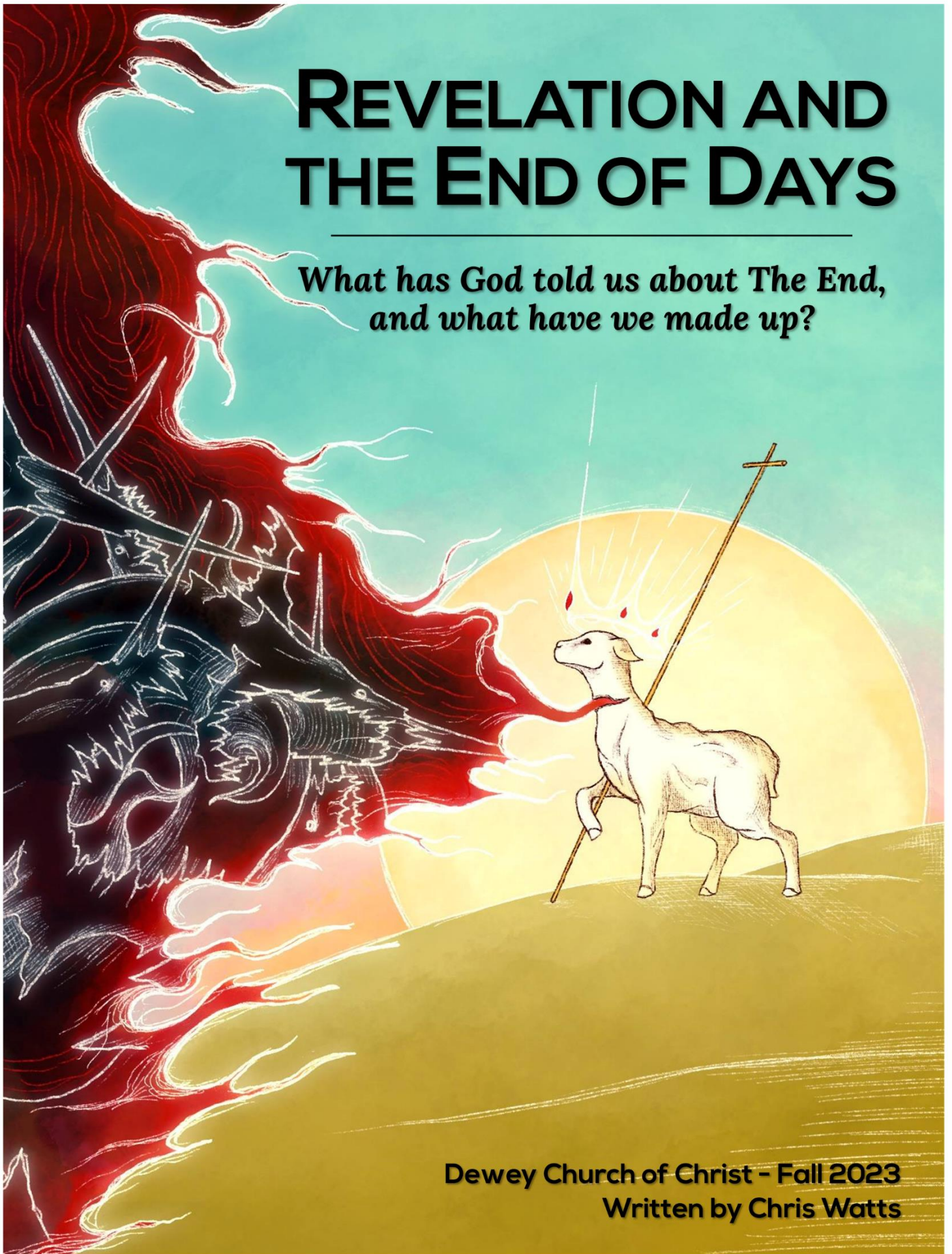


# REVELATION AND THE END OF DAYS

*What has God told us about The End,  
and what have we made up?*



Dewey Church of Christ - Fall 2023  
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# Introduction:

## WHY STUDY THIS?

I'm sure if I were to poll a random community of regular church-attenders, I would discover that the book most people have questions about is Revelation, and one of the most misunderstood topics is the End Times. This is a topic about which so much has been written, most of which contradicts each other. Revelation is a confusing book and the End Times are a confusing topic. Despite (or maybe because of) this, it is a subject of endless fascination and interest.

Why is that? What is it about the end that people find so compelling? If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that Revelation is fascinating *because* it is so different. It deals with forces beyond the normal scope of human experience (angels, demons, the second coming of Jesus, etc.). When you read it, you can't help but feel the supernatural atmosphere of the writing and be drawn into the conflict. It's compelling in all the ways any epic fantasy narrative is compelling.

But more than that, the end of all things is a common interest for everyone; everyone dies. This is a topic that levels the playing field for rich and poor, young and old, healthy and sick. All things end. We instinctively fear that end.

Most people like certainty in their lives. We like knowing when we need to get up, when our workday is over, what our weekend plans are. People like *knowing*. Uncertainty scares us, stresses us out, and makes us nervous. God has seemingly left so much about the End of Days up to interpretation, and this is precisely why the subject is so fascinating. People want to know how much time is left and how they can tell when the end is near. Consider this passage in Ecclesiastes, written by an author who is called simply "the preacher:"

***What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.***

**- Ecclesiastes 3:9-11**

God made us with eternity in mind. We instinctively know that something greater is going on around us, and we want to know what it is. It isn't wrong to wonder, or question.

It isn't a sin to be confused. God made us to seek after knowledge; He made us want to know. Hopefully this study will help us all in our pursuit of understanding.

However, before we can dig in, we must consider several traps common to any charged discussion. *Confirmation Bias* (the desire to only seek out knowledge that confirms what we already believe, and disregard information that contradicts what we already know) is an ever-present danger. We have all heard things and been taught things that may or may not be true. It is difficult to put aside what we are "supposed" to know and examine the Biblical text for itself. Has God spoken about the End of Days? Of course! But (maybe unfortunately) so have many, many people. It can be hard to set aside the "precepts of men" (Matthew 15:9, NASB) and let the word of God take precedence.

I have tried to set aside my own biases, but without an open, honest discourse among fellow truth-seekers, we can never hope to discover the Truth. As we study, let us examine the text together as honestly and openly as possible, and let God speak to us through His Spirit. As with all topics, God will confront us with His truth, and at times it may be difficult or painful to accept. But through the refiner's fire we will be made pure (Zechariah 13:9; 1 Peter 1:7). Let us be like the Bereans who searched the Scriptures diligently (Acts 17:10-11).

Is the topic important? If it is in the Bible, then God obviously thinks so. There are things about the End that we need to know; otherwise, God would not have seen fit to inspire people to write about these things. But there are certainly a lot of gaps in the picture; information that God has seen fit to leave out. While it is not wrong to extrapolate from what we know, we need to keep in mind the supremacy of the explicitly written Word. When we try to reach for knowledge that isn't supported by what we are plainly told by God, we wander right into the trap Paul warned Timothy about:

***As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.***

**- 1 Timothy 1:3-7**

There is perhaps no topic where people make more "confident assertions" about things "without understanding" than Revelation and the End of Days. It is a subject that lends itself

to “speculations rather than the stewardship from God”. Our job is to avoid these pitfalls to the best of our abilities while we seek the Truth God wants us to know.

To that end, this is an odd book. It is not structured like most books you will find on Revelation. While the bulk of the lessons are about the text of Revelation, we will preface our study with a long section that isn’t about Revelation at all. We will first examine what the first 26 books of the New Testament have to say about the End of Days, including an initial look at some important terms. We must consider how these terms have been traditionally defined, how they are used by the majority today, and how the Bible writers used them. Having defined terms, we will then consider what the writers of Matthew-Jude told us in plain language about Jesus’s return and what to expect at the End.

Next, we will address some high-level thoughts about Revelation as a whole. What are the different ways we interpret Bible texts, and how should we approach interpreting Revelation? How does Revelation fit into the larger context of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole? How have various groups interpreted Revelation throughout history, and how should their thoughts inform ours? In this section we will consider the situations of the seven churches who originally received the book.

Finally, armed with a thorough background knowledge, we will look at the text of Revelation itself. This may seem like an odd way to approach Revelation but consider the book’s place in the canon of Scripture. It was the last book written, and as such was intended to be understood in light of all that came before. One of the easiest ways to misunderstand a book of the Bible is to try to understand it devoid of the context of Scripture as a whole. Because Revelation is so often interpreted as revealing what will happen at the End of Days, we must first understand what all the rest of Scripture has to say about that subject. That’s how the information in Revelation would have been understood by its original audience!

In large sections of this study, I am relying on you, dear reader, to read the Biblical text. I will not have all the Scriptures we will be examining written out on these pages, especially once we begin digging into the text of Revelation itself. I will list the verses under consideration at the beginning of each lesson. Before you dig into my words, spend time in God’s Word. Read the texts. Read them several times. Then, we will discuss them together. I pray you will find this study to be enlightening in your understanding of God’s Word.

What do you expect an understanding of The End to change, both in yourself and in the lives of the lost? What tangible difference does it make in your life how the world is going to end? Should that knowledge change how you live your life today and tomorrow and the next day? Does that knowledge alter the need to “admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all” (1 Thessalonians 5:14)? I’m not sure that it does. Whether or not God has explicitly spelled out exactly the manner of Jesus’s return does not change your responsibility to live holy lives now. Whether there will be a



period of tribulation before the final return of Jesus not does not change the paramount importance of faithful living now!

What matters most, far more than the how or what, is the *when*. When the Lord will return means much more to me than the manner of his return. How long have I got to make things right with God? How much time do I have to reach out to the lost around me? How much longer do I have to put up with the suffering of life? It is not a coincidence that when discussing the End Times, the writers of the New Testament spend much more time discussing *when* Jesus will return and much less what will happen when he does.

But, even if we knew exactly when Jesus would return, that would not give you a certain window of repentance. You could get hit by a bus tomorrow or contract a deadly disease next week! We cannot possibly know the day of our death! So, as we study the End of Days, remember that we are not studying *your* end of days. I hope your end is not near, but only God knows for certain, so live faithfully now!

This is the most important disclaimer. People put too much stock in the End of Time. It's an important subject, as we will see, and God has said much about the subject. But He has said *far more* about what to do with the precious time we are given on this earth. Don't get so caught up in the End that you forget the Now!

***Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.***

**- 2 Peter 3:11-13**

# **PART 1: PLACING REVELATION IN ITS CONTEXT**





# 1. IMPORTANT TERMS

Any discussion is prone to confusion and failure if there is a misunderstanding about terminology between parties. If two people are talking about football, but one is thinking of the American version and the other person is thinking about the other (global) version, they won't get very far in their dialogue! We all need to be defining things the same way, for the purposes of healthy discourse. Clear and consistent communication is the key to success!

For our purpose, it's important to recognize that religious language is often loaded, carrying meaning far beyond the strict definitions of words, and with meaning that varies among different religious groups. More than that, it is hard to think of a topic where more confusion arises from different meanings of words than a study of End Times and Revelation.

I am also including in this section some terms that are not actually found in Scripture but will come up later when we examine the four major schools of thought about Revelation and/or the End Times. Many common religious terms are not actually from our English translations of the Bible, but are from other languages, or forms of various ancient words from a variety of different languages. I have also included a glossary at the back of the notebook with abbreviated definitions for easy reference. As we continue in this book, I will be using these words in the way they are defined in this chapter, with rare exceptions that I will spell out explicitly as they come up.

## ANTICHRIST

The word “antichrist” (Greek ἀντίχριστος|*antichristos*) is only used four times in the New Testament (1 John 2:18, 22, 4:3; 2 John 1:7). The Greek word means exactly what it looks like it should: “an opposer of Christ” (unless otherwise noted, all Greek definitions are taken from Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words). Jesus perhaps warns of the same person or persons in Matthew 24:24, referring to “false Christs” and those who will lead you “astray,” informing his disciples of those who would lead his followers astray by also claiming to be the Messiah, even though Christ had already come. Jesus uses ψευδόχριστος (*pseudochristos*) in Matthew 24:24.

The clearest references to the “antichrist” are in 1 and 2 John, the only places where the Greek word *antichristos* (again, a word literally not used in the rest of the New Testament)

is used. In 1 John 2:22, John says “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.” Further, in 1 John 4:

***Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.***

**- 1 John 4:1-3**

John does not seem to think that the antichrist is any one individual, saying in 1 John 2:18, “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.” Jesus’ words about “false Christs,” when combined with the explanation of John, describe anyone who stands against or desires to supplant Christ as an “antichrist.” Note again what John says: “[he] is in the world already” (4:3).

The idea that the antichrist is a specific person in history is traditionally drawn from two passages in the New Testament: 2 Thessalonians 2 and Revelation 19–20. In both places, this figure (called “the false prophet” in Revelation and “the man of lawlessness” in 2 Thess.) is destroyed either before or at the arrival of Christ in the second coming and therefore Christ will not return until this figure is present in the world to be destroyed. It is unclear, however, whether these figures are the same person, or even real historical figures at all. And as we have already said, this person (or persons) is not described with the word “antichrist” at all. Thus, the only way the writers of the New Testament use the word itself is in the plural, and not in reference to a specific individual. We will dig deeper into 2 Thessalonians 2 in a future chapter.

## **APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE**

This genre of literature includes, but is not limited to, writings that discuss the “apocalypse” or End of Days. In the Bible, the books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation most closely fit into this genre, but there are several extra-canonical Jewish writings that follow the same pattern. There are two distinguishing characteristics of this genre in Scripture: it always seemed to appear when God’s people were in crisis, their very existence in doubt, and it is highly stylized and fantastically symbolic.

However, this is a classic example of a cultural usage of a word morphing beyond what the word originally meant. The word “apocalypse” comes from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις (apokalypsis). The Greek word has nothing to do with End Times or calamity. The word simply means “a disclosure; revelation; manifestation; appearance.” The English word

*apocalypse* has come to mean calamity or End of Days, not because that is what the original word meant, but precisely because the book of Revelation is commonly interpreted to be about the End Times. We get our meaning of the word, not from the Greek itself, but from the context in which the word was usually used (the book of Revelation). Because books like Daniel also contain similar language and concepts, they tend to be grouped together into one genre that has taken on the name, though technically all Scripture is an *apokalypsis* or “revelation.”

## **ARMAGEDDON**

The word only appears one time in the New Testament, in Revelation 16:16: “And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.”

While the word is commonly used today to refer to the calamitous event at the time of the end of all things, in Scripture it is simply the name of a place. The word “Armageddon” is a transliteration (using the English sounds of the Greek letters to make a new word) of a word meaning “the hill of Megiddo.” Revelation 16:16 is probably a reference to Judges 5:19, where Megiddo is the site of a great battle in Deborah’s day. In Revelation 16, it is also the site of a great battle. What we will see over and over in our discussion of Revelation is the use of Old Testament references and allusions to provide mental shortcuts for the reader to understand the significance of the writing.

## **DAY OF THE LORD/DAY OF JUDGMENT**

These phrases refer to the day when Christ will return (Matthew 24-25, 1 Thessalonians 4-5), and the world will be judged (Matthew 10-12; 2 Peter 3:7). Christ’s return, the judgment of humanity, and the destruction of the world are all presented as happening on this (the same) day. The writers of the New Testament often use these terms when discussing the chronology or sequencing of the last days, or when warning their readers of the importance of always being ready for Christ’s return. In our discussion of eschatology in Matthew-Jude we will dig deeper into how the writers of the New Testament use these terms.

## **ESCHATOLOGY**

In a religious setting this word has to do with the study of death and the eventual end of all things, including judgment, wrath, and the manner of God’s dispensation of these things. In the case of fundamental Christians (the demographic we belong to), this typically involves discussion of things like the rapture, the Anti-Christ, Jesus’s second coming, the supposed war of Armageddon, and so on. Basically, this is the word that serves as the umbrella for all the things we are going to talk about in this book.

## LAST DAYS

The writers of the New Testament imply a final age of humanity before the end of the world. Peter, Luke, Paul, James and the Hebrew writer all speak of this final time:

*...knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires.*

- 2 Peter 3:3

*But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:*

*“And in the last days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...”*

- Acts 2:16-17

*But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty.*

- 2 Timothy 3:1

*Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...*

- Hebrews 1:1-2

*Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.*

- James 5:3

These writers refer to the “last days” as something the writers themselves were living in, or a time that the original recipients of the letters would experience. This was not some far future time but an immediate concern. If the writers of the New Testament either thought they were in the last days or expected their readers to be, then certainly we are in those last days now, since they are the “last” days; there won’t be another age or epoch after the last one! Again, we will unpack this term more in the next few lessons.

## MILLENNIUM

This is a term that we will not return to for quite a while, but it is an important term when discussing Revelation so we will introduce it here. This term refers to Revelation 20:

*Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient*

***serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.***

**- Revelation 20:1-3**

The four major schools of interpretation of Revelation are distinct in their interpretation of this chapter and the meaning of the thousand years (millennium). The various terms *premillennialism*, *postmillennialism*, and *amillennialism* are labels for different ways of interpreting that chapter and all the different implications of the various interpretations.

