there is good reason to take them figuratively, in Revelation, the opposite is true. That is, it is better to understand symbolic language in apocalyptic literature as figurative unless there is good reason for understanding it as literal (for example, a beast with seven heads and ten horns). Otherwise, we're likely to miss the point of the symbolism entirely.

There are generally understood to be four broad approaches to understanding the book of Revelation, and there are serious, scholarly, faithful Christians who hold each of these views. The first of these approaches, known as "the **Preterist** View," believes that Revelation refers only to events in the first century, not to our own time. The second approach, "the **Futurist** View," believes that Revelation refers almost entirely to "the terminal generation," still in the future for us and far into the future from John's perspective.

The third approach, "the **Historicist** View," believes that Revelation presents an outline of history from Jesus' Ascension to His Return . . . and beyond. And the fourth approach, "the **Idealist** View," believes that Revelation is a symbolic treatment of the battle between good and evil that applies equally to every generation. There are also those who combine some of the stronger aspects of each viewpoint into some sort of a hybrid, "mixed" approach.

I suspect that of these four views, the one you're most familiar with is some version of what is technically known as **Dispensational Premillennialism** with its elaborate charts and timelines that "leave no question unanswered." Dispensational Premillennialism is a subset of "the Futurist View," and this view began in England in the 1830's with a fellow named J.N. Darby. Cyrus Scofield popularized Dispensational Premillennialism in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his *Scofield Study Bible* is still quite popular today.

The word "premillennial" deserves a moment of explanation. The word "**millennium**" does not appear in Scripture, and I was thirty years old before I'd ever heard it used with reference to the Bible. Nevertheless, "the millennium" gets a lot of press these days, and you need to know at least a few things about it.

The idea of "the millennium" comes from the "thousand years" that are mentioned in Revelation 20:1-7, and the three main "millennial" viewpoints have to do with how Jesus' return is positioned with respect to that period of time. The "**Postmillennial** View" maintains that the world is going to get better and better during a thousand-year period either figurative or literal, and that Jesus will return at the end of that period. This view has not been widely held since the horrors of our great World Wars, but there are still those who hold it.

The “**Premillennial** View,” of which Dispensational Premillennialism is a subset, maintains that the world is going to get worse and worse, until there is no redeeming it. Jesus will secretly return at some point to remove or “rapture” believers prior to the millennium, and then He will visibly return a second time to bring an end to history.

Another frequently-held premillennial view among Baptists is known as “**Historic Premillennialism**.” This view holds to a literal, future reign of Christ on earth, during which Satan is bound a thousand years and the saints reign with Christ. Many who hold this view, though, consider the “thousand years” to be symbolic—that is, while the reign of Christ will be literal, the length of the reign may or may not be exactly 1,000 years. This type of premillennialism does not divide Christ’s Return into two phases, but expects a single return between the tribulation and millennium.

The third major millennial view is known as “**Amillennialism**,” which means, “no thousand years.” The idea here is that there will be no literal thousand year period, but that the “millennium” is a symbolic expression related to the spiritual realities of present Christian experience in which Satan is a defeated enemy and believers live right now through faith in Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. The amillennial view does not look for a literal, future thousand year reign of Christ on the earth during which Satan is bound.<sup>6</sup>

And then there is a fourth, tongue-in-cheek view of the millennium held by many, a view we might call “Panmillennialism.” This view holds that, while there are many aspects of the future that remain mysterious to us, God’s sovereignty will see to it that everything “pans out” in the end!

So which view is the right one? Since thoughtful, prayerful Christians hold each of these views, the issue is not one of orthodoxy but one of interpretation, and in recent years many expositors have combined the stronger elements of the different views into various “blended” approaches. We do well to make our interpretations with humility, remembering that **Jesus told us that He will return when we least expect it** (Matthew 24:44; 2 Peter 3:10).

In order to understand Revelation’s message for our own day, we need to do our best to study the text carefully, trying to be open to new and surprising understandings as they are given by God’s Spirit. My own approach is to be somewhat suspicious of persons who have no questions and whose systems seem far too neat at “the foggy ends” of Scripture.

I see the general trajectory of Revelation as moving from “*the things that are*”—the first-century churches’ present situation (chapters 2–3)—to “*the things that are to take place after this*,” climaxing with the destruction of God’s enemies and the presentation of the church as the Lamb’s Bride in a New Heaven and New Earth (1:19; 4:1). Within this general movement, I think John’s visions “double back” to present complementary perspectives on the same event or phase of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, rather as turning a kaleidoscope rearranges the same pieces into different patterns.<sup>7</sup>

The technical word for such a pattern is “recapitulation,” and recapitulation is used in other parts of the Bible to elaborate God’s purposes and to confirm their certainty. In Revelation, the principle of recapitulation means that the order in which John received his visions does not necessarily indicate the order of the events they symbolize.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Jerry Batson, “Millennium,” in *The Holman Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Reddish, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, p. 2461. See Genesis 1:1–2:25; 37:5–11; 41:1–32; Daniel 2:1–45 (with Daniel 7:1–28); Acts 10:10–16.

Well, what are we to make of all this? What's the "take away" from Revelation? Dr. George Beasley-Murray highlighted three ways in which Revelation unveils the nature of the forces that are at work in our world:

1. God the **Creator** in his glory and majesty, sovereignly works His will in the world—over against the **beast** from hell, the dragon who would bring the world down to hell with him;
2. Jesus, the **Christ** of God, who alone is the Redeemer, giving Himself for the life of the world and coming again to rule it in righteousness and justice—over against the **antichrist** who seeks to enslave the world in wickedness and bring it to destruction;
3. And the **City of God**, referred to as the Bride, beloved by the Lamb, wherein redeemed humankind finds the fulfillment of creation in a new existence provided by the eternal love of God—over against the **city of this world**, represented by a glittering prostitute, drunk with the blood of the righteous but destined to die at the hands of the very power it serves—the antichrist himself.

Such are the forces we see in the Revelation, but never is it suggested that they are equal forces, locked in a mortal combat whose outcome is uncertain. No, the entire book, from its first line to its last, makes it clear who is the real Lord of this world. The end of the story cannot be in doubt for persons who know that Lord and have experienced His power in their lives.

Neither does Revelation leave any doubt about God's attitude toward evil or the ultimate fate of the unrepentant: judgment is certain. Throughout the unfolding drama of Revelation, God calls for repentance and offers mercy; but where repentance is lacking, God will not forever tolerate rebellion.

In spite of its clear message of judgment, the primary purpose of Revelation is pastoral—to encourage faithfulness under persecution; and that message for first century Christians is also its chief message for us today. Whether physically oppressed by authoritarian governments, persecuted and killed by religious terrorists, or spiritually assaulted by money, pleasure and power, believers can find strength to face tribulation. Revelation reminds us that the waves of trouble that sweep over us cannot destroy us if we are in Christ. Revelation reminds us of God's sovereignty, Christ's presence, evil's defeat, and the Church's victory.

The great message of Revelation for Christians of every generation is the assurance that not even the worst that can be done by the powers of evil can frustrate God's eternal purpose for the world that God has made, and we are therefore called to be faithful in our commitment to Him. The entire book is really a commentary on John 16:33: "*Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.*" The most important teaching of this book is one on which all agree: "**Christ alone is our Hope!**"

And, finally, there's one more verse I want you to remember. You probably know it already. It's Revelation 3:20: "*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.*" And that brings me to another set of four words by which to summarize Revelation:

**"Jesus Wins. You're Invited!"**  
Have you accepted His invitation?