

NOT YOUR DAD'S END TIME STUDY

Session 6 - Introduction to Revelation

Now that we've completed our investigation of the clear passages that teach about the end times in the New Testament, we can move onto Revelation. What is important to keep in mind and the reason we are dealing with this book last is because nothing in Revelation will contradict what has already been taught about the end times. The things we have learned thus far are the guiding light and underlying grid of what we will see in the book of Revelation. The Bible never contradicts itself so we already have a huge head start on how to look at this important book of prophecy.

The book of Revelation is what is called an epic apocalyptic piece of literature. Apocalyptic literature is found in just about every culture throughout history and deals with that culture's prevailing view of how the world (or their society) will end. It's universal in that all cultures possess this sort of literature but only what we have in the Bible is inspired, thus will be the way it will actually happen. What's interesting is that Americans tend to get their apocalyptic notions from the Bible. They are usually twisted or diluted in some way but the basis for our thoughts on the end of the world, as a culture, come from Scripture. An epic is a grand story that sums up an entire age. It deals with a culture at a critical point of crisis. Supernatural beings and supernatural settings are often common in epic stories. One thing they all have in common is a unifying hero who wins in the end and establishes a new kingdom or order. Star Wars and Lord of the Rings are both epic stories as they deal with a major crisis in the order of things and a new order is established afterwards by the works of a hero figure. In Revelation, Jesus Christ is the unifying hero and it is important to keep that in mind when reading the book.

In keeping with this notion of Revelation being apocalyptic and epic, it has a heavy emphasis on two sides running constantly throughout the book. If you don't get this idea - then you will not understand the imagery and thus the message of the book. Here are a few examples:

- 1) There are two super-beings at odd with each other - God versus Satan (though Satan is not on God's level of existence or power as he is a created being)
- 2) There are two different views and patterns of behavior at odds - good versus evil
- 3) There are two cities mentioned which are opposites of each other - Babylon and the New Jerusalem
- 4) There are two different groups of people/ two factions - redeemed and the wicked lost
- 5) There are two groups of "gods" present - holy Trinity versus the unholy Trinity
- 6) There are two groups of angels at work against each other - Michael and his angels versus Satan and his demons (fallen angels).
- 7) There are only two endings for each soul - either eternal heaven and bliss or eternal damnation in hell
- 8) There are two vantage points for the action - either looking at the event from heaven or looking at it from earth (and often the same event is given from both in separate chapters)

Epic literature also include archetypes. Archetypes are the standard by which everything else in that class is patterned after. There are three types of archetypes in literature and Revelation has them all. Here are a few examples:

- 1) Images: light, mountain top, prison
- 2) Characters: hero, villain, tempter

3) Plot Motif: quest, fall from innocence, rescue

One of the other interesting aspects of the book of Revelation is that the apostle John, who authored the book, spent a great deal of time in his latter days in Ephesus. There is a huge theater in Ephesus. The book of Revelation is written exactly like a Greek drama - the number of chapters, the flow of the story, etc. When you view Revelation as drama, it helps you see the bigger picture of the meaning of the book rather than just a set of strange images stuck together.

But with keeping that all in mind, Revelation is also distinct and different from all other literature. While it has the elements listed above, it also includes elements of an epistle and prophecy which set it apart from secular literature. It must be kept in mind that it is divinely inspired and part of Canon.

I'm giving these to you as they will help in determining a solid interpretation of the book and the pieces of it. If you understand that several of the images, characters and actions are archetypes, then you don't have to scramble to re-invent the wheel in interpreting the scene presented. They just make sense.

From a theological stance, the major theme is the God is in control of everything. Revelation is not an detailed time line of history. It is a book that explains God's sovereignty and personal involvement in His creation. There are certain things we can pick out clearly from the book which are: the church will be persecuted and suffer. Christ will be victorious in the end. While the concept of timing is part of the story, it isn't the emphasis of the story. The "what" is always more important than the "when". Also, since God is in control, believers have hope.

Chapter 12, which is really the center of the book, is an overview of human history until the end times. (End times defined as the time between the cross and the second coming of Christ - again note that Christ is the central figure and hero of human history.) If you can interpret chapter 12 correctly and accurately, then you will have a much easier time dealing with everything else. It's the key that unlocks many of the questions about Revelation.

There are two favors you can do for yourself when it comes to attempting to interpret Revelation. First, all the symbols are symbols for other things but also they are accurate and truthful. The view we are given by John's revelation in the book of Revelation is the view God intended us to have so that we can have a grip on the truth of what is going to take place. While you don't interpret symbols literally, we do attempt to find the best meaning for a symbol and realize that this is the what is meant in the passage and go from there. Second, most Bibles have headings at the beginning of every chapter and sometimes in the middle of a chapter. These are comments by the Bible's editor and may or may not reflect accurately what the meaning of the passage is describing. Use these with caution in Revelation (and elsewhere) as many can be misleading.

As soon as you open the book of Revelation, you are hit with a flood of symbols, colors, images, numbers all come flying at you from the text. Throughout the book, these all keep their meaning. So when you see a certain color, it will always mean a certain thing or group of things. When you see a number mentioned, it means something. Remember, don't try to interpret these literally.

Let's first take a look at some of these things and understand why they are they way they are.