## **RAPTURE**

A word derived from the Latin *rapio* which means “to snatch.” While the English word *rapture* carries all sorts of different connotations in the modern religious world, the term very basically has to do with the method by which those who are alive when Jesus returns will be united with him. Paul, when discussing the second coming of Christ, describes it this way:

***For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.***

**- 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17**

Fundamentally, this word refers to the method by which people will be “gathered together” with Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:1; Matthew 24:31). We will be “snatched up” (“*rapio*” in the Latin translation of this verse) by the Lord and taken up from this earth. Like so many other terms, it has taken on much more specific religious meaning in modern Christianity. “The Rapture” as a specific event in modern Christian culture refers to the time when supposedly all or some Christians will be taken from the earth to meet the Lord. According to some groups, when this happens the unfaithful will remain on earth to face the tribulation (see below), while other groups teach that this rapture will be universal, as all humanity is gathered to face judgment.

## **SECOND COMING**

From the moment the Savior left the earth, his return has been promised. Immediately after his ascension in Acts 1, his disciples are promised by an angel: “Men of Galilee, why do

you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). This second coming is very heavily linked with judgment and the rapture in Matthew 24-25, and possibly with the Millennium in 1 Corinthians 15:25. One of the primary questions of this study will be “what is going to happen when Jesus returns?” When he returns, will he start a new earthly kingdom to reign for a thousand years on earth (the Millennium), or will he simply take everyone up to judgment and destroy the earth?

## **THE TRIBULATION**

In modern American Christianity, this word is often used to refer to a period of intense persecution that must take place before the return of Jesus (Matthew 24:29 and parallels). In the book of Revelation, this is the period of time between the sealing of the 144,000 in Rev. 7 and the destruction of the beast in Revelation 19-20.

## **WORDS ARE POWERFUL**

These are not the only important terms in this study, but they are some of the most important and most controversial. They are also some of the terms and words that have the most variation in definition between Christian groups. It is very difficult to have productive conversations when we aren't defining words the same way. As we continue through this study, we will continue to return to these words and compare how the writers of the Bible used them versus how people use them today.

It is important that we continually reevaluate our understanding of words as their use changes in culture, because as Christians we have a responsibility to engage with culture (1 Corinthians 5:9). At the same time, we can't allow the wider world to change or alter the meanings of Scripture. We must be relentless in our insistence on talking about things the way the Bible authors do. As a natural result, this will demystify much of the confusion in a study of the End Times. As we continue, we will see how many of the disputes simply stem from misunderstandings and misuse of words.



## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Think about how you use some of these terms. Where did you learn about them? How did you arrive at your understanding of them? Did someone teach you, or did you just sort of pick it up by accident?**

**2. How does a misunderstanding of terminology lead to confusion and poor communication? Have you ever experienced this in your life?**

**3. What are some practical steps we can take to ensure common understanding of terminology when we have discussions with someone about Revelation (or any topic)?**



## 2. THREE QUESTIONS IN MATTHEW

### Matthew 23-25

It is apparent upon first reading that Revelation is written in a vastly different style than Matthew-Jude. While Matthew-Jude are straightforward epistles written in a very basic language and style, Revelation falls into the category of Apocalyptic Literature, and is thus more poetic, symbolic, and fantastical. The first 26 books of the New Testament are (for the most part), very literal. Because of this, it is helpful to examine what these letters have to say about the End Times. It is within the Gospels and the Epistles that we can reach some concrete and solid understanding of a topic that is very complicated and emotionally charged. Then, with a solid set of knowledge founded in straight, uncomplicated language, we will be much better equipped to “rightly [handle] the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15) in a study and discussion of the book of Revelation.

It makes no sense to believe something about Scripture if that belief would require the Bible to disagree with itself. As we look at what God is telling us throughout the Bible, we must understand that each letter exists within the total context of the New Testament, which in turn must be put in context of all of God’s revealed Scripture. Nothing exists on its own in a vacuum; every subject can be illuminated by other parts of God’s Word.

### JESUS’S TEACHING IN MATTHEW

Outside of Revelation, Matthew 24-25 (and the parallels in Mark 13 and Luke 21) are the longest and most relevant passages for a discussion of the End Times. The problem is that, like Revelation, much of the language Jesus uses is highly stylized and symbolic.

To understand Jesus’s teaching on the End Times in Matthew 24 and 25, we need to understand the context, which really begins in Matthew 23. In that chapter, Jesus pronounces a series of woes on the scribes and the Pharisees (a pattern of judgment that is interestingly repeated in the book of Revelation). He concludes with this denunciation:

***Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel***

**to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.**

**- Matthew 23:32-36**

Jesus promised to send prophets and wise men to the leaders of Israel, and he promised that those same leaders would kill and crucify and reject those he sent. Jesus made it clear that this would happen soon, from the perspective of his audience (“all these things will come upon this generation”). He then continued, after scolding the leaders of Jerusalem and the city itself, to predict the destruction of the temple proper:

**Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down."**

**- Matthew 24:1-2**

It is after this lengthy bout of condemnation and dire warning that his disciples came with the questions that prompt Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 24-25:

**As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"**

**- Matthew 24:3**

It is important to note that there are three different questions: 1) when will these things be, 2) what will be the sign of his coming, and 3) what will be the sign of the end of the age? While the disciples may think they are the same question, they may have different answers.

I think we can understand their confusion and their eagerness to know; they demonstrated all the same attitudes that people today have when discussing these topics. People want to know about the end of things! They want to have it explained and catalogued, they want to know when and how the end will come, so they can be ready!

We must understand the context; Jesus had just denounced the Pharisees, the city, and the temple, promising things that must come to pass “in this generation.” So then, Jesus answered with the following general outline:

1. Warning of false prophets (24:4-8).
2. Warning of the coming tribulation (24:9-14).
3. The Abomination of Desolation (24:15-28).
4. The second coming (24:29-31).

5. Things this generation will face (24:32-35).
6. The timing of the second coming (24:36-51).

The first and most immediate concern is the apparent contradiction between what Jesus says in verses 36-44 and verses 32-35. Look at Matthew 24:32-35:

***From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.***

**- Matthew 24:32-35**

Here he is telling them the timing of everything he has already warned them about: the false prophets, the coming tribulation, and the abomination. 24:32-35 certainly seems to indicate two things: these things will happen soon (within “this generation”) and that they will be able to see the end coming (“when you see these things”...). The people will be able to predict when this will happen and prepare for it.

Contrast this with Matthew 24:36-44, notably these phrases “Concerning that day and hour no one knows...you do not know on what day your Lord is coming...the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” He describes the climate of the world at the second coming as at peace, normal, and very ordinary, unlike what he describes in 24:4-28. So, which is it? Is the Lord coming when things are peaceful or when things are chaotic? Will we be able to see it coming or will it be completely unexpected? And if all these things will take place before “this generation” passes away, why hasn’t he come back yet?

Remember, the whole discussion in these chapters hinge on the questions back in verse 24:3: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

What were they asking about? They were concerned about the judgments and warnings Jesus pronounced in chapter 23, specifically the persecution of the prophets and the destruction of Jerusalem predicted in 23:32-24:2. Those were the “these things” in 24:3. They wanted to know when those things would happen and how they could predict it (the signs). The disciples probably thought the latter two questions were the same and would have the same answer, thinking that Jesus would return at the end of the age, but Jesus answered them separately. He knew that he would not be coming back when the temple was destroyed and the prophets were persecuted; those things would take place relatively soon (remember that “soon” in this context is soon from *their* perspective, not ours). The best way to reconcile the apparent contradictions in these chapters, and to reconcile them with

the rest of Scripture, is to separate the three questions (which Jesus does as he answers them):

1. When will these things (the destruction of the temple and the persecution of the prophets) be?
2. What will be the sign of your coming?
3. What will be the sign of the end of the age?

Jesus tells them the signs of the end of the age several times:

***For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.***

- Matthew 24:7-8

***And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.***

- Matthew 24:14

***So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.***

- Matthew 24:33

But he tells them something very different about the signs of his second coming (24:36-25:46).

***But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.***

- Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus knew when the end of the age would come (within this generation). He knew what signs to look for. But not even he knew (or knows) when the Father will send him back to earth in the Second Coming. It will be, unlike the destruction of the temple, during a time of peace and normalcy. There will be no apparent signs!

## **THE ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION**

So what is the “abomination of desolation” in 24:15? This is a reference to Daniel 9-12, where the prophet refers to “abominations” and “things that make desolate” several times. The first is in the prophecy of “seventy weeks” found in Daniel 9:24-27. The second is in Daniel 11:31, during a long prophecy describing future conflict between nations. The last is in Daniel 12:11-13, at the end of the book. All three references are connected to the “end of burnt offering” (9:27, 11:31, 12:11). As you read Daniel 9-12, the references to the end of the offering and the abominations form a consistent marker in the narrative.

The prophecy of the seventy weeks is one of the more difficult passages in Scripture to interpret, largely because of the symbolic numbers. Pretty much the only thing everyone agrees on is that the numbers are not literal: seventy weeks in Daniel 9 doesn’t actually mean 490 days, and the day counts at the end of chapter 12 are not really the roughly three and a half years they indicate. These symbolic numbers must mean something other than their face value. So what does this prophecy mean? We will return unpack more possibilities of the seventy weeks when we dig into the book of Revelation, but for now, note this: Jesus certainly indicates that the abomination is something that will take place within the lifetimes of his audience:

***So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.***

**- Matthew 24:15-16**

***So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.***

**- Matthew 24:33-35**

There is only one series of events we know of from a study of history that happened during Jesus’ lifetime and resulted in both the fulfillment of Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:1-2 and the “end of burnt offerings” prophesied by Daniel numerous times: the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. This literally fulfilled Jesus’ promise that “no stone will be left upon



another” (since the building was destroyed), it took place “in the holy place” (the temple), and it brought an “end of offerings” (since the proper Old Testament sacrificial system couldn’t take place without the temple). While many interpret the “abomination of desolation” as something that will take place in the far future, at the end of time, Jesus promised that “this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”

## **PARABLES IN MATTHEW 25**

Again, I cannot stress this enough: the hinge verse of Matthew 23-25 is Matthew 24:3:

***As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"***

**- Matthew 24:3**

He has answered “when will these things be” (before this generation passes away) and “what will be the sign of the end of the age” (the persecution of the sent prophets, the abomination, the tribulation, and the false christs). This leaves the third question: “what will be the sign of your coming?” The answer to this question begins in 24:36, and continues in the three parables in Matthew 25. Jesus gives the answer multiple times: there will be no sign!

***...the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.***

**- Matthew 24:50-51**

***And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.***

**- Matthew 25:10-13**

Everything will be proceeding as normal, without any sort of indication, and then BAM! Jesus will return. According to Jesus’ own words, it will be “at an hour you do not expect.” People will feel secure and confident in their sin and wickedness. As we continue in this study, we must hold these ideas firmly in our minds. *Jesus himself* does not know when he will return, so how could any human predict it? Jesus warned us that we must be ready at all times, because there will not be any obvious signs or period of increasing turbulence

before the end. These ideas, directly from Jesus himself, must permeate our understanding of the rest of the New Testament teaching on the End of Days.

## UNUSUAL SEQUENCING

In light of all we have already studied, one of the harder things to understand in these three chapters is the sequencing in Matthew 24:29-36:

***“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.***

***“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.***

***“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.***

**- Matthew 24:29-36**

The “tribulation of those days” points back to the abomination of desolation and the flight from Jerusalem. If that referred to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, then why does Jesus say that the Son of Man will come “immediately” after that? And, what should we make of the lesson of the fig tree, that these things will be predictable? How can we reconcile this with the parables that make it obvious that the return of Jesus will not be predictable?

There are a couple things to keep in mind. One is the connecting word “but” in Matthew 24:36, which offers a contrast to the certainty that the things he discussed before would happen to the people he was talking to (“this generation”). While the abomination of desolation was of immediate concern, the “day and hour” of the coming of the son of man would be unknowable. This puts the word “immediately” in Matthew 24:29 in a strange place. One of the following must be true: 24:29-31 are not referring to Jesus’s second coming, or Jesus is incorrect that he will return during a period of safety and peace, or we should reconsider what “immediately” means.

One of the important terms we discussed in the previous lesson was “last days,” a term that the writers of the New Testament use to refer to the time in which they lived (Hebrews 1:1-2), and the time in which their readers would live (2 Timothy 3:1). But here we are, 2,000 years later. How long of a time period are the “last days”? It certainly seems like there were many days to come!

Another important word, here and in Revelation, is “soon”. John was shown “the things that must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1). Jesus ends his vision to John by saying he will return “soon” twice (Revelation 22:7, 20)! Yet again, here we are 2,000 years later. What does this mean?

Remember, who knows when Jesus will return? Not even Jesus himself knows (or knew at the time he was teaching on earth). Certainly Paul and Peter didn’t know. The writer of Hebrews didn’t know. It seems as if that lack of knowledge led them to presume it would be within their lifetimes, or the lives of their readers. Indeed, every generation since then has thought that they would be the ones to see Jesus return.

But this was (and is) a good attitude to have! Because it is unknowable, we must be ready! That was the point of the parables in Matthew 25! Even if he won’t return in our lifetimes, we must act as if he will, because he might! If your goal, as a teacher, is to instill urgency in your readers, would you use words like “eventually” or “at some point”? In keeping with Jesus’s warnings, the writers of the New Testament use words that denote urgency: “last days” and “soon.” Hence, I believe this is what Jesus means by using the word “immediately” in Matthew 24:29. After the “abomination of desolation” (which would happen in their lifetimes) then every generation that followed must live like Jesus would return soon. “Immediately” gets the point across that “after the tribulation of those days”, mankind will and truly entered into “the last days.”

There are two alternatives to this reading of the text. One is that Matthew 24:29-31 does not describe Jesus’s second coming. However, the language is very specific and mirrors how the New Testament writers would later describe his second coming (1 Thessalonians 5). The other possibility is the whole section from 24:15-31 describes an earthly, historical event that hasn’t happened yet. This is indeed how much of the Christian world interprets these verses. But this reading of the text has a serious problem in 24:32-35, where Jesus tells his hearers that these things would happen to them. It is much more likely that Jesus uses the word “immediately” in a symbolic way than that he was wrong or lying about these things happening before “this generation” passing away.

## CONCLUSION

Most of all, Jesus’s instruction in Matthew 23-25 should have a tangible impact on our hearts and attitudes. Are you ready for the hour you do not expect? Even if none of us live

long enough to see his return, even if that return is a thousand years away, our deaths could also be at “an hour you do not expect”! When the end comes, will you be ready to be judged faithful, or will he say to you:

***“Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?” Then he will answer them, saying, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”***

**- Matthew 25:41-45**

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Why are the teachings of Matthew-Jude easier to understand than Revelation? What qualities of Revelation make it harder to understand?**

**2. Why is it dangerous to study Revelation without first having a good grasp of the rest of the New Testament? What happens when we pull individual verses or letters out of their Biblical context?**

**3. Ultimately, what lessons should we take away from Jesus's teachings in Matthew 23-25?**

# 3. WARNINGS IN THE EPISTLES

## 1-2 Thessalonians, 2 Peter

### THESSALONIAN THEOLOGY

The Thessalonian church had a problem: they were discouraged about some of their brothers and sisters who had died, because they didn't understand what would happen when Jesus returned. They thought that when Jesus returned and gathered the faithful to himself, their dead loved ones would be left behind, missing out on the glory of heaven. Paul wanted to put them at ease, assuring them that their fallen brethren would not be left behind when the Lord returned; their loved ones would be raised and join them in glory:

***For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.***

- 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17

The language Paul uses to describe the manner of the Lord's return is very similar to the language Jesus himself used in Matthew 24:29-31. It will be awesome and powerful and majestic; there will be no way to miss it as the dead in Christ rise and all are gathered together. This passage in 1 Thessalonians (along with a couple others) is where the term "rapture" comes from. The Latin translation of this passage uses the word *rapio* to translate the word meaning "caught up". Of course, the English word "rapture" doesn't really mean "to snatch or catch." Outside of the specific religious context, we use the word to mean a feeling of intense pleasure or joy. But in modern American Christian discourse, the term "rapture" is used as the Latin *rapio* is in this text. It is used to describe the manner that Jesus will "gather" his people together to himself. In Hollywood's representation of "the rapture," all the faithful simply vanish without a trace.

Paul repeats this language of gathering in his second letter:

**Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come.**

**- 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2**

The words are again almost identical to Jesus' warnings in Matthew 24, a warning not to be deceived about the second coming of Christ.

**Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Look, he is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look, he is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.**

**- Matthew 24:23-27**

The Thessalonians needed two assurances: their dead loved ones wouldn't miss out, and those of them still alive hadn't already missed out! Jesus's return would not be missable; it would be apparent and obvious to everyone! So, when should the Thessalonians expect Jesus to return?

**Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time.**

**- 2 Thessalonians 2:3-6**

Paul listed two things that must happen before Jesus' return: the *rebellion* and the *revealing* (*apokalypsis*, see the chapter on important terms) of the "man of lawlessness." Who is this "lawless one"? We are only given a couple ways to identify him:

**For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity**



***of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.***

**- 2 Thessalonians 2:7-10**

These words again bear a striking resemblance to Jesus's warning: "for false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24). Additionally, there is an interesting parallel to the language Daniel used to describe the king who would set up the "abomination of desolation" by taking away the burnt offerings:

***And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished; for what is decreed shall be done. He shall pay no attention to the gods of his fathers, or to the one beloved by women. He shall not pay attention to any other god, for he shall magnify himself above all.***

**- Daniel 11:36-37**

Is this a literal, historical figure who either came shortly after the writing of the New Testament or who is yet to come? The Thessalonian letter describes this figure as someone who must appear before Jesus' return; does that mean that this figure will appear immediately preceding the second coming, or simply that he will appear, and then some indefinite time later Jesus will return? Paul says this person will "take his seat in the temple of God, and proclaim himself to be God" (2 Thessalonians 2:4). Does that mean we can delay God's return indefinitely simply by not rebuilding the temple and the seat which the man might take? Or is this referring to the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans, ending in the destruction of the temple? Or could this be one of the many antichrists, a word that (as we have already noted) describes not an individual, but anyone "who denies the Father and the son" (1 John 2:22)?

Based only on texts we have read so far in this study, all we can deduce is that, in keeping with the teachings of Jesus, the second coming will not occur until this person (either a real historical figure or metaphorical description of a kind of person) is present in the world. We will return to this idea as we continue.

## **THE LAST DAYS**

We have looked at this phrase several times before, but the concept bears exploring in the context of the other passages we have examined. New Testament authors warned several times of things that would happen in "the last days."

***But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive...***

***- 2 Timothy 3:1-2***

***...that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."***

***- 2 Peter 3:2-4***

The phrase "last days" inherently implies that these will be the days which will take place immediately before the end of the world (hence the "last" days). Peter directly ties this phrase to the End Times in his warning against scoffers, who will scoff at the second coming of Christ.

So when are these last days, and what should we be on the lookout for? In the two other times this phrase is used (Acts 2:14-17 and Hebrews 1:1-2) it is used in the present tense. Peter in his sermon was speaking of a prophecy that would be fulfilled "in the last days" (Acts 2:17, referencing Joel 2:28-29), and makes the point that the events of the day of Pentecost were the fulfillment of the prophecy. The Hebrew writer explicitly states that God speaks through Jesus "in these last days" (Hebrews 1:2).

In the minds of the New Testament writers, they were already living in the last days. When Peter and Paul warn their readers of events that would happen in the last days, they were not saying that the last days were not already here. They were saying that since the last days are here, the reader should be alert for some problems that will soon arise. It seems that they expected the return of Christ to happen soon, possibly within their lifetimes! But their confusion is not to be condemned; as we have already seen, Jesus himself didn't know when his return would be.

Combined with what we have already seen in Matthew 23-25, it becomes clearer how specifically Jesus was answering their question in Matthew 24:3: "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" What age would be ending with the "abomination of desolation" and the destruction of the temple? What age would end when the "end of offering" prophesied to Daniel took place? The Hebrew writer might give us some more insight here, in a quote from Jeremiah:

***For he finds fault with them when he says: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel***

***and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.***

**- Hebrews 8:8-13**

The idea of the changing covenant between God and His people is littered throughout the whole Bible. The death of Jesus ended the covenant made through Moses (Colossians 2:14, Romans 8:1-11). This is the age that ended with Jesus's death, the age of the Law of Moses. But such a transition cannot happen overnight. The book of Acts is full of the difficulty the Jews had in accepting the new paradigm. While the covenant ended with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, there was a practical transition period while the apostles taught and performed miracles on the earth. They were conveying the New Covenant, the thing that would govern people in the last days. The Hebrews writer says "what is becoming obsolete and growing old is *ready to vanish away*" (8:13, emphasis added). When did it fully vanish?

If we accept the destruction of the temple as the "abomination of desolation," that event becomes the sign, easily seen by all, of the end of the age of Judaism, even though it had technically already passed. That is when the "end of offering" was truly accomplished. Even if the Jews wouldn't give up the Mosaic system of sacrifices, they would be made to, perhaps by the man of lawlessness taking "his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God" (as the invading Roman general did in the temple).

Thus, the antichrists John warned of, the scoffers Peter warned of, and the false prophets that Jesus warned of are all the same people. The man of lawlessness, if he was a specific historical figure, was probably the conquering Roman. If Paul was rather using the term to metaphorically describe a group of people, then we can include the man of lawlessness in with the antichrist and the scoffer. All are in the world now, during these "last days" as we await the second coming. All are trying to lead us astray as we "wait for and hasten the coming of the day of God" (2 Peter 3:12). Will we remain faithful until the end, or will we be deceived by false promises?

## **DIGGING DEEPTER**

1. Using the term "antichrist" the way that John does, are there any in the world today? How would we identify them?

2. Do you know any of the scoffers that Peter warns against? What, if anything, are you doing to reach them with the gospel?

3. Why is it significant that we are living in the "last days"? What does this mean for you and me?

# 4. WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

## SO WHERE IS HE?

So then, what is taking so long? Why isn't Jesus here yet? These "last days" sure seem to be taking a long time! Jesus placed some stipulations on his return in Matthew 23-25. There were three things he promised would take place before the second coming:

1. A period of false prophets (24:3-8).
2. The "abomination of desolation" and a period of turmoil (24:9-22).
3. Another period of false prophets (24:23-27).

These clearly have come to pass. We have seen many false prophets, much turmoil, and the "abomination that makes desolate" that Daniel foresaw. So where is he? All the things that needed to happen have happened, so why hasn't he returned yet? Peter anticipated these exact questions:

***This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."***

**- 2 Peter 3:1-4**

When Peter warned of the scoffers who would come in the last days, his point was to encourage his readers to remain faithful, despite the scoffers. People scoff and wonder where he is, but that is exactly what Peter said they would do! We shouldn't be surprised that people wonder about it, and we shouldn't join in the doubting and questioning. He continues:

***But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the***

**heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.**

**- 2 Peter 3:8-10**

There are two things to note in this passage. The first is the immediate link between the “day of the Lord” and the destruction of the earth. There is no indication of any length of time between those two events (we will return to this idea momentarily). Second is the manner in which this day will come “like a thief.” This is the language Jesus used in Matthew 24:42-44. Paul used the same language:

**Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.**

**- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-3**

Note the same thing we have seen in previous verses; the link between the day of the Lord and sudden destruction and the unexpected nature of it. Paul highlights even more than Peter the suddenness of it; there will be no signs, no indications; Christ’s return will catch everyone off guard. Ultimately, Peter and Paul were only teaching the same things Jesus taught in Matthew 24-25 and the parallel passages in Mark 13 and Luke 17 and 21. There will be no indication of Jesus’s imminent return. People will not be able to look around and see any obvious warning signs.

This basic fact (that the return of Jesus will not be preceded by obvious signs) must influence our interpretation of Revelation. This teaching is given in very plain language, by multiple authors (including Jesus himself). If there is a supposed contradiction between this plain teaching in the New Testament and the figurative, highly fantastical language of Revelation, which do you think is more likely to be misunderstood? Are we more likely to misinterpret the words of Jesus, Paul, and Peter, or the emotionally charged symbolic visions of John? We will return to this idea as we transition into a study of Revelation itself.

Ultimately, what is the point? Peter’s point sometimes gets lost in the shuffle:

**The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.**

**- 2 Peter 3:9**

The Lord delays, not because he is slow, but because he is patient! He wants more people to turn to him! He is giving his people more time to do the work of the kingdom and reach the lost. We must be ready, because Jesus's return will be surprising, but while we wait we must be about His work, because there is only time to reach the lost while the Lord waits!

## **SO WHAT EXACTLY WILL HAPPEN?**

We have spent so much time gleaning what we can from Scripture about the *timing* of the second coming, but what exactly will happen when Christ does return? There is one more major passage we haven't looked at. Apparently, some of the Christians in Corinth were having a hard time accepting the resurrection of Jesus, and consequently the resurrection of the Christians that would take place in the "day of the Lord." To combat their confusion, Paul says:

***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.***

**- 1 Corinthians 15:20-24**

This is all in keeping with the verses we have previously read in Matthew, the Thessalonian letters, and 2 Peter. We see again the manner in which the faithful will be raised and gathered. We see again the link between the day of the Lord and the destruction of the earth. He continues later in the chapter to describe in greater detail the process that will take place:

***I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.***

**- 1 Corinthians 15:50-53**

What is Paul saying? Everything that is physical will go away at Christ's return! Paul is emphatic: "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." There is no confusing language. If we want to inherit the kingdom of God, we cannot be beings of flesh and blood.

Of course it has to be this way! The dead have no bodies anyway. Paul's body is long gone, dissolved in decay in the millennia since his death. Many Christians have no remains because they were burned at the stake. The dead are going to "be raised imperishable," despite the condition of their physical remains, and whoever is alive at the time will have to be changed to be like them.

***But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.***

**- 2 Peter 3:10**

So not only must our bodies be changed to be something that isn't "flesh and blood," but the earth itself will be destroyed. Not only is Jesus's return linked to the destruction of physical reality, it's also closely tied to the concept of judgment:

***When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.***

**- Matthew 25:31-33**

This is an important point: in all the teachings of Matthew-Jude, there is no discernable period of time between the second coming and the judgment, or the second coming and the destruction of earth. Judgment and destruction will immediately follow the Lord's return. The second coming will result in (in some order): the gathering of the saints in a manner that could be described using the Latin *rapio* (to snatch), the transformation of the saints' bodies into something eternal and indestructible, the judgment of the world, and the destruction of all things physical. There is never any indication of any meaningful amount of time between these events.

## **SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME?**

***Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.***

***Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the***



*wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.*

**- 2 Peter 3:11-18**

Peter spells it out quite plainly! These matters are confusing, and it is easy for people to get the wrong idea or teach the wrong thing. These words are easily twisted into something that God's prophets didn't intend. But the practical application is very simple: **live holy and godly lives!**

As we continue in a study of Revelation, using the foundational knowledge of the End of Days that we have gleaned from the rest of the New Testament, we will venture into subjects that are "hard to understand." But even if we don't have a great grasp of the symbology and numerology of Revelation, we can still live holy lives! We can still worship God the way He deserves. We can still teach the lost the gospel of Jesus. We can still endeavor to remove sin from our lives and replace it with godliness and righteousness. We can still be ready for the return of Jesus!

As we do so, we will strive to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." We will do that together as we study what may be the most controversial book in the entire Bible. But all the while, we will continue to give God the glory in our lives through our diligent faithfulness to His Word.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

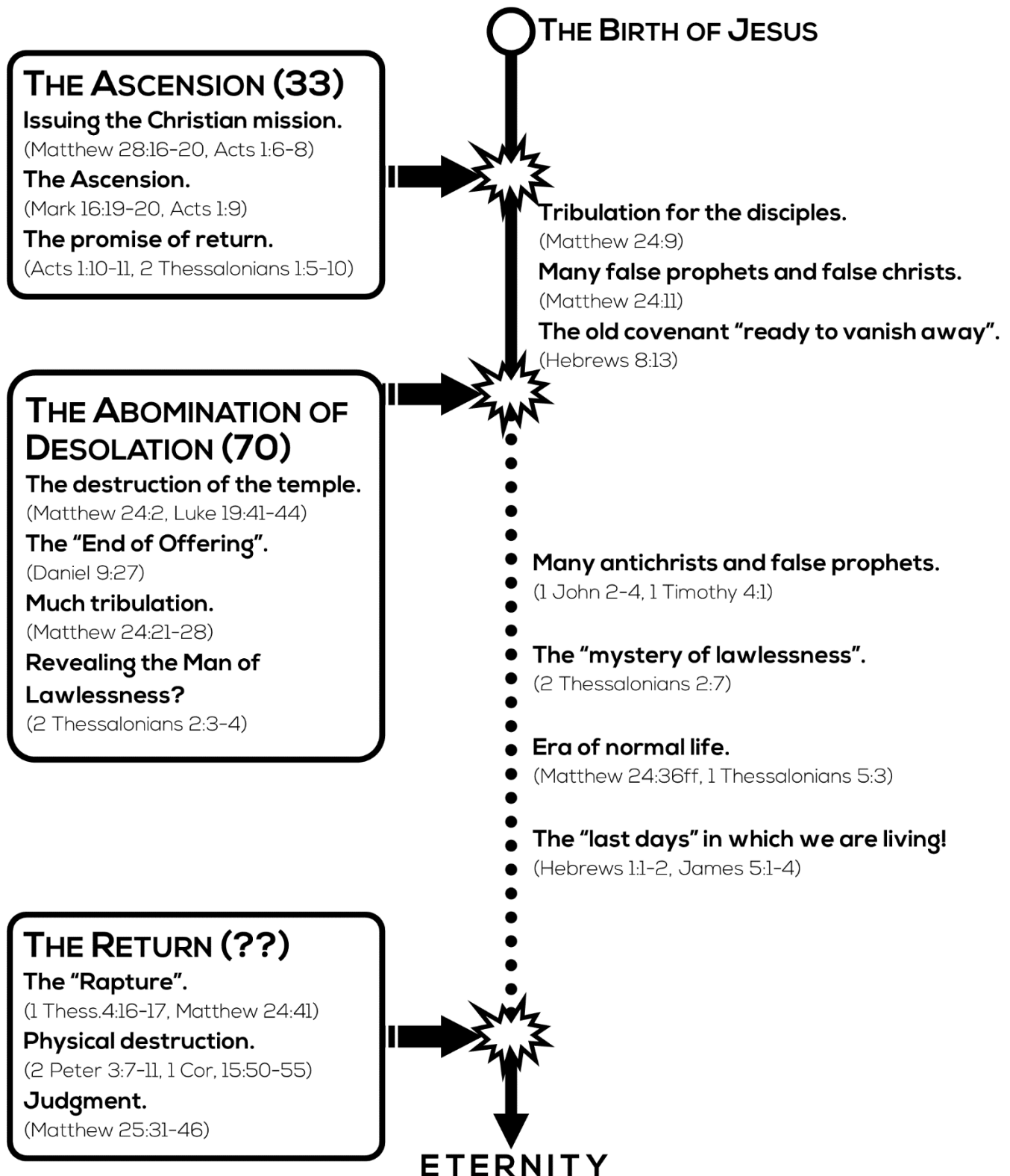
1. In all this discussion from Matthew-Jude, what is do you think is the most important lesson to learn?

2. What is the primary difference between the way the concept of the rapture is used in Scripture and the way it is used today?

3. How should all this knowledge from Matthew-Jude affect your day-to-day life?

# THE LAST DAYS

## Eschatology in Matthew-Jude





# 5. INTERPRETING REVELATION

As we transition into a study of Revelation, it's worth reiterating: why did we just study all that other stuff? Isn't this a study of Revelation?

The book of Revelation is the most complicated book of the New Testament. It is the only New Testament book written in the style of *Apocalyptic Literature*, and because of that, is the hardest to understand. It's important to note that Revelation was also the last book written in the New Testament. It was never meant to be understood on its own, devoid of the doctrine of the rest of the New Testament. While the other 26 books would not have been universally distributed by the time John wrote Revelation, the apostles and prophets would have orally taught the churches what they needed to know, and those teachings would have been passed on, either in written form or by word of mouth. Because Revelation has commonly been interpreted as revealing the End Times, it is worth knowing what the rest of the New Testament has to say about that subject.

These two factors (the highly fantastical nature of the book and its place in the canon of Scripture) make a review of eschatology in the previous 26 books not only important, but necessary, especially if you have never thought about these things before.

Before we dig into the text of Revelation, we will consider a few high-level ideas, beginning with our interpretive approach. Because the book is not in plain language, we should consider how best to interpret it. To this end, we should consider two main ideas: the original audience, and the nature of figurative language.

## LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE?

The first and perhaps most important question when discussing Revelation is what parts of the book should be understood as literal, and what parts should be understood as figurative or symbolic? This is not just a question for Revelation; it is important to ask this when considering any book of the Bible. You can see the difficulty and importance of the question in John 6:

***"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."***

***The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you***

***eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you...When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"***

**- John 6:51-53, 60**

The people to whom Jesus was speaking faced this same question: is Jesus being literal or figurative? One can easily imagine their confusion: "Does he really expect us to eat his flesh?" It is important to note that the literal interpretation of his words was the default understanding. It was so shocking to them because they took his words at face value, and so were confronted with the question of whether this was something they actually wanted to do. To be clear, this is how we interpret 95% of all communication we receive as humans. When your boss invites you to a meeting or sends you an email, you don't typically try to find some secret, hidden meaning in their words (unless you have an unusually obtuse or annoying boss). Almost all of the time humans communicate, they assume that the words used mean the normal, usual thing.

