

# Introduction to Revelation

## Lesson 1

### What is Revelation?

This would seem to be an odd question to ask about a book of the Bible, but 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? Here are several answers to that question:

(1) Philip Carrington said: “In the case of Revelation, we are dealing with an artist greater than Stevenson or Coleridge or Bach. John has a better sense of the right word than Stevenson. He has a greater command of unearthly supernatural loveliness than Coleridge. He has a richer sense of melody and rhythm in composition than Bach. It is the only masterpiece of pure art in the New Testament. Its fullness and richness and harmonic variety place it far above Greek tragedy.”

(2) Novelist Will Self in an introduction to a pocket edition of Revelation wrote: “In its vile obscurantism is its baneful effect; the original language may have welded the metaphoric with the signified, the ‘logos’ with the flesh, but in the King James version, the text is a guignol of tedium, a portentous horror film.”

(3) Hal Lindsey wrote in 1973: “The information in the book you are about to read is more up to date than tomorrow’s newspaper. I can say this with confidence because the facts and predictions in the next few pages are all taken from the greatest sourcebook of current events in the world.”

(4) Williams Barclay, referring to Revelation as “The strange book,” wrote: “When a student of the New Testament embarks upon the study of Revelation, he finds himself projected into a different world. Here is something quite unlike the rest of the New Testament. And

not only is it different, but it is notoriously difficult for a modern mind to understand. As a result it has sometimes been abandoned and has instead become the playground a religious eccentrics. One despairing commentator said that there are as many riddles in the Revelation as there are words. And another that the study of Revelation either finds or leaves a man mad!"

(5) "There is a choral, symphonic nature about the book of Revelation that stirs up our feelings as much as it does our ideas. It is a dramatic, forceful, yet surprisingly tender and comforting book. The result is that this remarkable book is both hard to understand fully and impossible to forget."

(6) "Beautiful beyond description is the last book of the Bible. Beautiful in form, in symbolism, in purpose, and in meaning. Where in Scripture do we find a more vivid and picturesque portrayal of the Christ, Faithful and True, going forth unto victory, seated upon a white horse, arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood, followed by the armies of heaven?"

What is Revelation? There are as many answers to that question as there are commentators. We will see how we answer that question at the end of our studies.

## What is Revelation About?

Either Revelation is almost totally neglected or it is elevated to a prominence shared by no other Biblical book. No other part of the Bible has proved so fascinating to commentators, and no other has suffered so much at their hands.

What is this book all about? The Future? The Past? Heaven? The Church?

Most people would tell you that Revelation is all about Heaven, the second coming of Christ, and the end of the world ... and perhaps as we study the book we will find that they are right. But we need to be

very careful. Not every coming of Christ in the New Testament deals with his final coming at the end of the world.

In Matthew 24:29–30 Jesus speaks of a time when:

The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.

That sounds like the end of the world, doesn't it. But if we keep reading, we find something interesting in verse 34: "Truly I say to you, **this generation** will not pass away until all these things take place."

Verse 34 provides a time frame—the most important feature of any prophecy. Whatever the "coming" was in verses 29–30, it must have happened in the first century!

A basic principle of Bible study is that we should use the easy verses to help explain the difficult verses. And verse 34 is very easy to understand!

The language in Matthew 24 is the language of judgment, and there are many judgments in the Bible: Sodom, Gomorrah, Egypt, Edom, Tyre, Sidon, Babylon, Assyria, Judah, Israel, Jerusalem, Rome, and the World. The same sort of language used in Matthew 24 to describe a judgment against Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other judgments.

So what can we conclude about *Revelation* from Matthew 24? Only that we should be careful not to automatically assume that language of judgment must apply to the final judgment of the world. It definitely does not in Matthew 24, and we may discover that it does not in Revelation.

One thing 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

Not only is this a book about Christ, but this is a book about the church of Christ. The most beautiful descriptions of the Lord's church found anywhere in the Bible are found in this book.

## **Does it Matter What We Believe About Revelation?**

Revelation has permeated the popular culture. There are many people who can't name the four gospels yet who have heard about 666.

Revelation forms the basis for virtually all of the predictions by the end-is-near prophets. Many feel that the Middle East and especially Israel will play a special role in the end of the world.

Here is a list of book titles from the 1980's and 1990's: *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East, Iraq in Prophecy, Holy War for the Promised Land, Prophecy 2000: Rushing to Armageddon, The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times, Global Peace and the Rise of the Antichrist, The Coming Russian Invasion of America, The New Millennium* by Pat Robertson, *Road to Armageddon* by Billy Graham, *88 Reasons why the Rapture is in 1988* and its much antic-

ipated (and unexpected!) sequel, *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*, and *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey.

A simple Amazon search would turn up many more that are available today. One that I purchased recently is entitled *Armageddon, Oil, and Terror*, by John Walvoord, someone we will have more to say about later. That book lists a series of 12 catastrophic events that will supposedly take place as the fulfillment of Revelation.

