

Revelation Week 1

Introduction

I. Introduction

- a. The late British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once described the former Soviet Union as “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”
- b. Many Christians view the book of Revelation in much the same way.
- c. Bewildered by its mystifying symbolism and striking imagery, many believers (including some pastors, who never preach through Revelation) avoid serious study of the book.
- d. Even John Calvin, the greatest commentator of the Reformation, who wrote commentaries on the other books, did not attempt to write a commentary on Revelation.
- e. Such shortsightedness deprives believers of the blessings the book promises to those who diligently read it (1:3; 22:7).
- f. Those who ignore Revelation deprive themselves of a rich treasure of divine truth.
 - i. Revelation takes a high view of God’s inspired Word.

- ii. It claims divine inspiration for itself (1:2), and it has been estimated that 278 of its 404 verses allude to the inspired Old Testament Scriptures.
- iii. Revelation reveals God the Father in all His glory and majesty, describing Him as holy (4:8), true (6:10), omnipotent (4:11), wise (7:12), sovereign (4:11), and eternal (4:10).
- iv. Revelation details the depths of man's depravity. Despite experiencing the final outpouring of God's devastating wrath and judgment on sinful mankind, people will nevertheless harden their hearts (like Pharaoh before them; 1 Sam. 6:6) and refuse to repent (9:20–21; 16:9, 11).
- v. Scripture contains no clearer summation of the doctrine of redemption than that of Revelation 1:5, which declares that "Jesus Christ ... loves us and released us from our sins by His blood."
- vi. The ministry of angels also figures prominently in Revelation, which contains one out of every four references to angels in Scripture.
- vii. Revelation warns the church of the dangers of sin and compromise with the world

(chaps. 2–3), and teaches it how to properly worship God (chaps. 4–5).

- g. Some who study Revelation do so seeking evidence to support their own (often bizarre or sensational) eschatological views.
 - i. What is eschatology?
 - ii. But they miss the point. Revelation is a rich source of truth about eschatology; in fact, it contains more details about the end times than any other book of the Bible.
 - iii. Revelation portrays Christ's ultimate triumph over Satan, depicts the final political setup of the world system, and describes the career of the most powerful dictator in human history, the final Anti christ.
 - iv. It also mentions the Rapture of the church (3:10), and describes the seven-year time of Tribulation, including the three and one-half years of the Great Tribulation (7:14; cf. Matt. 24:21), the second coming of Christ, the climactic battle of human history (Armageddon), the thousand-year earthly kingdom of Jesus Christ, the final judgment of unrepentant sinners (the Great White Throne judgment), and the final state of the

wicked in hell (the lake of fire) and the redeemed in the new heaven and new earth.

h. But the book of Revelation is primarily the “Revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1).

i. It describes Him by many titles, including “the faithful witness” (1:5); “the firstborn of the dead” (1:5); “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5); “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8; 21:6); “the first and the last” (1:17); “the living One” (1:18); “the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1); “the One who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12); “the Son of God” (2:18); the One “who has eyes like a flame of fire, and ... feet ... like burnished bronze” (2:18); the One “who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1); the One “who is holy, who is true” (3:7); the holder of “the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens” (3:7); “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness” (3:14); “the Beginning of the creation of God” (3:14); “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah” (5:5); “the Root of David” (5:5); the Lamb of God (e.g., 5:6;

6:1; 7:9–10; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7; 21:9; 22:1); the “Lord, holy and true” (6:10); the One who “is called Faithful and True” (19:11); “The Word of God” (19:13); the “King of kings, and Lord of lords” (19:16); Christ (Messiah), ruling on earth with His glorified saints (20:6); and “Jesus ... the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (22:16).

- i. Revelation also affirms the full deity of Jesus Christ.
 - i. He possesses the attributes and prerogatives of God, including sovereignty (1:5), eternity (1:17–18), the right to judge men (19:11) and to decide who lives and who dies (1:18; 2:23).
 - ii. He also receives worship (5:13) and rules from God’s throne (22:1, 3).
- j. Finally, Revelation affirms His equality of essence with God the Father by applying Old Testament passages that describe God to Jesus Christ (cf. Deut. 10:17 with 19:16; Prov. 3:12 with 3:19; Dan. 7:9 with 1:14; Isa. 44:6 with 1:17; also cf. 1:8 with 22:12–13).

- k. Far from being the mysterious, incomprehensible book many imagine it to be, Revelation's purpose is to reveal truth, not to obscure it.
- i. That fact is evident in its title, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1), primarily in His second coming glory. Apokalupsis ("Revelation") could be translated "an uncovering," "an unveiling," or "a disclosure."
 - ii. It is used in the New Testament to speak of revealing spiritual truth (Rom. 16:25; Gal. 1:12; Eph. 1:17; 3:3), the manifestation of the sons of God (Rom. 8:19), and of Christ's manifestation at both His first (Luke 2:32) and second (2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7) comings.
 - iii. In each case, Revelation describes something (or someone) that was formerly hidden, but now becomes visible.
 - iv. Revelation unveils truths about Jesus Christ, and makes clear features of prophetic truth only hinted at in the Old Testament and other New Testament books.
 - v. This clarity is often obscured by a rejection of the principles of literal interpretation in

favor of an allegorical or spiritualizing hermeneutical method.