Is that what Jesus meant? Did he literally mean that people would need to eat his flesh and drink his blood? The most literal interpretation of Jesus's words in John 6 is still taught in some groups today. Most Catholics believe in a doctrine call *transubstantiation*, a fancy word that means that when a believer takes the bread and wine into his or her mouth, those things actually transform (or *transubstantiate*) into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus, through the supernatural power of God. However, most groups teach that Jesus was speaking symbolically. Rather than literal flesh and blood, he was telling them the importance of understanding and internalizing his words (John 6:63), or foreshadowing the symbolic power of the Last Supper (Matthew 26:26-29).

When studying the book of Revelation, this question is foremost: how much, if any, of John's vision is intended to be understood literally? Upon the answer to this primary question rest many secondary and tertiary questions: if only some of the book is to be taken literally, how do we decide which parts? How are we to understand the numbers? Will only 144,000 Jews be saved (a number seen in Revelation 7)? And, importantly, how can we be sure that we have interpreted it correctly?

## **IDEAS HAVE CONSEQUENCES**

One of the concepts we will return to again and again in this book is the importance of carrying our interpretation of the book to its logical conclusion. It's easy to interpret one verse as literal if we don't have to think through the implications of what such an interpretation would mean for the rest of the book and the rest of the Bible. No part of Revelation exists in a vacuum; it must be considered in light of the entire Bible. We have

said this before and will again: *no interpretation of any part of the Bible that would require the Bible to disagree with itself can be correct.*

However we decide to interpret Revelation, consistency is key. It's consistent to interpret the parables of Jesus symbolically, but take his teaching at face value, because he doesn't use the same kind of language and style in both cases. This is a hard thing to articulate but we all grasp the concept. Most people can tell pretty easily when someone switches from plain language to symbolic, either in storytelling or songwriting or in normal conversation.

But unlike the parables and allegories of Jesus, or even the apocalyptic language in Daniel and Ezekiel, there are very few linguistic or stylistic breaks to guide our interpretation of Revelation. Other than one section in Revelation (the letters to the seven churches) all of the book has the same language and style. Even in Daniel, there are clear narrative and stylistic transitions from the descriptions of Daniel's day-to-day life to the retelling of his visions. This allows a literal interpretation of one and not the other. Revelation simply doesn't have many of those transitions.

On a practical level, this means (for example) that if we interpret Revelation 20 and the 1,000 year reign (the *Millennium*) as something that will literally, actually happen, it is hermeneutically difficult to reject the idea that literally only 144,000 Jews will be saved or raptured (Revelation 7), and that fantastical beasts will rise up and be worshipped (Revelation 13). To take one as literal and not the others has very little logical or linguistic justification.

The need for consistency becomes very prominent in the numerology and symbology in apocalyptic literature. If one accepts the number of 1000 years in Revelation 20 to be literal, then why not the 70 weeks in Daniel 9? It is difficult to justify one being literal but not the other; they are both contained in sections of Scripture that are highly stylized and fantastical, with clear apocalyptic overtones. The problem is that the 70 weeks in Daniel 9 do not and cannot literally fit with the chronological numbers in Revelation 4-19 leading up to the millennial reign of Jesus. One or the other has to be symbolic, and if one why not both, and specifically how are we justifying our choice other than "I want it to be that way"?

## **CHRONOLOGY**

When are the events depicted in Revelation going to take place? Is the entire book one long string of events, or are there repeated sections describing the same time frame in different ways? These questions follow from the first question about interpretation but are so important they deserve some solitary attention. There are several framing verses that help us understand the timing of the content:

***The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.***

**- Revelation 1:1**

At the very beginning of the book John indicates that he will, at least in part, be describing actual future events (from his own temporal perspective). The first inclination might be to leap on the word “soon” and use that to say that the events described must have already happened (from our temporal perspective). However, the word “soon” is vague; in fact it is vague in a manner very similar to the rest of the book! We have previously discussed how the writers of the New Testament use this word. Most early Church fathers believed that Jesus would come soon, as they perceived soon, but of course he still has not returned! Remember Peter’s warning:

***But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you...***

**- 2 Peter 3:8-9**

God’s definition of “soon” and ours are not the same thing. He is infinite and eternal while we scurry about for less than 100 years. God explicitly reminds the reader of Revelation this in the opening chapter (1:5-8, 17-18). We must not be too quick to assume any specific chronology in Revelation based on one word.

***Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.***

**- Revelation 1:19**

While some of the book refers to future events (from John’s perspective), some of it also refers to the current situation of John’s time. Jesus begins his words to the Churches “I know...” (2:9, 13, etc.), which has led many to interpret the letters to the Churches as “those [things] that are” in 1:19. The transition paragraph at the beginning of chapter 4 seems to support this:

***After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."***

**- Revelation 4:1**

A common understanding is that chapters 1-3 are meant for the seven Churches that actually existed and were facing problems at the time John wrote the letter. This harmonizes with the way the rest of the New Testament is structured, as letters to actual



congregations, real groups of people that needed guidance and encouragement. What would follow then, in Chapter 4 onward, is a description of things that “must take place after this.” After what? Presumably, after John sends his letter to the Churches or perhaps after the lifetimes of the recipients of the letter. But again, the phrase is so vague that it could mean almost any future time!

So we have some indicators to help us with chronology. But the only solid, concrete fact is that some of the book describes current events (from John’s perspective), and some of the book describes events future to John. This leads us to our last important introductory concept: *placing the book in its original context*.

## WHO IS THE BOOK MEANT FOR?

John wrote Revelation while in exile on the isle of Patmos, toward the end of the first century. He was, quite possibly, the last living apostle at the time he wrote it. The rest of the New Testament had already been written. The church was transitioning out of the era of apostolic work into the “last days” in which people would have to rely on the written word. As such, Revelation truly serves as the capstone of Scripture. Who was John writing to and why?

When considering any book of the Bible, understanding the original audience is critical to understanding the intended meaning of the book. For example, Paul’s epistles are named for their original readers (1 Corinthians is Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth). Understanding who the audience is illuminates our understanding in two ways: 1) if we understand the historical context of Corinth, we can understand better why Paul said what he said and what he intended them to do about it, and 2) it is vital to remember that the Bible is not an instruction manual that fell out of the sky; these are practical instructions for Christians trying to live out their faith daily.

This matters! *Revelation was not written just for you and me*. It definitely wasn’t just written so that the people who happened to be living in the End Times would know what to look for. Like every other book of the New Testament, it had an original intended audience, in this case the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These were real people, with real problems! When we consider the letters to the seven Churches, we are getting a glimpse into the lives of real Christians!

Practically, this means that any interpretation that doesn’t have meaning for those seven Churches (or that those seven churches couldn’t have figured out) is probably suspect. Why would God, knowing that the end of time wouldn’t be for 2,000+ years, direct His Spirit to inspire a letter written to real people with real problems, when the majority of that letter wouldn’t really even apply to them? This would make Revelation a major outlier in the New Testament; every other letter had clear and present application for the original audience.

The struggles of ancient Christians were the impetus for the letters; they were written first and foremost to respond to the questions, doubts and problems of the people of the day.

Of course, that doesn't exclude meaning for us. When someone put their faith in Jesus in the first century, they must have asked, "Now that I follow Jesus, what should I do next?" We continue to ask that same question today! The letters of the New Testament answer that question from a position of divinely inspired authority. The apostles and prophets demonstrated that authority by their miraculous power. Until someone demonstrates a miraculous power on that level (and even then, maybe not, see Galatians 1:9-10), it stands to reason that the last set of divine instructions still apply; the instructions given by the apostles and prophets.

So, like the rest of Scripture, Revelation has meaning for all people who will read it until Jesus returns. The key to understanding Revelation, like every other book of the Bible, is finding a way of interpreting it that satisfies both groups: practical meaning for the original audience *and* practical meaning for Christians to follow. This probably rules out any interpretation of the book that requires an advanced theology degree; the original readers would have needed to understand what Jesus wanted to convey *without* the benefit of several hundred years of theological numerology and theory. This again reinforces the need to understand the book *in the context of the rest of the Bible*. As the last book written, John would have known that the churches had already been taught some things about the End of Days. His writing wouldn't contradict what had come before; it would illuminate and complement the work of his fellow apostles.

## CONCLUSION

As we study Revelation, please continue to ask yourself these three very important questions:

1. Would this interpretation have meant anything to the original audience?
2. How does this interpretation line up with the rest of Biblical teaching?
3. What are the logical consequences or conclusions to this interpretation? Does taking this line of reasoning to its natural conclusion make sense?

In fact, you should be asking yourself these questions when you study *any* part of the Bible! As we study together, I hope we will come to understand the deep meaning Revelation holds for Christians throughout the ages.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. In your experience, are people afraid to talk about Revelation? Or have people rather been extra excited to talk about it? Why would people feel either way?**

**2. What sort of biases or preconceptions might influence our interpretation of Revelation?**

**3. Consider what you know about Revelation. Where did you learn that information? Is that source one you would typically consider reliable?**



# 6. MAJOR THEMES IN REVELATION

## OLD TESTAMENT INFLUENCES

As we have said many times before, Revelation did not drop down out of heaven devoid of context. Like the rest of the New Testament, Revelation was revealed against the backdrop of the Old Testament. More than any other book of the New Testament (with the possible exception of Hebrews), Revelation relies on and expands upon Old Testament stories, doctrines, and symbolic imagery. For example, consider the parallel descriptions of God's throne and four creatures in Ezekiel 1:4-11 and Revelation 4:5-8:

### **EZEKIEL 1:4-11**

**Stormy clouds and fire.**

**An expanse of something hard and shiny.**

**Four creatures with four appearances.**

**Faces of man, lion, ox, and eagle.**

**Four wings (2 flying, 2 covering).**

### **REVELATION 4:5-8**

**Lightning and thunder.**

**An expanse of something hard and shiny.**

**Four creatures with one appearance.**

**Faces of man, lion, ox, and eagle.**

**Six wings.**

The imagery is not exactly the same, but the similarities are striking. They both depict the same setting (the throne of God). Both Ezekiel and John are about to receive divine revelation. The similarities are too close to be a coincidence, since the same Author ultimately revealed both visions. God consistently presents Himself in such glory and splendor to His prophets (see also Isaiah 6:1-7 as another example).

What is the point? The imagery and symbolism of Revelation does not exist in isolation. Much (though not all) of the roots of the language of Revelation can be traced back to the stories and visions of the Old Testament. As we study, we shall see connections to the plagues in Exodus, the enemy stronghold of Babylon, and the song of Moses. The symbolic nature of Revelation begets many questions. *What does this mean? Why is God using this language? What should I take from this?* In our pursuit of understanding, we should not forsake the past in order to divine the future. Many of the New Testament writers use the language of the Old Testament to explain and clarify the spiritual truths of Christ's covenant; why should John be any different? He certainly did so in his version of the gospel. By considering the Old Testament stories and what they meant, we can illuminate some of the more confusing parts of Revelation that draw on those ancient revelations.

## THE NEEDS OF THE AUDIENCE

We have previously noted that any book of the Bible must be understood in its original context. God inspired prophets to write for specific audiences at the impetus of their particular questions and problems. The book of Revelation was written to seven of the churches in Asia toward the end of the first century. It was probably written during or shortly after the reign of emperor Domitian, who hated Christians and persecuted them mercilessly. But he was not the first Emperor nor the last who would insist that people worship him as a god. The “Cult of the Emperor” operated throughout the Roman Empire, trying to persuade citizens to worship whichever ruler was in power at the time.

It is probable that this cult was responsible for John’s exile to Patmos in the first place. As a teacher, preacher, and leader of the growing sect of Christianity, John would have been one to silence. Exiling him, rather than killing him, avoided martyrdom (though this is speculation; some ancient accounts claim they tried to boil him alive but when that failed, they exiled him).

Even after Domitian’s death, the empire did not suddenly and wholeheartedly endorse Christianity. Several generals continued Domitian’s work after his passing, and future emperors returned to widescale persecution. Domitian himself was simply carrying on the legacy of Nero, an earlier emperor.

Understanding the atmosphere of persecution and struggle sheds light on some of the thematic elements of the book of Revelation, especially considering that God’s revealing of Scripture was about to conclude. As the last book of God’s completed word, Revelation is in a unique place to offer comfort and hope for the future. As John completed this prophetic work, he offered special encouragement to Christians who had faced harsh persecution in the past and who would face it again in the future.

## THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

The first 26 books of the New Testament make it plain that we need to think about our Christian walk as a conflict or war:

***For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.***

**- 2 Corinthians 10:3-6**

If our Christian struggle is a spiritual war, then Revelation shows us who the combatants are. The book begins and ends with a vision of our Commander, Jesus (Revelation 1:12-16 and Revelation 19:11-16). In the middle John sees a literal “war in heaven” (Revelation 12). John also sees a vision of our chief adversary (“the dragon”).

Beyond revealing the participants in this war, Revelation shows God’s people the eventual outcome. All of history is a war: between God and the Devil, between humanity and the Devil, between God’s people and people who reject God, and most intimately between people’s righteous and unrighteous desires *within themselves*. In the Old Testament, that warfare was often literal (like the Israelites exterminating the Canaanites). But as Paul said, “the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:4, “our” referring to Christians). Jesus himself said that “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36) and “The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed” (Luke 17:20). This warfare is going on around us all the time, but in ways that aren’t immediately obvious to our limited, physical perceptions.

Revelation gives us a “peek behind the curtain.” There are real, powerful, horrifying forces trying their hardest to destroy the people of God and thwart His plans. Revelation shows us a bit of who they are, what they want, and how they operate. But at the same time, Revelation teaches us why their struggle is ultimately in vain. John tells us how God will win, and how we can be a part of it. Along the way, we are shown why the fight matters and how to keep going. This is what those seven churches needed to hear, coming off the persecutions of Domitian and in preparation for what was to come. But this is also something Christians of any era need to hear! The Devil is still prowling “around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” Revelation shows us how to “resist him, firm in the faith” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

There are many ways we could break down the message and thematic elements of Revelation. We could get very granular and list a dozen or more themes and lessons, or simply stick to the overall message: God will win! To help us organize our thoughts about the text, we will consider five main themes. We will not try to stick to this list exclusively or put every verse in Revelation into one of these boxes. Rather, these are some of the main things John emphasizes over and over in the text.

## **MAJOR THEME 1: GOD IS MIGHTY**

What does any army need to know? They need to know that their side has the power, might, and ability to win! No army can keep going for very long if they lack confidence in their ability to defeat the enemy. Flagging morale is a real danger. It’s no surprise then that Jesus shows John a very different side of himself than we see in the gospels. For example, toward the end of Revelation:

***Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself.***

**- Revelation 19:11-12**

The general we follow is powerful, majestic, and mighty! The book of Revelation contains special emphasis on the power of the one we serve; both the Son, who “makes war,” and the Father, who pours out wrath on his foes. One of the most important themes of Revelation is the might of the God we serve and His ability to give victory to those who serve Him.

## **MAJOR THEME 2: JESUS IS WORTHY**

One of the things we see most in Revelation, again in stark contrast to the rest of the New Testament, is worship of both the Father and the Son. From the beginning of John’s visions, we are shown a figure worthy of all the worship we can give him:

***Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,***

***“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!”***

**- Revelation 5:11-12**

This is a repeated refrain of the book; we cannot worship God too much! This is seen not only in the frequency of worship scenes, but also in who exactly is doing the worshipping: important members of God’s kingdom like the apostles and elders, along with angels and majestic supernatural beings, and even the whole host of heaven. Revelation shows that Christians are joining in an eternal, transcendent chorus when we worship God.

## **MAJOR THEME 3: EXPECT PERSECUTION**

Even though Jesus shows John several images of his might and power, Jesus does not promise total and immediate victory to the reader *right now*. God’s might ensures eventual and lasting victory, but in the meantime, Christians should not expect to be free of hardship or difficulty. In the visions John is shown, the root of this difficulty is the enemies of God and His will:



***Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.***

**- Revelation 12:17**

Our enemy, the dragon, has not yet suffered total defeat. While we wait for Jesus's return, our enemy is free to influence the world around us, using kings, governments, and normal people to persecute and oppress God's people. Another important lesson in the book is that until total victory is achieved, we should expect to face some difficulty as we "share Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13).

## **MAJOR THEME 4: JUDGMENT IS COMING**

These themes have a logical sequence to them. God is mighty, He is worthy of worship, yet we should expect that many will reject Him and persecute those who follow Him. This is a grave injustice and unrighteousness. As the Creator of all, worthy of all worship, God promises a specific response to the persecution of His people and the rejection of His will:

***The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say,***

***“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,  
for you brought these judgments.***

***For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,  
and you have given them blood to drink.***

***It is what they deserve!”***

***And I heard the altar saying,***

***“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,  
true and just are your judgments!”***

**- Revelation 16:4-7**

The judgment of God is a continual promise, not just for eternity, but for this life. The repeated cycles of sevens in Revelation demonstrate the escalating nature of God's judgment; people face consequences in this life, but a more serious and final consequence awaits. And, as God's people facing persecution, we can hold on to the promise that justice will be done!