Walvoord writes: “The rapidly increasing tempo of change in modern life has given the entire world a sense of impending crisis. ... How long can world tensions be kept in check? ... As alarming as these events are, they really are not surprising in light of the Bible’s end-time prophecies.” (pp. 4-5)

Let me read next from the introduction of a similar book: “It is impossible for the most thoughtless to overlook the impressive and almost unprecedented character of the age in which we live. Events, as rapid in their succession as they are startling in their magnitude, ... chase each other like waves on the sea... ”

And where did that second quote come from? From another modern end-is-near bestseller? No. It came from *The Great Tribulation, or Things Coming on the Earth* by John Cumming, **which was published in 1863** in New York at the height of the U.S. Civil War!

The first time I taught this class in 1990, we were at war with Iraq—the site of ancient Babylon. Popular books at that time told us that the locusts were smart bombs, and Saddam Hussein was the antichrist.

The second time I taught Revelation was in the aftermath of a war with Waco. David Koresh’s crazy ideas about the seven seals in Revelation were broadcast by the national media, who seemed to particularly enjoy an opportunity to heap ridicule on the Bible.

Now, the third time I am teaching the book, we are once again at war in Iraq. And once again, the books and the preachers are shouting that the signs are clear that this is the end.

Do we really believe that God's word changes with the headlines? Is that what we want the world to believe? These modern day prophets of doom are doing great damage to God's word.

Another example is *premillennialism*. As we will see, that false doctrine involves much more than simply a 1000 year reign of Christ. The premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel.

It matters what we believe about and what teach about this book.

### **Do misconceptions about Revelation make any difference?**

Yes. In fact, misconceptions about the Jews and the end of the world may have effected political decisions. Ronald Reagan said "I sometimes believe we're heading very fast for Armageddon" and told People magazine in 1983 that "theologians have been studying the ancient prophecies—what would portend the coming of Armageddon—and have said that never, in the time between the prophecies up until now, has there ever been a time in which so many of the prophecies are coming together. There have been times in the past when people thought the end of the world was coming, but never anything like this." Will a president one day mistakenly see himself as an instrument of God destined to make end time prophecies come true?

### **What is the Time Frame of Revelation?**

The time frame is vital to understanding any prophecy. It helped us understand Matthew 24 a moment ago, and it will help us understand Revelation.

Absent a time frame, we are left with what I call the Nostradamus Effect. That is, we have vague statements with no anchor in time that could apply to any of dozens of events that have happened throughout history. If I told you a king would arise, and he would be followed by another king who would do this or that, and then by a third king who would be evil, would you be surprised if it happened at some point in the next 2000 years? But what if I told you exactly when it would happen? And what if I told you that 600 years before the fact? Prophe-

cies without timeframes are usually not that impressive. For one reason, how can they ever be proved wrong?

Fortunately, Revelation has a *very clear* time frame. John says that the events dealt with in the book would occur shortly after the book was written, and he tells us that four times!

**Revelation 1:1** (The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass)

**Revelation 1:3** (Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.)

**Revelation 22:6** (And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.)

**Revelation 22:10** (And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand.)

The meaning of these passages would not be disputed in any other context. In Revelation, however, the passages conflict with men's interpretation of the book and instead of changing their interpretation many change the clear meaning of these important verses.

Walvoord recognizes the proper meaning but ignores it. Hinds inserts a word in order to have John say that his writings concern events that were to shortly *begin* to come to pass. Others say it means that the events in the book would happen *quickly*. That, however, is not what John said.

The timeframe in Revelation 22:10 is particularly instructive. In that verse, John was told to "seal **not** the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand." Daniel received a vision in 550 B.C. (described in Daniel 8) that was fulfilled 400 years later in 165 B.C. when the sanctuary was restored after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. In Daniel 8:26, Daniel was told to shut up the vision because its fulfillment was a long way off. In Revelation 22:10 John is

told just the opposite — Don't seal up the vision because the time for its fulfillment is at hand. By what theory do we argue that the "long way off" in Daniel is 400 years, while the "time at hand" in Revelation is 2000 years and counting? Does that make any sense?

What about 2 Peter 3:8 where we see that to God 1000 years appears as 1 day? Time does not mean the same thing to God as it means to man yet in Revelation 1:1, 3 God is not talking to himself — God is talking to man. Which time frame do you think he would use? In Daniel 8 he said that 400 years were "many days."

Many commentators ignore or try to explain away those clearly stated timeframes. We will not do that in this class.

## Why Should We Study Revelation?

The easy answer is that we should study Revelation for the same reason we study any other book in the Bible. It is the Word of God, and we should want to know everything about it. But there are other reasons that apply specifically to this book.

First, I would argue that few evangelistic tools are better than a knowledge of Revelation. Just placing a commentary on your desk at work can create an open door for spreading the gospel.

Second, people out in the world are interested in Revelation, and if we can answer their questions about this book, they may trust us on other books. People are interested in Revelation. their interest provides us with a great opportunity.