- vi. Such approaches attempt to place Revelation's account in the past and present rather than the future.
- vii. But once the plain meaning of the text is denied, an interpreter is left to his own imagination, and the truths of this book are lost in a maze of human inventions void of authenticity.

II. Author

- a. Four times in Revelation the author identifies himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8).
- b. The early church unanimously (until the third century) affirmed that he was John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles and author of the fourth gospel and the epistles of John.
- c. Writing early in the second century (possibly as early as a.d. 135) Justin Martyr declared, "There was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would

likewise take place” (Dialogue with Trypho, chap. 81).

- d. Since Justin lived for a time in Ephesus, one of the seven churches to which Revelation was addressed, his testimony is especially significant.
- e. Dating from about the same time as Justin (c. a.d. 100–150) is the Gnostic writing known as the Apocryphon of John.
 - i. That document cites Revelation 1:19 and attributes it to John the brother of James and son of Zebedee (Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 28).
- f. Also writing in the second century, Clement of Alexandria noted that it was John the apostle who had been in exile on Patmos. Obviously, it was the John who had been exiled to Patmos who penned Revelation (1:9).
- g. Such strong, early, and consistent testimony to the apostle John’s authorship affirms the book’s internal claims (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8) and cannot easily be set aside.
- h. That the church could have been mistaken about who wrote Revelation virtually from the time it was written is inconceivable.

- i. But some deny it by saying the writing style is different
- j. Despite the differences, there are striking parallels between Revelation and the apostle John's other writings.
 - i. Only the gospel of John and Revelation refer to Christ as the Word (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13).
 - ii. Revelation frequently describes Christ as the Lamb—a title elsewhere given to Him only in John's gospel.
 - iii. Both the gospel of John and Revelation refer to Jesus as a witness (John 5:31–32; Rev. 1:5).
 - iv. Revelation 1:7 and John 19:37 quote Zechariah 12:10 differently from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) but in agreement with each other.

III. Date

- a. Two main alternatives have been proposed for the date of Revelation: during either the reign of Nero (c. a.d. 68), or that of Domitian (c. a.d. 96).
- b. The earlier date is held primarily by some who adopt the preterist interpretation of Revelation.
 - i. What is a preterist view.

- c. It is based largely on questionable exegesis of several passages in the book and attempts to relegate its prophetic fulfillment entirely to the period before the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70.
- d. Those who hold to the early date see in Jerusalem's destruction the prophesied second coming of Jesus Christ in its first phase.
- e. On the other hand, the view that the apostle John penned Revelation near the end of Domitian's reign was widely held in the early church.
 - i. The second-century church father Irenaeus wrote, "We will not, however, incur the risk of pronouncing positively as to the name of Antichrist; for if it were necessary that his name should be distinctly revealed in this present time, it would have been announced by him who beheld the apocalyptic vision [the book of Revelation]. For that was seen no very long time since, but almost in our day, towards the end of Domitian's reign" (Against Heresies, 5.30.3).
 - ii. The church fathers Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Victorinus, Eusebius, and Jerome also affirm that Revelation was written during Domitian's reign (cf. Mounce,

Revelation, 32; Swete, Commentary on Revelation, xcix–c).

- f. Revelation was written during a time when the church was undergoing persecution.
 - i. John had been exiled to Patmos, at least one believer had already suffered martyrdom (2:13), and more persecution loomed on the horizon (2:10).
 - ii. The extent of the persecution under Domitian appears to have been more widespread than that under Nero, which was largely confined to the city of Rome.
 - iii. So, the persecution of Christians referred to in Revelation fits better with a date during Domitian's reign.
- g. The condition of the seven churches to whom John addressed Revelation also argues for the later date.
 - i. As seen in Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Timothy, those churches were spiritually healthy as of the mid-sixties, when Paul last ministered in that region.
 - ii. But by the time Revelation was written, those churches had suffered serious spiritual decline.

- iii. Ephesus had left its first love, and most of the rest had been infiltrated by false doctrine and sin.
- iv. Such a decline would have taken longer than the brief period between the end of Paul's ministry in Asia Minor and the end of Nero's reign.
- v. In a similar vein, some have argued that the lack of any mention of Paul in the letters to the seven churches implies an interval of at least a generation between his death and the writing of Revelation (Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, 954 n. 1).
- h. Paul nowhere mentions the heretical sect known as the Nicolaitans that plagued the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum (2:6, 15).
 - i. But by the time of Revelation the sect had become so notorious that John could simply name it; the Nicolaitans were evidently so well-known to his readers that no description was necessary.
 - ii. That again implies a long time gap between the time of Paul and the time Revelation was written.
- i. Laodicea, one of the seven churches, was devastated by an earthquake about a.d. 60.