## **MAJOR THEME 5: ONLY THE CHRISTIAN HAS HOPE**

Judgment is coming, due to the nature of God, His power, and His worthiness. The most immediate practical application of the book, then, for both the original audience and for all

who would read it in perpetuity, is both a warning and a promise. Who can stand against the judgment of God?

***Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”***

**- Revelation 6:15-17**

The answer, both implied and explicit, is found throughout the book: only those who submit to God’s will, obey His commandments, and give Him the worship He deserves can hope to stand in judgment. As the final revealing of God’s written word to the world, the concluding book of the Bible, this is a fitting reminder: as we await the end of all things, only those who belong to God can await His return with hope. For the rest, there is only “a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:27).

Are you ready?

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. How familiar are you with the Old Testament in general? How familiar are you specifically with books like Ezekiel and Daniel? If you haven't studied them in a while, why is that?**

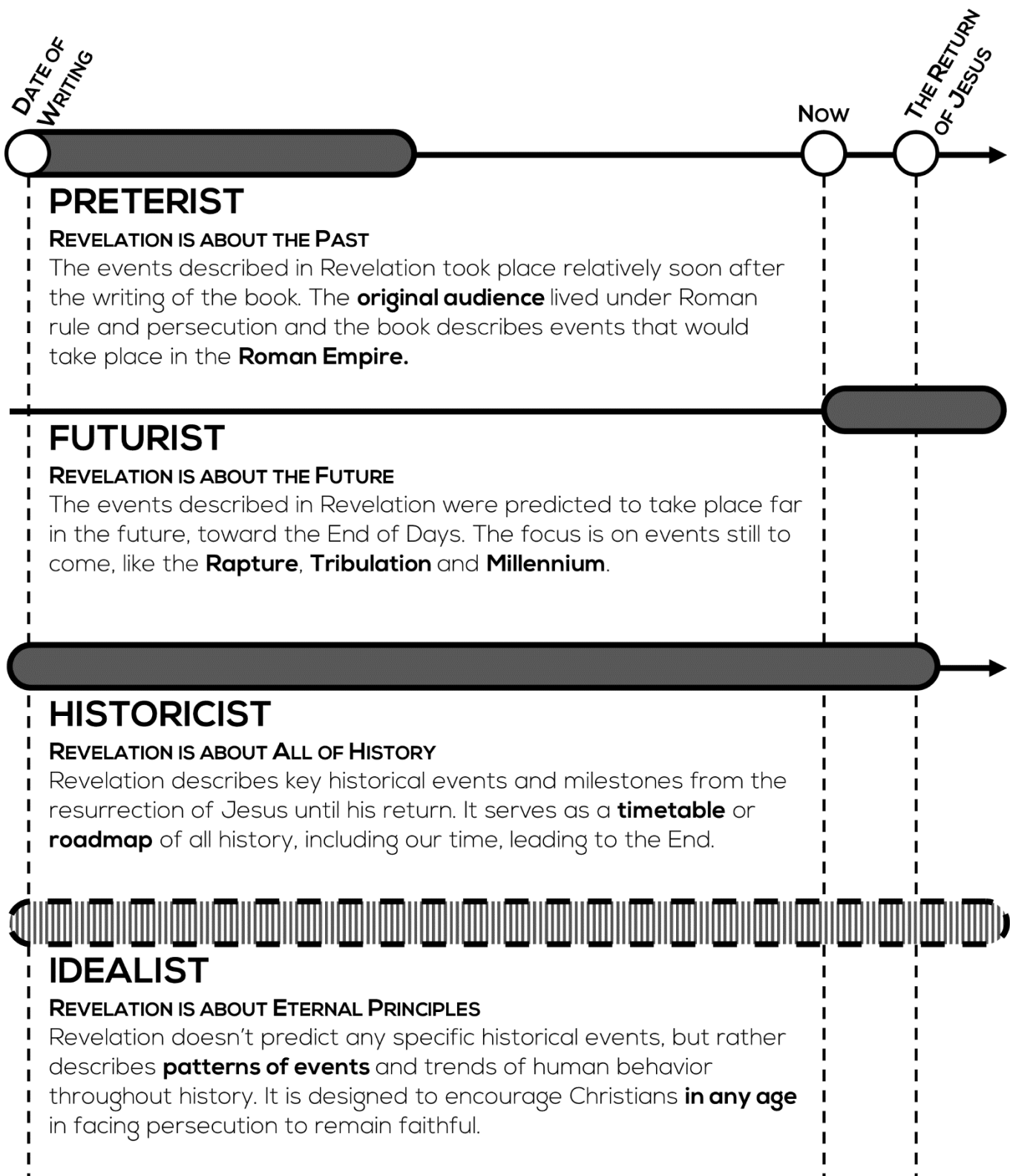
**2. Think about your habits of worship: how often do you worship God outside of the assembly? If the answer is never, why is that? How much worship does God deserve?**

**3. How much persecution do you face for your Christianity? If the answer is "none," why do you think there is so much warning about persecution in the New Testament, and how have you avoided it?**



# FOUR INTERPRETATIONS

## Major Schools of Thought on Revelation





# 7. PROLOGUE

## Revelation 1:1-20

As a reminder, the whole text of Revelation will not be supplied in the text of this book. From this point forward the relevant Bible text will be listed at the beginning of each chapter. I encourage you to read the text one or more times before you dig into each lesson. While I aim to clarify and expound upon the Biblical text, we should always allow God's word itself to take first place in our discussions.

The book of Revelation gets its name from the first verse: "The *revelation* (Greek: *apokalypsis*) of Jesus Christ..." Remember from our look at important terms that the English word "apocalypse" is just a transliteration of this Greek word. The word as it is used in the ancient book did not mean what the word *apocalypse* means today. The Greek word simply means "something revealed." Our use of the word *apocalypse* is influenced by the very things we read about in the book of Revelation. While this kind of redefining of words is not uncommon in English, we should not allow our conception of the word *apocalypse* to unduly influence our interpretation of the text of Revelation.

### INTRODUCING CHRONOLOGY IN REVELATION

Two phrases immediately stand out in the text:

***The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.***

**- Revelation 1:1-3, emphasis added**

We have already considered the importance and ambiguity of the word "soon" in the New Testament text. John adds another phrase to emphasize the immediacy of the book by warning the reader that "the time is near." We must ask: the time is near for what? Does John mean the time is near for Jesus's return, which he very briefly describes in 1:7? Or does John mean the time is near for the events that are described in the book? That last seems to be what is meant by "the things that must soon take place."

Jesus tells John to “write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this” (1:19). He later reemphasizes this in 4:1: “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” It would seem that the first three chapters address the needs and concerns of those seven churches, while the rest of the book describes “the things that must soon take place.”

Remember, we must consider the needs and perspective of the original audience when we seek to interpret *any* book of the Bible. This perspective is often lost when we endeavor to understand Revelation. In light of this structuring of the prologue, it’s hard to imagine that the original readers would have thought the bulk of the book would only matter to far-future generations of Christians. They would likely have anticipated the events happening to them! After all, the book was written to them, and they were told that these things would soon take place!

This is not to say that it’s impossible that the book describes far future events. Many of Daniel’s visions (the four beasts in Daniel 7 and the later visions in Daniel 9-12) either implicitly or explicitly allude to far-future events (from the time of Daniel’s receiving the vision). However, there is a distinct contrast between how Daniel’s future visions are explained and how Revelation is presented:

***These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.***

**- Daniel 7:17-18**

***But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.”***

**- Daniel 12:4**

***He said, “Go your way, Daniel, for the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end.***

**- Daniel 12:9**

Daniel is either explicitly told that his vision pertains to future kings, or that the time is not yet right for the fulfillment of the visions. Contrast this with Jesus’s instructions in Revelation, and we get a sense of immediacy and urgency in Revelation that isn’t present throughout much of the Old Testament prophecies. Yet, as we previously considered, none of this can conclusively lead us to interpret the book as being about events soon to take place from the reader’s perspective, because God views the time scales of history in a very different way than we do (2 Peter 3). We must keep these ideas about chronology in mind as we consider the rest of the book.



## INTRODUCING THEMES IN REVELATION

The first chapter of Revelation introduces the major themes we will see throughout the rest of the book. From the beginning, the reader is presented with a picture of Jesus very different from how he is seen in the gospels. Contrary to the meek and lowly suffering savior, we see the mighty and intimidating conqueror, harkening back to the “commander of the Lord’s armies” Joshua encountered in Joshua 5:13-15. John begins the letter with an expression of worship for “him...who has freed us from our sins by his blood” in Revelation 1:5. The vision of the son of man in 1:12-16 is so powerful that John essentially faints or passes out (1:17). *This is the one we serve, who stands at the right hand of God on our behalf.* We can immediately understand one of the main points of the book; to remind God’s people that they serve a Being that can and will destroy their enemies.

This is important because John had already reminded the readers of persecution:

***I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.***

**- Revelation 1:9**

John had experienced intense persecution, resulting in his exile on Patmos, away from his home and loved ones. He knew that his readers would be familiar with such persecution, calling himself a “partner in the tribulation.” God’s children should expect to experience such persecution. This idea is repeated throughout the New Testament (Matthew 5:10-12; John 15:18-20; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 3:13-17). The rest of Revelation will continue to reemphasize the nature of persecution God’s children should expect and how to overcome it.

In the end, though, judgment will be brought to bear on the earth, and it will be brought by one who conquered death (Revelation 1:5-7, 17-18; Acts 17:30-31). Only those who belong to God can hope to stand in the face of such a mighty conqueror, not by their own strength, but by his mercy, in abstaining from wrath.

## INTRODUCING NUMBERS AND SYMBOLS IN REVELATION

Seven is a number that is repeated throughout the introduction of Revelation, counting the spirits before the throne (1:4), the churches of Asia (1:11), and the “angels of the seven churches” (1:20). Throughout the Bible, seven is a significant and holy number (the seven days of creation and the seventh-day Sabbath, for example). In the Hebrew culture, it represented completeness or wholeness. The phrase “time, times and half a time” occurs three times (Daniel 7:25, 12:7; Revelation 12:14) as a contrast, being half of seven, seen as 1

(time) plus 2 (times) +.5 (half a time). This denoted incompleteness or something that is temporary.

I cannot stress this enough as we continue through Revelation; trying to pin down a literal meaning of the various numbers and symbols throughout Revelation is both maddening and self-defeating. There is no way to make all the numbers and word-pictures work if you consistently apply them literally, which leads us to the inevitable conclusion that at least some of them are symbolic. We see this principle in action from the beginning. What are the “seven spirits” in Revelation 1:4? The phrase “seven spirits” (from the throne, belonging to God) is not found in any other book of the Bible. They are described as torches in 4:5 and eyes of the Lamb in 5:6. So which is it? Are the seven spirits of God torches or eyes? Or are they neither? We know the Lamb in Revelation 5 is Jesus, but he was previously described as a mighty warrior in Revelation 1; is Jesus a Lamb or a warrior?

In the seven spirits of God we see the practical application of numerology and symbology in Revelation. The spirits are not literally torches, nor are they literally eyes. John is being shown symbolic visions representing eternal, spiritual truths and beings. A torch gives light, allowing us to see things as they are. The eye is what we use to see, and the Lamb has seven of them. He can see perfectly! The seven spirits represent the complete and perfect sight and understanding of God; He sees all and knows all. In all the admonitions to the churches, Jesus begins with “I know...” He sees us, sees all his children throughout history, and knows what we need and how we are doing. It is another reason to have confidence in this war; we serve a general who has perfect knowledge of the battlefield.

The hardest thing about interpreting Revelation is understanding the intended meaning of the numbers and the symbols. Sometimes we are explicitly told what the symbols represent (the seven lampstands in Revelation 1:20), but we are often left to infer their meaning in the context of Scripture. The understanding of lampstands as churches is not without precedent in the rest of the Bible; remember that Jesus described us as “the light of the world” in Matthew 5:14-15. The image of a lampstand represents the function and purpose of the seven churches: to share the light of Jesus!

As we continue through Revelation, we must not separate our understanding of it from the rest of the Bible. If our interpretation of Revelation requires knowledge or training unavailable to the original readers, it is almost certainly wrong. The numbers and symbols are often drawn from other parts of the Bible, vital context that the original recipients of Revelation would have had access to. Often, when we are faced with a confusing number or symbol in Revelation, the first thing we should do is consider the rest of Scripture; how was this number or symbol used in other parts of the Bible, and how can that understanding inform our interpretation of Revelation? As a practical application of this principle, consider one of the more interesting phrases in the prologue.

## IN THE SPIRIT

John introduces his vision in this way: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, ‘Write what you see in a book...’” (Revelation 1:10-11). What does it mean that John “was in the Spirit”? He repeats this phrasing in 4:2, describing seemingly being taken up into heaven.

We can read about this kind of event in a couple other places in Scripture. The call of Ezekiel, in Ezekiel 3, contains several word-pictures that are repeated in Revelation, including the idea of being taken somewhere by the Spirit. In Ezekiel 3:12-15, Ezekiel is “lifted up” by the Spirit, hears the “voice of a great earthquake,” sees majestic, supernatural winged creatures, and then is carried by the Spirit to another place. At the end of his encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip was “carried away” by the Spirit of the Lord (Acts 8:39). Both of these stories emphasize physical displacement in a supernatural way, though there is no indication that Philip ever entered the throne room of God in the way that Ezekiel seems to have. Paul describes something even more explicit in 2 Corinthians:

***I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.***

**- 2 Corinthians 12:2-4**

Paul wasn't sure if this was a purely spiritual experience (“out of the body”) or a literal physical transportation, but the story emphasizes the same things that we see in Ezekiel and John's accounts; traveling to the throne room of God to receive some kind of revelation.

John, in a manner similar to Ezekiel, Philip, and the man Paul knew, was taken “in the Spirit” (either physically or mentally) to a special place (called “heaven” in Revelation 4:1-2) to receive divine revelation and knowledge. What John sees throughout the book is not tied to physical, temporal rules; John sees all these fantastic visions in a place separate from Earth. These visions transcend the rules of mundane physicality, because John has himself (either in body or in spirit) been taken beyond those rules. But our understanding of this can only be informed by other instances in Scripture.

If I have tried to emphasize anything so far, it's this: as we endeavor to understand Revelation, our best tool will be the rest of God's word. It is a tool that would have been available, either in paper or in prophetic gift, to the original seven churches that received the letter, and it is a tool that God has made available to His children throughout history. May we all follow in the steps of the Bereans in “examining the Scriptures daily” (Acts 17:11).

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. When you picture Jesus, do you picture the servant washing the disciples' feet or the warrior with eyes like fire? Which is the real Jesus? Why does it matter?**

**2. Have you read many extra-Biblical books on Revelation? If so, how much did the authors reference other books of the Bible in their interpretation? How much academic education did their interpretation require?**

**3. Consider the symbol of a lampstand for the church: would Jesus describe your congregation as an object that shines light? What about you as an individual Christian? What kind of light are you shining?**

# THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

## The Basics of the Cities and the Churches

### EPHESUS

**Pop.** 250,000  
**Known for** trade and the Temple of Artemis (Diana).

#### THE CHURCH

**The Good:** Toil and patient endurance, did not bear with false teaching.

**The Bad:** Left their first love.

### SMYRNA

**Pop.** 100,000  
**Known for** creating the Imperial Cult

#### THE CHURCH

**The Good:** Spiritually rich, enduring slander.

**The Bad:** None

### PERGAMUM

**Pop.** 200,000  
**Known for** being the cultural center of Asia.

#### THE CHURCH

**The Good:** Holding fast to Jesus's name, enduring persecution.

**The Bad:** Some listened to false teaching.

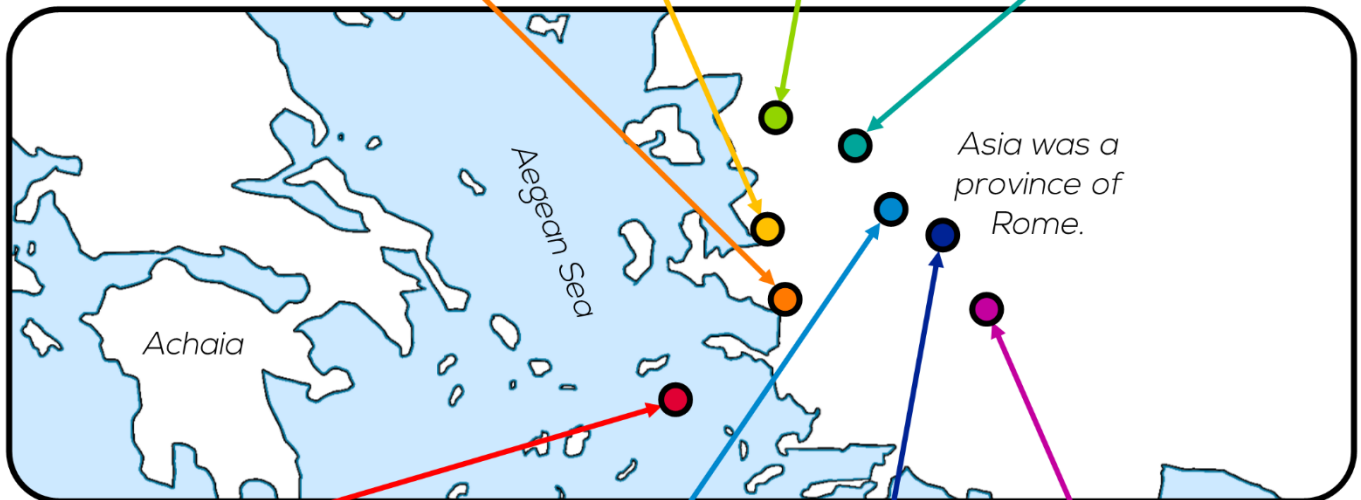
### THYATIRA

**Pop.** Unknown  
**Known for** dyeing facilities and purple cloth.

#### THE CHURCH

**The Good:** Love, faith, service, and endurance.

**The Bad:** Tolerating false teaching and sexual immorality.



### PATMOS

The island where John was exiled (1:9). One interpretation of the "angels" or "messengers" of the seven churches (2:1ff) is that these were people who physically went to the island.