Historian Timothy P. Webber tells us that a resurgence of interest in prophetic themes is one of the most significant developments in American religion since World War II. This fact, he says, is evidenced generally in the rising flood of eschatological literature pouring forth from the so-called "Christian" publishers.

One of the most widely distributed books of the present era is Hal Lindsey's multi-million selling *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It has been translated into no fewer than 31 languages and circulated in more

than 50 nations. It was Lindsey's book that caused *Newsweek* magazine to report that in America there is a "boom in doom"!

There is a widespread popular interest in Revelation today. Unfortunately, most of the interest in Revelation seems based on a radical misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the book.

A third reason to study Revelation is that it is incredibly interesting. If you enjoy Bible studies that cause you to search for clues all throughout the Bible then you will love Revelation. If you enjoy the study of history, and particularly the history of Rome, then you will love Revelation.

A fourth reason to study Revelation is that the book is incredibly beautiful and dramatic.

Some today think we need to add drama to the gospel by presenting dramatic plays in the worship service or by adding dramatic music to cassettes of the scriptures. The Bible is already dramatic! It does not need any help from us. How exactly does man increase the drama of a story that involves the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of deity? Simply reading the book of Revelation from the pulpit would provide more drama than any play 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 200 miles long that comes up to a horse's bridle. Fierce creatures? How about seven headed beasts and dragons? Success of an underdog? How about the church versus the greatest political and military power the world had ever known? Happy ending? How about the church triumphant?

## Who Wrote Revelation?

This one is easy. Revelation 1:1-2 tells us that the author was John, who bare record of the word of God and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things things that he saw. That could be no other than the Apostle John.

Some commentaries begin by doubting the truthfulness of that claim of authorship in the first two verses of the book. It makes me wonder why they bother to read any further!

## When Was Revelation Written?

We are going to deal with this question at length when we get to Revelation 17, but since that will be months from now I will briefly discuss it here in the introduction.

Augustus was the first emperor of Rome. (Some argue that Julius Caesar was the first emperor, but we will deal with that objection later in our studies.) Following Augustus were Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. After Nero, there was a period of civil war in which four emperors came to power in the span of about a year. The first three of those four (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius) reigned for only a short time before they were killed. The fourth was Vespasian, who was followed by his son Titus, and then by his other son Domitian.

The key verse in dating Revelation is 17:10-11, where John discusses 8 kings, and tells us that one is, one will come and continue only a short time, and then the eighth will come. If we can determine the one that “is” then we will know when the book was written.

The first problem is that I listed 11 emperors and John mentions only 8. I believe the explanation to that problem is that John ignores the three who came and went during the Civil Wars. (Daniel 7, by contrast, mentions them but says they were plucked up.) If we omit those three, then number 8 is Domitian. Counting back one, we reach Titus, who did reign only a short time as we read in 17:10-11. Counting back one more, we reach Vespasian, who then must be the king who “is.” Thus, I will argue that Revelation was written during the reign of Vespasian, although it likely was not circulated until some time later when John’s exile ended.

But there is external evidence from shortly after the time that tells us John was banished by Domitian and restored by Nerva. How can that

fit in with our proposed date for the book during the reign of Vespasian?

In December of 69, Vespasian was acclaimed emperor, but for the first half of 70, he was occupied in Alexandria, while his elder son Titus was engaged upon the siege of Jerusalem. His younger son Domitian, the sole representative of the family in Rome, accepted the name of Caesar and imperial residence and was invested with full consular authority, his name being placed at the head of all dispatches and edicts. As Josephus tells us, Domitian was ruler until his father showed up, and for over 6 months with the backing of the army that is what happened.

It was perhaps during this time that John was exiled to Patmos. That would have been in early AD 70. In June, Domitian left Rome, and shortly thereafter Vespasian arrived. In the following year he took as his colleague in the consularship, Nerva, a lawyer and a future emperor. Nerva held office in AD 71, and perhaps at that time he revoked the sentence that had exiled John to Patmos, which would mean that John's exile would have lasted almost exactly one year.

So John could have been banished by Domitian and restored by Nerva, as the tradition tells us, but in AD 70-71 rather than later when Domitian became emperor and later still when Nerva took his place.

## Why Was Revelation Written?

In studying any book, one should always begin with same question: Why was the book written? What was its initial purpose?

A short answer to this question is that the book of Revelation was written to provide comfort and encouragement to the people of God. The book was written to convince the church that God had not abandoned them.

If I had to point to a theme from the book itself, I would point to two verses:

Revelation 6:10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?"

Revelation 17:14 They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.

We will have much more to say later about the theme of the book and its initial audience, but one thing we can say now is that **we should be very wary of any view that makes us the focus of this book!** This book was written to Christians suffering under Roman persecution, and any interpretation that ignores that suffering is a fatally flawed interpretation.

God was not comforting persecuted first century Christians by telling them about some great battle that would happen 2000 years later! The focus of the problem was first century Roman persecution, and the focus of Revelation is first century Rome.