- i. For the rest of Nero's reign, the city was involved in reconstruction, and could hardly be considered "rich ... wealthy" and having "need of nothing" (3:17). A date during Domitian's reign would allow time for Laodicea to regain its wealth.
- j. There is evidence that the church at Smyrna was not founded until after Paul's death (about a.d. 67 [Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 954]).
 - i. It could hardly have begun, grown to maturity, and declined in the brief interval between the apostle's death and the end of Nero's reign at about the same time.
- k. A final reason for preferring the late (a.d. 95–96) date for Revelation is the timing of John's arrival in Asia Minor.
 - i. According to tradition, John did not leave Palestine for Asia Minor until the time of the Jewish revolt against Rome (a.d. 66–70).
 - ii. Placing the writing of Revelation during Nero's reign would not allow sufficient time for John's ministry to have reached the point where the Romans would have felt the need to exile him (Thomas, *Revelation* 1–7, 22).
G. R. Beasley-Murray notes that

- l. John's banishment as a Christian preacher ... reflects a policy of active hostility on the part of the state towards the Church. It cannot be shown that such legal measures were taken by the state against Christians prior to the later years of Domitian.
- m. The Revelation reflects a situation in which the cult of the emperor was a contemporary force and was bidding to become world-wide.
- n. The weight of the evidence clearly favors a date for the writing of Revelation in the mid-nineties, near the end of Domitian's reign.
 - i. This is critically important, because it eliminates the possibility that the prophecies in Revelation were fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70.

IV. Interpretation

- a. Revelation's picturesque images, mysterious symbols, and apocalyptic language make it one of the most challenging books in Scripture to interpret.
- b. There are four main interpretative approaches to the book.
- c. **The preterist** approach views Revelation not as future, predictive prophecy, but as a historical

record of events in the first-century Roman Empire.

- i. The preterist view thus ignores the book's own claims to be a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19).
- ii. Nor were all the events predicted and depicted in Revelation fulfilled in the first century. The second coming of Christ described in chapter 19 obviously is yet to occur.
- iii. But the preterist view requires that one see the words about Christ's second coming as fulfilled in the destruction of the temple in a.d. 70, even though He did not appear on that occasion.
- iv. Nor is there any persecution in the first century that fits the description of the horrific events depicted in chapters 6–19.
- d. **The historicist** approach finds in Revelation a record of the sweep of church history from apostolic times until the present.
 - i. Historicist interpreters often resort to allegorizing the text in order to find in it the various historical events they believe it depicts (e.g., the fall of Rome to the barbarians, the rise of the Roman Catholic

Church, the advent of Islam, even the French Revolution).

- ii. Not surprisingly, such a subjective, arbitrary, and whimsical approach has given rise to a myriad of conflicting interpretations of the actual historical events in Revelation.
 - iii. Like the preterist approach, the historicist view ignores Revelation's own claims to be a prophecy.
 - iv. It also robs the book of any meaning for those first-century believers to whom it was addressed. And it removes the interpretation of Revelation from the realm of literal, historical hermeneutics, leaving it at the mercy of the allegorical and spiritualized meanings invented by each would-be interpreter.
- e. **The idealist** approach sees depicted in Revelation the timeless struggle between good and evil that is played out in every age.
- i. According to this view Revelation is neither a historical record nor a predictive prophecy.
 - ii. Like the first two views, the idealist view ignores Revelation's claims to be a prophecy.

- iii. It also, if carried to its logical conclusion, severs Revelation from any connection with actual historical events. The book is thus reduced to a collection of myths designed to convey spiritual truth.
- f. **The futurist approach** sees in chapters 4–22 predictions of people and events yet to come in the future.
 - i. Only this approach allows Revelation to be interpreted following the same literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutical method by which non-prophetic portions of Scripture are interpreted.
 - ii. As previously noted, proponents of the other three approaches are frequently forced to resort to allegorizing or spiritualizing the text to sustain their interpretations.
 - iii. The futurist approach, in contrast to the other three, does full justice to Revelation's claim to be a prophecy.
 - iv. The futurist approach is often criticized as robbing Revelation of any meaning for those to whom it was written, since it views much of the book as describing events in the distant future.

- v. John F. Walvoord notes: Much of the prophecy of the Bible deals with the distant future, including the Old Testament promises of the coming Messiah, the prophecies of Daniel concerning the future world empires, the body of truth relating to the coming kingdom on earth as well as countless other prophecies. If the events of chapters 4 through 19 are future, even from our viewpoint today, they teach the blessed truth of the ultimate supremacy of God and the triumph of righteousness. The immediate application of distant events is familiar in Scripture, as for instance II Peter 3:10–12, which speaks of the ultimate dissolution of the earth; nevertheless the succeeding passage makes an immediate application: “Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent ...” (II Peter 3:14). (The Revelation of Jesus Christ [Chicago: Moody, 1966], 22)
- g. Anything other than the futurist approach leaves the meaning of the book to human ingenuity and opinion.
- h. The futurist approach takes the book’s meaning as God gave it.

- i. In studying Revelation, we will take this straightforward view and accept what the text says.
 - i. It is nearly impossible to consider all the interpretive options offered by people holding the other three views, so we will not try to work through that maze of options. Rather, we will take the book as it comes in the normal fashion of language.