### SARDIS

**Pop.** 50,000  
**Known for** wealth and lengthy history.

#### THE CHURCH

**The Good:** Some had not soiled their garments with sin.

**The Bad:** A healthy church in reputation only. Had ceased doing good.

### PHILADELPHIA

**Pop.** Unknown  
**Known for** being a relatively new city and many earthquakes.

#### THE CHURCH

**The Good:** Kept Jesus's word with patient endurance.

**The Bad:** None

### LAODICEA

**Pop.** 150,000?  
**Known for** their medical school and complex aqueduct system.

#### THE CHURCH

**The Good:** None

**The Bad:** Spiritually lukewarm and full of hubris.



## 8. THE THINGS THAT ARE Revelation 2:1 – 3:22

The letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 are, by far, the easiest parts of the book to understand and to apply in a modern context. Like the other epistles in the New Testament, these were personal correspondence to real people in situations that were difficult, complex, and tangible.

That doesn't mean these letters aren't without their esoteric subjects. What are "the angels of the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20)? The word "angel" is a transliteration of the Greek word *aggelos*, which at the time simply meant "messenger." The word was occasionally used of people in the New Testament (Matthew 11:10; James 2:25), though it is more often used to describe spiritual beings sent from God on some task. The Hebrew word *malak* is used in the same way, though it is much more often applied to human messengers.

This leaves us with two possibilities in Revelation 1-3. We know that there are "ministering spirits" (Hebrews 1:14) that are sent to aid God's people, but does that mean that each congregation has a specific angelic being watching over it? That idea is not found anywhere else in the Bible, though the argument could be made that a similar concept is found in Daniel 12:1, where Michael is called "the great prince who has charge of your (the Hebrew?) people."

The other (more mundane) possibility is that these were human messengers. Remember the situation of the writing of Revelation; John had been exiled to the isle of Patmos. There is a rather obvious and boring question implied by his situation: how is the letter going to get from Patmos to the seven churches? While it could have been that Jesus would send angelic beings to carry the letter, it could also be the case that humans came to the island and received the Revelation to carry back to the churches. It's hard to say from the historical record how difficult or possible it would have been for John to receive human visitors, or for people to get the writing from John, though if we are admitting the possibility of angelic intervention, it's not more of a stretch to admit the possibility that God would make it possible for humans to visit John.

It's important to keep fixed in our minds the mundane (in other words, not supernatural) circumstances of the writing and the reading of Revelation. These seven churches really existed, and they really had problems that needed addressing. In this sense, Revelation

follows the same pattern as the rest of the New Testament and should be read in the same way. That is why John begins the book this way:

***Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.***

**- Revelation 1:3**

Like all books of the New Testament, God expects His children to read this writing and let it tangibly affect the way we live! The letters all follow the same structure: a reminder of some awesome attribute of Jesus, Jesus's knowledge of the audience, admonition, and encouragement, and then a closing statement that serves as both a promise and a warning.

## **STATEMENT OF POWER**

The opening statements to the churches (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) are reminders about who exactly Jesus is. They describe his power, his abilities, his temperament, and his faithfulness. Some of the language is symbolic, some refers back to other Bible passages, and some of the language is future-facing, describing what Jesus can and will do in the future. But all serve as the reminder of why the churches should listen to these letters; these are the backbone of Jesus's authority.

## **JESUS'S KNOWLEDGE**

Five of the letters begin with "I know your works" (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15, and he also says he knows of the others in 2:9, 13). Jesus is speaking from a place of intimate knowledge of these people. He has that same intimate knowledge of Christians today. Specifically, he knew the ways they were faithfully serving him, and the ways they were failing to do so. This, too, enhances the authority of the message.

## **ADMONITION AND ENCOURAGEMENT**

Five of the seven letters are a mix of praise and rebuke. Congregations, just like the people that compose them, are a mix of good and bad. We all have things we need to correct, but hopefully we are all also serving God well in some way.

The admonitions range from specific and prophetic to highly symbolic. Here Jesus draws on the language of Old Testament stories to impart deep spiritual truths. The story of Balaam (Numbers 22-24; Deuteronomy 23:4-5; Joshua 13:22, 24:9-10) reminds the people of the need to listen only to God's commands and not be swayed by other teachings. The story of Jezebel from 1-2 Kings recalls one of the worst periods in Israelite history.



There are several warnings about sexual purity (2:14, 20-22), two allusions to “the synagogue of Satan” (2:9 and 3:9, emphasizing the need to worship God alone), and many calls to repent (2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19). The main emphasis of the letters is the need to keep obeying Jesus, despite all the influences pressing on them. The church in Philadelphia was praised specifically because they kept Jesus’s word (3:8, 10). Obedience would not lead to perfect, safe lives; several of the letters discuss persecutions (2:9-10, 13). These warnings echo again the beginning of Revelation: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it...” (1:3).

These letters, like the longer epistles of the New Testament written by other prophets, addressed specific needs of the original audience while also serving as valuable instruction for the generations of Christians to follow. No church today will face precisely all the same mix of problems that any of these churches face, but we all face some of them, and we all struggle with some of the same temptations and failings. The message is still the same for us:

***Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.***

**- Revelation 3:3**

## **FINAL PROMISES**

All the letters end with the same pattern of promise for “the one who conquers.” In the ESV, at least, the Greek word translated “conquers” throughout Revelation 2-3 is more often translated “overcomes” in the rest of Scripture, as in 1 John:

***For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?***

**- 1 John 5:3-5**

The letters to the churches reinforce this teaching of John; we can only overcome through our faithful obedience. This is the message reiterated to the churches. We know we won’t be perfect (1 John 1:8), which is why Jesus continually calls for repentance. The forces of this world will always try to lure us away from Jesus and his word, but we must keep clawing our way back, over and over and over.

So, the promises to those who conquer, overcome, and achieve victory through “patient endurance” (Revelation 1:9; 2:2, 19; 3:10) are numerous. We will get to eat from the tree of life (2:7), avoid the “second death” (2:11), receive a new name (2:17), rule with Jesus (2:26), hear Jesus confess our name to the Father (3:5), live in the city of God (3:12), and sit with Jesus on the throne (3:21). Some of this terminology will reappear throughout the book of Revelation, and some of it is drawn from other New Testament promises. But all are worth the struggle. Any one of them makes the struggle worth it!

## PLACING REVELATION IN ITS CONTEXT

Revelation, more than most of the epistles of the New Testament, carefully situates itself as a book written for specific people. These people were and would continue to be embroiled in hardship, persecution, and temptation. They were living out in a very real way “the good fight” (1 Timothy 6:12; 2 Timothy 4:7). This doesn’t mean that the book has no meaning for us; rather it means we should carefully consider how *they* might have understood all the visions of the future that would follow. What would these things have meant to *them*? After all, Jesus commanded John to “write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea” (Revelation 1:11).

The visions that follow must have been important to the mission Jesus gave the seven churches. What was that mission? To continually keep his word, repent when they failed, and serve him faithfully in the midst of persecution and temptation. This is, to be sure, the same mission every Christian throughout history has been given. The purpose of the book, written as a needed encouragement for these churches, is to supply them with the strength, motivation, and courage they needed to “conquer”! As a consequence, this is what the book provides readers throughout history.

The rest of the book will rotate around the Christian struggle and the need to overcome. What, precisely, do we need to overcome? What does victory look like, both in this physical existence and in eternity? How does God help us conquer? What about all the times when it seems like the enemy is winning? Who exactly is the enemy, and how does he fight against us? These questions, focused on the eternal spiritual war at the heart of existence, are the subject of John’s visions. To that end, it is a book that is just as valuable for the modern Christian as any other book of the New Testament.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Read again the attributes and qualities of Jesus found at the beginning of each letter (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Do you think about Jesus in these terms? Why or why not?**

**2. Read over the admonitions to the churches. Which of these sins can you find in your own life? Do you think Jesus will be more or less lenient toward you than he was toward them?**

**3. What struggles are you facing? How do you feel you are doing in your efforts to overcome or conquer? Have you reached out for help from your fellow warriors, or are you striving alone, surrounded by the enemy?**



# **PART 2: JOHN'S VISIONS OF THE FUTURE**



# 9. THE THRONE ROOM IN HEAVEN

## Revelation 4:1 – 5:14

### “IN THE SPIRIT” REVISITED

When we get down to the nitty gritty details, it seems apparent that the visions of the future John received did not follow any sort of physical or natural law. These are supernatural visions being shown in a spiritual realm that we shouldn't feel the need to conform with what we understand about reality. That is in fact why John is “in the Spirit” instead of seeing these things on the island of Patmos. He had to leave (either in mind or in body) the mundane earthly reality through a “door in heaven” (4:1).

As we continue through the book, it will be very difficult to try to place the events John is shown into a physical context bound by things like space, matter, and distance. This should not be discouraging. John is being shown things that transcend our reality. I wonder how limited he felt by human language to convey the majesty of his visions.

### A VISION OF WORSHIP

The first thing John is shown is the seat of God's power: the throne. Does God need a chair to sit in? Of course not. As an omnipresent, infinite being, what chair could contain Him anyway? Rather, the throne is a symbol of authority and rule. A throne is where kings sat in judgment and ceremony. It was the center of power in a nation. John has been taken to the center of power and authority.

There are several levels to the majesty John sees. First is a natural, inanimate majesty. Around the throne is a rainbow (4:3), harkening back to the rainbow in Genesis 9 as a sign of God's covenant with humanity never to flood the earth again. Yet there is the specter of destruction surrounding God's throne: lightning and thunder (4:5).

Next, there is the spiritual majesty of the seven torches and seven spirits. There is nowhere to hide from His sight (Hebrews 4:13). He knows all and sees all.

Third, there are four supernatural creatures surrounding the throne. We have already seen how these creatures harken back to the visions of Ezekiel, another person who was shown visions “in the spirit” (or maybe “in the Spirit”). These creatures supersede any creature on earth in power and majesty, and yet what do they do, all day every day?

***And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,  
“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come!”***

**- Revelation 4:8**

These creatures exist to give worship to God, who is worthy of all praise and glory and honor. This leads us to the fourth level of God’s glory: the praise of human leaders. The 24 elders are traditionally interpreted as the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles, symbolizing the human leadership of God’s people throughout history. These are rulers of some sort, since they have crowns.

The crowns, however, serve no purpose but to highlight their worthlessness compared to the authority of God. They cast them down (4:10); human authority is nothing compared to God’s power. They, too, join in worship of the one on the throne.

Later, in 5:11-13, we see the fifth and sixth levels of God’s glory. The fifth is the “myriads and myriads” of angels (5:11). These beings, created by God and possessing great supernatural power, join in the expression of worship to God. Finally, “every creature in heaven and on earth” (5:13) joins in worship.

To begin the great and terrible visions of the future with a scene of total, infinite worship is surely no coincidence. The one who will pronounce the judgments and wrath to come is worth all the worship we can possibly give him. Supernatural creatures, leaders of humanity, and angels all join in the praise of God. If they can humble themselves before His throne, what about the rest of us? What should we be doing?

## **NOT JUST THE FATHER**

“In the right hand of him who was seated on the throne” is a scroll (5:1). We should pause for a moment and consider the nature of scrolls, because they will come up again. A scroll was an object of communication. While we favor the codex for our books, the most common form of written communication in the first century was a scroll (as opposed to a stone tablet or a single sheet).

When no one is found worthy to open the scroll, John was beset by horrible sadness (5:4). Why? Because he desperately wanted to know what was in the scroll! To see something presumably written by God, yet be unable to read its contents, should be devastating!

And so, the Lamb is introduced, not as a figure of war or destruction, but as one simply worthy of opening God’s scroll (5:5). Using names that obviously refer to Jesus (the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” from Genesis 49:9 and “the root of David” from Isaiah 11:1 and Romans 15:12), John is shown a vision of Jesus very different from the first in Revelation 1. Here Jesus



is shown as “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (5:6), a helpless creature who has been killed. Yet, contrasted with that helplessness, the Lamb has seven horns (horns represented power) and seven eyes (representing knowledge or awareness). The Lamb has perfect power and perfect knowledge. This is what makes the Lamb worthy to open the scroll!

When the four living creatures, the elders, the angels, and all of creation join in worship of the Lamb, the elders also give him something else: the prayers of the saints (5:8). The Lamb was slain, of course, as the great act of intercession between humanity and God! He is our advocate (1 John 2:1). No one can come to the Father except through him (John 14:6).

And so, all of creation joins in worship, not just of the Father, seated on the throne, but of the Lamb, Jesus, who was slain for us. The four living creatures, when they see the worship of the Lamb, say amen (5:14). Truly, Jesus is worthy of our worship!

## SO WHAT?

At this point we might try to draw some conclusions about the nature of these visions and symbols and numbers. At the most basic level, John’s first vision compels the reader to worship. All these amazing beings exist simply to worship God; what about us? God and Jesus are worthy of worship; from this premise flows their authority to judge and the reason for our faithfulness.

We might go a little deeper. Only the Lamb is worthy to open the scroll, the message from God. We see a similar idea in Hebrews:

***Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.***

**- Hebrews 1:1-3**

In addition to being worthy to open the scroll of God’s message, Jesus is also intimately connected with the coming judgment:

***The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”***

**- Acts 17:30-31**

At the seat of power in all reality sits God on the throne, and the Lamb receiving worship alongside Him. Amid all this worship, we should not forget the detail in 5:8, that they are also receiving the prayers of the saints. It can seem like God is so far away. Jesus left earth and ascended to heaven. Does he even care what is going on down here anymore? But God is not so separated from us as to forget us. Even in the midst of such worship, God hears us. We are not forgotten.

We can join in with the multitude in heaven whenever we wish to. John sees, not just those in heaven worshipping, but all of creation. When you worship, you never do so alone! Take every opportunity to join the heavenly chorus in praise of the only One who is truly worthy of worship.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Do you often think about Jesus as worthy of worship? How should John's vision inform our worship today?**

**2. Can you relate to John's desperation to know the contents of God's scroll? How does this (or should this) relate to our own Bible study and teaching?**

**3. What is the significance of the symbol of the Lamb? What were lambs used for in the history of God's people?**



# CYCLES OF SEVEN IN REVELATION

## The Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls



<b>1</b> <b>White Horse</b> Allowed to conquer and make conquest.	<b>1</b> <b>Hail and Fire</b> Earth, trees, grass consumed.	<b>1</b> <b>On the Earth</b> Harmful and painful sores.
<b>2</b> <b>Red Horse</b> Allowed to make war on the earth.	<b>2</b> <b>Burning Mountain</b> Sea becomes blood, kills creatures, ships.	<b>2</b> <b>In the Sea</b> Sea becomes blood and everything dies.
<b>3</b> <b>Black Horse</b> Comes with scales and scarcity of food.	<b>3</b> <b>Great Star Falls</b> Rivers become bitter and poison people.	<b>3</b> <b>In the Rivers</b> Rivers become blood.
<b>4</b> <b>Pale Horse</b> Ridden by Death. Kills 1/4 of the earth.	<b>4</b> <b>Darkness</b> Sun, moon, and stars are dimmed by 1/3.	<b>4</b> <b>On the Sun</b> Fierce heat scorches the people.
<b>5</b> <b>Altar of Souls</b> Those slain for the Word cry out.	<b>5</b> <b>Warrior Locusts</b> They torment the unfaithful.	<b>5</b> <b>On Beast's Throne</b> Beast's kingdom covered in darkness.
<b>6</b> <b>Natural Disaster</b> Earthquakes, dark, falling stars, fear.	<b>6</b> <b>Heavenly Host</b> Mounted troops kill 1/3 of mankind.	<b>6</b> <b>On the Euphrates</b> The water dries up.
<b>Interlude (7:1-17)</b> Sealing of Israel and Worship of Nations		
<b>7</b> <b>Silence in Heaven</b> God hears the prayers of the saints.	<b>7</b> <b>The Kingdom Arrives</b> God's temple is opened.	<b>7</b> <b>Into the Air</b> Earthquake cracks the great city.
<b>Interlude (10:1 - 11:14)</b> The Scroll and the Witness		
<b>Interlude (16:13-16)</b> Demonic Forces Assemble for Battle		



# 10. THE SEVEN SEALS

## Revelation 6:1 – 8:5

The beginning of Revelation 6 is a significant cultural marker in the book. Most of what the casual modern American Christian (or secular American) knows about Revelation comes from this point onward. The famous *Left Behind* books draw most of their material from chapter 6 onward, as do most of the various Bible code bestsellers.