[Revelation 11:1-3]

Q: Three and a half years is the same as 42 months which is the same as 1260 days in terms of a calendar. Why does John give these time spans in different units? *(He's referring to two different frames of time. They may overlap but they are measuring different events.)*

[Revelation 1:12-16, 4:1-4, 6:9-11, 20:11, 6:2]

Q: What can we discern about the meaning of the color white in Revelation? *(The color white deals with Christ, His righteousness, His victories, or heaven)*

Here's a partial list of important symbols in Revelation:

Numbers

3 - deals with the spirit world in some way (good or evil), if good then it has to do with God

4 - number of the world (earth) - the earth has 4 seasons to a year, it has four corners (compass points)

6 - number of man - God created man on the 6th day. It is short of the perfect number by 1

7 - the perfect number - signifies divine completeness (or satanic counterfeit completeness) (The 7 eyes mentioned symbolize all-seeing or omniscience - it is God's perfect sight or complete sight of everything.) (Note: seven is the number 3 (divine/spirit world) plus the number 4 (physical world).)

10 - complete or full amount

12 - God's administration of His kingdom, it represents His redeemed people. (12 Jewish tribes, 12 apostles of Christ) It is the all-inclusiveness of God's plan - everything related to God's complete

3 ½ years OR 42 months OR 1260 days - it means a cutoff or limited time. It is the perfect number cut in half. When the number is given in different units it signifies a different time in history. (Thus when the term 3 ½ years is given in one verse and then the next verse gives 42 months, it means TWO distinct limited segments of time.)

1,000 - this is the number 10 (complete number of a group) cubed (10 X 10 X 10). When a number is triplicated, it means it is the superlative of a situation or the final, total amount of something. (When the cherubim are proclaiming "Holy, Holy, Holy" the meaning is God is the holiest of all. When you see 1,000 or multiples thereof, you know it is the full amount of something - all of something that there is or will be.)

7,000 - the complete number of deaths from God's perspective (7 X 10 cubed)

144,000 - This number is the product of 12 (tribes of Israel) X 12 (apostles of Christ) X 1,000. In other words, it is the total number of God's servants, people of faith, who will face the Great Tribulation. Like the rest, it isn't a number arrived at by counting but rather a number of symbolism. It represents all those who have faith in Christ when the Great Tribulation erupts upon the earth.

Colors

White - pertaining to Christ, His victory and/or righteousness, pertaining to heaven/God's kingdom

Red - evil, war, strife, conflict, pertaining to Satan

Scarlet - wealth, vast fortune

Black - famine or gloom

Grey (ashen, pale) - death

Purple - royalty

Symbolic Events

Earthquake - God's judgment upon mankind

Sword - God's wrath/ righteous judgment

Horns - strength/ authority

Euphrates River - barrier that has always protected God's people from their enemies

Babylon - all the places in the world where satanic deceptions exist and are allowed to rule as well as idols are worshiped

Some of these symbols are defined by the text and others are defined by symbols in the Old Testament and others are just generally accepted symbols from the ancient world. There are over 350 references to the Old Testament in Revelation. Sometimes a clue in the Old Testament gives you what you need to accurately interpret the symbol in Revelation.

There is a real need be able to harmonize the symbols. Often the same thing will be described in two different places with two different symbols. It doesn't mean there are two different things but what it shows is a bigger, more full picture or revelation of the "thing" that wasn't seen in the first symbol. Don't get thrown by this when interpreting the symbols.

Seals, Trumpets & Bowls

The seals of the scroll, the trumpets and the bowls all represent God's activity in His creation. The scroll and its seals are very different than the trumpets and bowls.

This scroll contains the announcement of the consummation of all history. It contains the knowledge of how things will end for all people - the judgment of the lost and the reward of the saints. Not only does this scroll contain the revelation of history to come but also the implementation of that history. The contents of the scroll are detailed for us in Revelation chapters 7-22. The seven seals mean that it is completely sealed by God Himself and no one in all of creation is found who is able to break the seals and open the scroll. No one takes up the mighty angel's challenge to take the scroll and open it. It turns out only Christ, pictured as a lamb who was slain, can take the scroll of human destiny and open it.

Here are the implications of the meaning of the scroll. Apart from the person and work of Christ, history is an enigma. The problem of meaning or purpose of life, goals of history are all disturbing and difficult questions apart from the knowledge of God's will and His work through Jesus Christ, who is the central figure and main focus of all history. Without Christ there is no answer to the questions, "What is the meaning of life?" and "Is there a meaning to the world?" The first five of these seals describe events which are going to take place throughout the entire period known as the end times - the time between the cross and the second coming. The deal is you CANNOT interpret these in a linear fashion. The sixth seal being broken describes the day of the Lord - the end of human history and the return of Christ. Then the seventh seal begins a flashback to explain how the Lord brings all history to a conclusion.

The trumpets and bowls do have a more or less linear fashion to them but it's important to note that often the same event is told from heaven's perspective and then the same event is told from earth's perspective. So it's imperative to know what event is being described or you end up with too many events in your accounting. Also, there are interludes to the trumpets and bowls that break the action to answer certain questions. Like all visions, these are out of time. They are events but they are not in the progression of the judgments.

Questions

One of the most important features of Revelation is the number of questions that get asked. In EVERY instance, the question is not rhetorical. The question is asked in order to lead into an answer that is critical to the understanding the main point of that section of Scripture. Example: in Revelation 6:17 when the sixth seal is broken and the day of the Lord happens, the question is asked, "Who can stand (in light of Christ's return)?" The next chapter (7) then answers the question by showing us the 144,000 who are sealed by God. This also is an example of showing the same event from the two different perspectives. In 7:1-8 we are shown the believers who are sealed from earth's perspective. In 7:9-17 we are shown the same group of believers from heaven's perspective. We know it's the same group due to v.14 - we are told who comprises this crowd.

Though this introduction could go on nearly forever, the last thing to keep in mind is that you need to engage your imagination when you read Revelation. After you grapple with the symbols and details of language, imagine what is being presented. What is the picture John is painting for us that describes what he saw in a vision?

Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals concerning this material?