The word “tribulation” is of particular import, found in Revelation 7:14:

***Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.***

**- Revelation 7:13-14**

This is the same word Jesus uses several times in the foretelling of the “abomination of Desolation” in Matthew 24, specifically in verses 9, 21, and 29. If you have never read the Bible, or never been particularly invested in Christianity, you might still be familiar with the terms *tribulation* and *rapture*. Those ideas, as conceived of by much of the modern world, come from this section of Revelation.

It is at this point that we should briefly begin to unpack some of the more literal interpretations of Revelation. The idea that there will be 144,000 people raptured ahead of the tribulation comes from a literal reading of Revelation 7 and Revelation 14:1-5. As we have seen, the way the authors of Matthew-Jude address the End Times does not support the idea that only a select few will be raptured, leaving behind more people on earth for an extended period.

More than that, as we will see in an examination of the seven seals in Revelation 6-8, such an interpretation relies on very selective literalism. If literally 144,000 will be raptured, then what does the text actually say about the 144,000? According to Revelation 7:4, the 144,000 that are sealed are specifically “from every tribe of the sons of Israel,” 12,000 from each one. Yet very few people talk about the 144,000 in terms of simply being Jews. Gentiles are included in the supposed rapture later, in 7:13-14, but no specific number is given. They are referred to as “a great multitude” in verse 9.

There is another reference to the 144,000 in chapter 14:

**No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.**

**- Revelation 14:3-5**

The text is unclear whether these are the same 144,000 as in chapter 7 or not. It seems unlikely that there would be two separate groups of such a specific number. Either way, these have some very specific characteristics: they are virgins, and they do not lie. Yet, in common discussion about the 144,000, no one ever mentions those two characteristics as necessary for inclusion in the group.

Of course, some might say that the language of virginity and truthfulness is simply symbolic or representative of people who are striving to live holy lives. But if that language is symbolic, why isn't the number? There's no linguistic or theological reason why a number must be literal in the same context as other figurative language. It seems rather arbitrary.

Returning to the seven seals, we see how a literal reading of Revelation must either be totally flawed or very arbitrary.

**When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.**

**- Revelation 6:12-14**

No one seriously tries to interpret this section of Revelation as literal, nor should they. If the "stars of the sky" fell to earth, the earth wouldn't exist in any inhabitable form any longer. It is impossible to calculate the ramifications of every mountain and island being "removed from its place," other than to posit that such a thing might also be an extinction level event. So of course, no one interprets the sixth seal literally.

But why, then, should the sealing of the 144,000 be literal? Again, other than the transition from the letters to the churches to the scene of the throne, there are no linguistic or stylistic markers to denote a switch in intended interpretation. There's no good reason to interpret one literally and not the other aside from "it feels right." Yet that is not a good reason for any interpretation of Scripture (2 Peter 1:16-21).

At this stage in our discussion, it is premature to claim that the book should be read primarily as symbolic. However, if we want to interpret major portions literally, we need a



more consistent, less arbitrary rubric for determining which sections are literal and which are figurative.

## THE SEVEN SEALS

A seal was a means of containing and authenticating a piece of communication. The communication in this case is the scroll in the hand of the one seated on the throne (5:1). A seal might have been imprinted with a signet ring, family crest, or some other symbol marking the sender or creator of a document. The seal was meant to show who the communication was from or on whose authority it was sent.

The seals of Revelation are no different. Remember that only the Lamb was worthy of breaking them. God established the seal, and only at the authority of the Lamb are they opened. What comes from their opening is not written communication, but it is still something that issues from the authority and power of the throne of God.

We can break the seals into three main categories: the four horsemen, the altar of the souls, and the judgment of God.

## THE FOUR HORSEMEN

The unsealing of the first four seals releases a very familiar set of figures: the so-called “horsemen of the apocalypse.” This is yet another facet of Revelation that has grown larger-than-life in the cultural zeitgeist. The ones in Revelation are a little different than the popular conception: Conquest (6:1-2), War (6:3-4), Famine (6:5-6, indicated by the obscenely high food prices), and Death (6:7-8).

This is another example of Revelation paralleling an Old Testament passage, and yet another of those parallels being found in Ezekiel (what we shall find as we continue through the book is an astonishing number of links to the book of Ezekiel):

***“For thus says the Lord God: How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast! But behold, some survivors will be left in it, sons and daughters who will be brought out; behold, when they come out to you, and you see their ways and their deeds, you will be consoled for the disaster that I have brought upon Jerusalem, for all that I have brought upon it. They will console you, when you see their ways and their deeds, and you shall know that I have not done without cause all that I have done in it, declares the Lord God.”***

**- Ezekiel 14:21-23**

Revelation 6:8 is almost an exact match to Ezekiel 14:21. The lesson from Ezekiel 14 was plain: God would use these “natural” forces to bring judgment upon the wicked, even if those who deserved punishment were His own people. There is a special emphasis on God’s purpose and action in the working of the sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence; even though these were things they were familiar with in general, God wanted them to know that He was in control of their punishment.

The four horsemen of Revelation demonstrate the same lesson. Conquest, war, famine, and death are a natural part of living in a fallen world, but there are times when God uses them to further His own means. Remember that these are coming out of God’s seal on His own scroll, opened by the Lamb. God is in control of even these forces!

Ezekiel was a message of judgment on those who had oppressed the faithful and distorted the word of God. We see the same sort of themes in the fifth seal.

## **THE ALTAR OF SOULS**

***When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.***

**- Revelation 6:9-11**

It is natural, as Christians suffer in a fallen world, beset by various pressures and persecution, to cry out “how long!?” We, too, wonder why God is taking so long in executing judgment on the wicked. Why does he allow those who oppress to continue to live and operate in the world?

In the fifth seal, we see an answer, echoing the words of Peter:

***But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.***

**- 2 Peter 3:8-9**

God is waiting, even now, for the “number of their fellow servants...to be complete” (Revelation 6:11). The longer God delays, the more time people have to demonstrate faithfulness and come to repentance. One of the costs of such generosity is the suffering of

present Christians. But our endurance in some way allows more people to join the winning side!

Make no mistake, ultimate judgment is coming. The sixth seal releases terrible natural disaster and devastation (Revelation 6:12-13), leading us to one of the pivotal passages of the book:

***Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”***

**- Revelation 6:15-17**

## **THE 144,000**

The sealing of the 144,000 from Israel (7:1-8), and the calling of the multitude from the nations (7:9-17), follow logically from the preceding fifth and sixth seal. The souls of the slain are told to “rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete” (6:11), and the kings of the earth ask “who can stand?” (6:17). The interlude before the last seal answers the kings and reassures the saints!

Remember that a seal was a sign of authority or authenticity signifying that a letter belonged to or came from a certain person. For those in Israel to be sealed meant they had come into possession of God; they belonged to him! In the next section we are told very specifically who is in the multitude:

***Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.***

**- Revelation 7:13-14**

Who can stand? Those who have the seal of God and belong to Him (Ephesians 1:11-14). Who can stand? Those who have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14; Hebrews 9:13-14; 1 John 1:7). It is they who do not have to worry about the “the great day of their wrath” (Revelation 6:17). And it is they who will complete the number of the faithful, as those who have been slain and now serve as the “cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1).

## MAJOR THEME: ONLY THE CHRISTIAN HAS HOPE!

Ezekiel 14 mentioned those who would survive the judgment of God and understand why it happened. Some have interpreted Revelation 7:14 (“those who are coming out of the great tribulation”) as a reference to the rapture, when the faithful will be taken up to heaven to be spared the coming horrors. However, the parallel to Ezekiel belies a different reading: John is shown that some will be spared God’s judgment. In the great judgment of mankind, not all will be destroyed. The faithful will emerge, either in this life or the next.

Remember that Jesus urged the churches in Revelation 2-3 to remain faithful, to stay strong, to ultimately conquer over their failings and persecutions through faith in him. The whole book urges the same thing.

God is in control, even though it may not seem like it. The four horsemen of the apocalypse are always present in the world, aren’t they? Has there ever been a time when humans were not trying to expand and conquer others? Has there ever been a time of total peace? Famine indiscriminately strikes the rich and the poor, and of course death will always be a constant blight on humanity. If the seals foretell some specific future event, how would we even be able to tell? These things are always a problem for us! (And remember, Jesus and Paul were quite clear that Jesus would return during a period of normal life.)

Rather, the point is simple and profound: the great forces of history (including, but not limited to, conquest, war, famine, and death) are not beyond His sight or influence. Even though we too suffer, as people who live in this fallen world, God sees the suffering we experience and is ready to administer vengeance (Romans 12:19-21). The final seal shows us the care God has for His children:

***When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.***

**- Revelation 8:1-4**

The seventh seal, following such judgment and destruction, is a period of silence, harkening back to the seventh day of creation and the Sabbath rest in Israel. God pauses to hear the prayers of the saints. Even though He is constantly busy with His work, God always has time to hear us. We are not forgotten; we are not abandoned.

Who can stand? Only the Christian!

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Do you belong to God? Have you washed your robes in the blood of the Lamb? How can you be sure? How confident are you that you are part of the faithful who will conquer?**

**2. Remember John's despair when no one could open the scroll and read God's message? Do you think he expected this kind of communication to come from the breaking of the seals? Has there ever been a time when God's word said something you were not expecting or that made you uncomfortable?**

**3. Have you ever cried "how long!?" to God? If so, what answers can you find for your question in this section of Revelation?**



# 11. THE SEVEN TRUMPETS

## Revelation 8:6-9:21; 11:15-19

### REINTERPRETING REVELATION

In light of such crazy symbolic imagery, the question must be asked: *why*? If the book is not intended to be literal, then why is John shown all these crazy metaphorical things? Why go through all this complicated nonsense?

It is fitting at this stage to spend a bit of time unpacking some larger theories of interpreting Revelation. As we have previously discussed (in the chart on page 55), there are basically four mainline interpretations of Revelation. They diverge in large part based on the amount of text each theory posits should be taken literally. Let us briefly consider some parts of each theory.

### IS REVELATION A CODED MESSAGE?

One of the major interpretations of Revelation (the *preterist* view) is that it is not about *our* future at all, but rather about the future of the Roman Empire, from the perspective of the original readers. Under this theory (which we unpack more in our discussion of the great dragon in chapters 12-14), John is being shown a vision of Rome's downfall. Rome was one of the primary oppressors of the church at the time, so the theory goes, and so they needed to be reassured of God's ultimate triumph over their very immediate enemies.

Thus, the reason the book is so fantastical and symbolic presents itself; John, as an exile under Roman captivity, *couldn't* just come out and say that the book was about Rome's fall, or else they never would have allowed the letter to leave the island, and would have persecuted the church *even more* once they found such a letter in their possession. So, Jesus conveyed this to John in code.

This makes a certain amount of sense, yet has one major flaw, as a theory: when have God's people or prophets ever demonstrated this kind of caution or fear in preaching about the enemies of God? Daniel, in exile and captivity in Babylon, very explicitly told the king that things would not go well for him (Daniel 2:31-45; 4:19-27). Daniel and his friends were not shy about opposing the king's unrighteousness in their captivity; they trusted that God would take care of them (and if they perished, it would have been right anyway, in Daniel 3:16-18).

The apostles demonstrated the same attitude before the Jewish council (Acts 4:1-22). Jeremiah didn't *want* to preach, because he knew it would result in harmful consequences for himself, but he did it anyway (Jeremiah 20).

So, I wouldn't say that Revelation is a coded message born out of necessity to hide it from the Romans. However, Ezekiel *does* stand as a similar example of a prophet who pronounced judgment in highly symbolic language meant to represent things that would actually happen. So perhaps Revelation falls into the same category of prophetic utterance as that book.

## **CYCLES OF SEVEN**

Two other major theories posit a more long-term view of the book. Supposedly, the book is still not really about events future to *us*, but the timeframe the book describes goes far beyond the Roman Empire. These theories found themselves in the repeated sevens of Revelation (the chart on page 79).

One school of thought (the *historicist* view) is that Revelation describes the whole of human history from the first century to the end of time. The cycles of seven are landmarks throughout history, leading up to the final victory and the return of Jesus at the end of the book. According to this theory, *some* of the book describes events future to us, but probably not very much. Rather, we can trace the rise and fall of major empires throughout history in seals, the bowls, the dragon and the beasts, and the harlot of Babylon.

The main problem with this is it becomes very hard to pin down exactly what means what. If some of the book describes events future to us, when does that start? This would change, of course, from generation to generation. There's no really good way to identify any of the major parts of Revelation with any specific historic events.

The second school of thought (the *spiritualist* view) is that the cycles of seven aren't describing any specific historic events at all, but rather demonstrate repeated patterns of human behavior throughout history, and the way God interacts with and influences those patterns of behavior. I personally find a lot of merit in this theory, except that there does seem to be an escalation, or progression, in the text. The seven seals result in the destruction of a quarter of various things (the water, the trees, etc.). The seven trumpets result in a third being destroyed, and the seven bowls destroy all they touch. The cycles of seven aren't just exact repeats, it seems.

## **THE PROBLEM WITH BEING LITERAL**

Finally, we come to the most popular of the four major schools (the *futurist* view), which posits that most of Revelation describes the final years of human history, leading up to the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 16:16) and the triumphant return of Jesus.



As we have previously stated (and this is the last time we will make this point in great detail), most of this interpretation depends on large parts of the book being literal (the 144,000, the actual battle of Armageddon, the Millennial reign, etc.). Once you bind so much of the book as being literal things that will happen, there's no good reason to stop. This brings us to the seven trumpets and the interlude in Revelation 10-11. If, as many teach, the two witnesses in Revelation represent real people that will eventually be on earth and do the things they do, then why wouldn't the seven trumpets also be describing real things that will happen in the future?

But, of course, they can't. One of the trumpets results in a third of the oceans turning to blood (8:8-9). Were this to actually happen, it would be an extinction-level event. Very few people think that horse-sized warrior locusts are literally going to appear on earth and wage war (9:1-11), with good reason! But the symbolism becomes very arbitrary if that is the case. Why two real witnesses who will perform miracles and be killed by the beast, but not warrior locusts? In the scheme of supernatural power, neither of them is less plausible than the other; both would require supernatural power of God to create and maintain. So why would one be literal and not the other?

Ideas have consequences. If the book literally describes events leading up to the end of time, then it almost directly contradicts the teaching of Jesus, Paul, and Peter concerning the last days. They all taught that the end would come unexpectedly, without warning. This was impetus to be ready! Yet, if Revelation describes momentous and fantastical events that will precede the end, then it seems to be that the end of time *will not be* unexpected. We will have years to see it coming!

## THE SEVEN TRUMPETS

Let us return then to a discussion of the seven trumpets beginning in Revelation 8:6. Where a seal was a marker of authority, a trumpet served to herald the arrival of something or someone momentous or important. They were used to announce the arrival of important dignitaries to a city, or to announce impending battle or natural disaster. The trumpets of Revelation announce or herald judgment from God. As we read through the list, an obvious Old Testament parallel becomes clear.

The seven trumpets do not herald anything truly new. We see hail and fire (8:7), the sea becoming blood (8:8), light becoming darkened (8:12), darkness repeated (9:2), a swarm of locusts (9:3), and death (9:14-19). Even imperfectly, what does this list remind you of? What would it have reminded the original readers of? John is actually quite explicit in the parallel toward the end of the sixth trumpet:

**The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.**

**- Revelation 9:20-21**

If the seals parallel God's judgment in Ezekiel, the trumpets parallel God's judgment in Exodus. God sent the plagues on Exodus to demonstrate His power and might (Exodus 9:16). He sent them because His people were suffering at the hands of a cruel earthly power (Exodus 3:7-8). And despite the repeated judgment pronounced on Egypt, they ultimately did not repent (Exodus 14:5-9). These are the same things we see in the seven trumpets of Revelation! Despite God's judgments, the people refused to repent (Revelation 9:20-21).

If this is describing a specific historical event, either in the past or in the future, it is impossible to decipher which one. This is the normal pattern of human behavior! Despite God's repeated judgment on nations, people do not turn to Him *en masse*. They continue to rebel and deny His authority and rule.

In this we see the significance of the escalating destruction, from one quarter to one third to total. One of the reasons God allows suffering is to turn people back to their need for him. We see the same thing happen to Israel over and over in the Old Testament. The plagues of Exodus showed a similar escalation, leading to at least some in Egypt realizing their error, before hardening their hearts once more. God sends judgment, and it is up to us to respond in repentance, or we will face increasing wrath and judgment.

This is the pattern of history: God allows people to make their own choices, and when this leads to a certain threshold of human sin and misery, God wipes them out and lets other people try in their place. The only constant, from Abraham to today, is that God keeps for Himself a remnant of people who remain faithful to Him.

## **THE SEVENTH SEAL**

The problem, from our perspective (and the perspective of the saints in Revelation) is that we must live here while God hands out judgment. Being faithful to Him does not exempt us from the suffering of living in a fallen, sinful world. This is another mark against the popular idea of the rapture: throughout history, God has allowed His people to suffer as part of His larger interactions with humankind. In the previous 26 books of the New Testament, when God's prophets spoke of God's people being spared, it was in the context of the final judgment and separation. The apostles didn't promise that Christians would be

spared God's earthly judgment, but rather that they (and we) would be spared the ultimate eternal fate reserved for the wicked.

The seventh trumpet, which doesn't come until much later in the text, shows us this same idea:

***Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth."***

**- Revelation 11:15-18**

If trumpets served as heralds of something important to soon come, what do these trumpets herald? God's judgment is coming, and only those who serve God will be spared.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Why would Jesus show John so many visions that parallel Old Testament stories? What is the benefit of that to the original readers and to us?**

**2. Which of the four major schools of interpretation makes the most sense to you? Why is that?**

**3. What leads people to have such hard hearts that they can't or won't repent in the face of God's judgment? How can we tell if we have such hard hearts?**

# 12. GOD COMMUNICATES!

## Revelation 10:1 – 11:14

Today, God primarily communicates to humanity in two ways: through His Word, the Bible, and through His people, the church: written communication and living witnesses. God has communicated more directly in visions, dreams, and through prophets in the past, but those times have ceased.

It is interesting, then, what transpires in the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets. Three communications come from God: the voice in the thunders (10:4), the scroll (10:8ff), and the two witnesses (11). The voice from the thunder is sealed up (prevented from being heard), the scroll is eaten (changing the one who eats it), and the witnesses are heard, but persecuted and eventually killed.

### THE VOICE IN THE THUNDERS

*And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.” And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.*

*- Revelation 10:4-7*

John hears something from God but is prevented from writing it down. God decrees that, at least temporarily, it is to remain a mystery. God’s message to mankind is often referred to as a mystery (Romans 11, 1 Corinthians 2, Ephesians 3. The same word for *mystery* is used in Matthew 13:11, translated *secrets* in the ESV). The word *mystery* denotes some hidden or secret thing or knowledge. The message of God is a mystery in three ways.

First, God’s message of salvation was a mystery for millennia under the Old Covenant. This is what is meant by passages like this from Ephesians:

***When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.***

**- Ephesians 3:4-5**

Consider how many things were unknown in the old covenant: who would be included in salvation, how would salvation be accomplished, and how would one partake in it? But the mystery has been revealed, at least in part. The Messiah has come and “create[d] in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” (Ephesians 2:15). The Gentiles have been welcomed in, a message that Revelation has repeatedly emphasized (5:13; 7:9-12).

Secondly, God’s message is *still* a mystery to those who are lost. Consider this statement in 1 Corinthians:

***Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.***

**- 1 Corinthians 2:6-8**

In a sense, the mystery of God persists to this day; those who will not accept it keep themselves clouded in ignorance. They have been blinded by “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). This is another point of emphasis in Revelation; despite the clearly obvious signs of God’s power, many refuse to repent (Revelation 9:20-21).

Finally, there are parts of God’s message that are still a mystery, even to His people. How big would the Bible have to be to convey everything God knows? We do not know everything there is to know! This is in part why Revelation is so difficult to understand.

Some have taken the angel’s words to John to mean that the voice in the thunders refers to the completed Scriptures and the church age. It is true that we now know everything we need to know to be saved and live lives pleasing to the Lord. Remember, however, that John is being shown “what must take place after this” (Revelation 4:1). The revealing of the mystery is something that must wait until “the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel” (10:7). We jumped ahead in the last section to the seventh trumpet: the Kingdom of God arrived fully, and the servants of God were rewarded, and the temple of God was opened. This seems to parallel Paul’s own thoughts about the mystery of God’s knowledge:

***For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like***

***a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.***

**- 1 Corinthians 13:9-12**

There are some things we cannot know in this life. This is where faith and hope enter the picture (1 Corinthians 13:13). A major lesson from Revelation is the importance of trusting in God's care and control, even over things we cannot hope to understand. All will be revealed in His time.

## **THE SCROLL**

We have previously seen what scrolls represent: communication! They were (and are) a means of transferring knowledge and information from one party to another. What happens with this scroll?

***So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, "Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey." And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter.***

**- Revelation 10:9-10**

Consuming or eating was not an unheard of analogy for learning from God. The Hebrew writers told the original readers that they still needed "milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness" (Hebrews 5:12-13). Peter tells his readers to "long for the pure spiritual milk" (1 Peter 2:2) to which many translations add "of the word."

But here again we find a direct parallel in Ezekiel:

***And he said to me, "Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and he gave me this scroll to eat. And he said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it." Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. And he said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with my words to them.***

**- Ezekiel 3:1-4**

The process of internalizing and absorbing God's truth is very much like eating and absorbing nutrients. What we eat affects our body, our health, and our ability to function.

What we learn and absorb mentally, changes who we are and what we care about. Ezekiel was told to eat the scroll, then preach to Israel. John was told that the scroll would turn his stomach bitter but be sweet in his mouth. Accepting God's truth is difficult. It can be painful to truly absorb the truth of God's teaching. But in spreading that to others, we offer them life itself. Like Ezekiel, John was then told he must continue to prophesy (Revelation 10:11).

## THE TWO WITNESSES

Finally, we come to the witnesses. The word *witness* is commonly used in the New Testament to refer to one who speaks a message about God or Christ (Acts 1:8; 2:32; 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 2:10, etc.). These witnesses are special in several ways.

First, we see that they will prophesy for 1,260 days. In the verse prior we see that the enemies of God will be allowed to persist for 42 months. 42 months is, of course, 1,260 days (if you assume each month has 30 days). This amount of time is a very common one in apocalyptic literature. In Revelation 12 the woman who gives birth to the holy child is given respite for 1,260 days. In Revelation 13 the beast is given authority for 42 months. We see a very similar amount of time in Daniel:

***And from the time that the regular burnt offering is taken away and the abomination that makes desolate is set up, there shall be 1,290 days. Blessed is he who waits and arrives at the 1,335 days. But go your way till the end. And you shall rest and shall stand in your allotted place at the end of the days."***

**- Daniel 12:11-13**

What is significant about this amount of time? Daniel is shown a vision of a ruler who would be given authority for "time, times, and half a time" (7:25) and was told that "time, times, and half a time" would be connected to the timeline of his visions (12:7). Revelation itself parallels "time, times, and half a time" and 1,260 days (Revelation 12:6, 14). Note that 42 months is 3.5 years, perfectly half of seven. We have seen sevens over and over and over in the Bible, denoting completeness. The repetition of exactly half of seven probably denotes incompleteness or something that is temporary or imperfect.

These witnesses, then, will speak for a temporary amount of time. They will have miraculous power (11:5-6), be killed and rise again (11:7-11), and ascend into heaven (11:12). Each of these characteristics harken back to other witnesses of God in Scripture. Many of God's witnesses had miraculous power, but perhaps none so important as the 12 apostles. Who else do we know of who was killed and rose three days later? Didn't Elijah cause a famine in the land? Moses, of course, is famous for striking the earth with plagues.

Here, then, is the puzzle of the witnesses: do they represent something in the past or in the future? Will there be two physical people who come to Jerusalem (v. 8) in the future and



do all these things, or is this section reminding us about the role of witnesses in God's plan throughout history? The idea that these are two future real physical people has all the same problems as any other literal reading of Revelation. More than anything else, they seem to be an amalgamation of many different features of God's prophets throughout the Bible.

What is more significant is how they are treated for speaking God's truth: the beast (we will talk more about the beast in the next section) kills them, and people rejoice over their deaths. People were unhappy to hear from God's witnesses and wanted them out of the way. This is how the world has *always* treated those who speak God's truth. Should we expect to escape such treatment?

***Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.***

**- 1 Peter 4:12-14**

## **GOD'S MESSAGE WILL PREVAIL!**

Most importantly, the witnesses who are killed eventually rise again. Despite the beast's best efforts and the rejoicing of the city, those who witness for the truth of God are victorious!

Despite what anyone does, the message of God *will* prevail! We may not know everything there is to know (the voice in the thunders), but we must still accept and internalize God's truth, allowing it to change us (the scroll). Then, we must share what we have heard with those around us (the witnesses). We *will* be persecuted, but in the end, we will triumph, *if* we remain faithful (Revelation 2:10).

The seventh trumpet *seems* to herald the ultimate victory of Christ. His kingdom fully arrives, and he is ready to reign "forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). However, we are only halfway through the book! What could come after the ultimate victory of Christ?

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Consider the voice in the thunders, sealed up until the end. Is there anything about God you wish you understood? Is there anything about the Bible that doesn't make sense to you? What have you done to uncover the mystery of God's truth, and how can we reach acceptance that there are some things we just won't know until heaven?**

**2. Consider the scroll: have you "eaten" God's word? Have you allowed it to change your life, even when it may be uncomfortable and painful? If not, why not?**

**3. Consider the witnesses. What have you witnessed of God's greatness? Have you tried sharing that with others? How might it change our witnessing if we expect persecution?**

# 13. THE GREAT WAR

## Revelation 12:1 – 13:18

At this point, the narrative of Revelation shifts for the fourth time (the previous shifts coming at 4:1, 6:1, and 8:1), and we begin to dive into the *really* fantastical stuff. The saga of the dragon and the woman fits right in with many ancient battle-stories and origin-myths, though of course John is being shown a vision of something true.

The first question, as it has been with many of John's visions, is *when*. When will this great battle in heaven take place? Or, has it already taken place? Several events in the text seem to describe things that have already happened, from John's temporal point of view. Is the conflict in 12:1-6 different from the one in 12:13-17, or are they the same event described twice? If this is all some future event, what do we do with the apparent contradictions in the rest of the New Testament? None of these questions are easy to answer, but some are easier than others.

### WHO ARE THE FIGURES?

There are seven primary figures in Revelation 12 and 13: the dragon, the woman, the child, Michael and the angelic host, the rest of the woman's descendants, and the two beasts. As we unpack this vision of these great signs in heaven (12:1-3), identifying the various figures will be of tantamount importance. We will discuss those who are relatively easy to identify first.

### THE DRAGON

Fortunately, we are explicitly told who the dragon is:

***And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.***

**- Revelation 12:9**

The dragon is the great antagonist of the whole Bible story. The word "Satan" is particularly important. The English word is a transliteration of the Greek *Satanas*, which means "one who accuses." This is a word that would often be used in a court setting; the one who makes the accusation of a crime. That is indeed one of Satan's primary activities throughout the course of the Bible story (his work in Job, for example).

Many have traditionally interpreted the sweeping down “a third of the stars of heaven” (12:4) to refer to the Devil’s angels (12:9), those who rebelled against heaven with him in the beginning (see also Jude 6).

## **THE CHILD**

It is similarly easy to identify the child. He is “one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” and he was “caught up to God and to his throne” (12:5). This is a clear allusion to Psalm 2:7-9, a passage that is cited as referencing Jesus in Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5. Only one prophetic figure can properly be said to rule all the nations: Jesus, the Messiah!

If the dragon is the Devil, and the child is the Christ, that gives us a fairly good indication of what is happening in several sections of the text:

***And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne...***

**- Revelation 12:4-5**

There are several instances in the gospels that this vision might be alluding to, but it is very unlikely that this could be a future event. Even in Revelation, when Jesus returns to earth it will be to conquer and defeat the forces of evil, not to be chased off by them (Revelation 19:11-16). All the promises in the previous 26 books of the New Testament emphasize the same thing (1 Peter 5:4; Hebrews 9:27-28). So, what could it mean? Some think this refers to the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4, when Satan tried to derail the plan of salvation. Some think this refers to the events of the cross, when Satan thought he would win but was ultimately defeated.

Either way, this places the events of at least Revelation 12:1-6 firmly in the past. What does that tell us about the rest of the vision?

## **THE WOMAN**

The woman “gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (12:5). If the male child is indeed Jesus Christ, then our candidates for the woman narrow dramatically. Further, we read of the woman later:

***Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.***

**- Revelation 12:17**

The woman did not just give birth to the Christ, but to those who “hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Who are they? Certainly the 144,000 Israelites and the multitude of worshippers in chapter 7. More broadly, there are two main ways to think about the offspring; either they represent the specific faithful who will endure the tribulation at the End of Days, or they represent all Christians throughout history.

Either way, the woman isn’t a specific historical figure (except *maybe* Mary, the mother of Jesus). Perhaps the woman represents Israel, who eventually brought forth the Messiah and who were stewards of the oracles of God and through whom the church began (Romans 3:1-4; 11:11-12). Some indeed believe that the woman represents future Israel, who will be driven to the wilderness in the tribulation to be shepherded by God. Or perhaps this woman represents Eve, the mother of all mankind?

## THE WAR IN HEAVEN

Revelation 12:7-17 are some of the more hotly debated verses in the book of Revelation. The question, as it always is, is *when*. When did the war take place? Or is it a future war? Is this the original war of rebellion when Satan fell or some future war that will cast him to earth to start the tribulation?

In the flow of the text, the war seems to be a response to the dragon’s failure to kill the child. As we have previously discussed, that failure probably represents either the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness or the triumph of Jesus on the cross. There are only two other verses in the Bible that possibly allude to a war in heaven around the time of Jesus’s victory over death:

***The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!” And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”***

- Luke 10:17-20

***Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven: “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”***

- John 12:28-32

Jesus told the seventy-two that he “saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” when they were triumphant over any demons. As he entered into the final days before his crucifixion, he announced that “now will the ruler of this world be cast out.” The timing seems strange, if Satan had already been cast out from heaven at the initial fall.

Except, the Old Testament does not show Satan barred from heaven. In the book of Job, Satan is free to come and go as he pleases from the presence of God (Job 1:6; 2:1). Zechariah is shown a vision of Satan standing before the angel of the Lord, accusing Joshua the high priest (Zechariah 3:1-2).

Putting it all together, we see what might be a coherent timeline for both Revelation 12 and the overall arc of Satan’s journey. In the Old Testament, perhaps he was free to come and go as he pleased from God’s presence (Job 1:6; 2:1). In the gospels, he greedily begins preparing to destroy Jesus and his mission. At the cross, he believes he has been victorious (Revelation 12:1-6). Then, Jesus returns, conquering over the power of death! In a rage, Satan wages war in heaven and is cast out (John 12:28-32; Revelation 12:7-9). Finally, what does he do?

***Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.***

**- Revelation 12:17**

Isn’t this what Satan is continuing to do, even to this day? The New Testament uses war language to describe our conflict with Satan (Ephesians 6:10-20). We are told that he is the “god of this world” and that he blinds “the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

It is important to note that this is *the* struggle of the Bible story. All the way back in Genesis, God foretold this conflict (Genesis 3:14-15). This is a point in favor of interpreting the woman to be Eve; God foretold that there would be “enmity between you and the woman [Eve], and between your offspring and her offspring” (3:15, clarification added).

From the beginning of the Bible to the end, there is an eternal struggle over the souls of humankind. God wants us to love and obey Him, and Satan is doing all that he can to draw us away from God and into destruction!

## **THE BEASTS**

To this end, the dragon calls forth two beasts to help him in his conquest. The first beast, like the dragon, has seven heads and ten horns (we will unpack the heads and horns when we get to chapter 17 with a more explicit explanation). This beast is an amalgam of the four

beasts shown to Daniel in Daniel 7:1-8; a lion (v. 4), a bear (v. 5), a leopard (v. 6), and one with ten horns (v. 7). Daniel's vision especially emphasized the fourth beast, who would set up a kingdom, whose horns represented 10 rulers, and who would:

***...speak words against the Most High,  
and shall wear out the saints of the Most High,  
and shall think to change the times and the law;  
and they shall be given into his hand  
for a time, times, and half a time.***

- Daniel 7:25

The beast in Revelation, similarly:

***And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation...***

- Revelation 13:5-7

More interestingly, the beast of Revelation had “a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed” (13:3). Many have tied this to the Imperial Cult that claimed that the emperor Nero (a famous enemy of Christians in the first century, who committed suicide) had risen from the dead. Two of the seven cities that received the original letter had strong ties to the Imperial Cult; Smyrna was the birthplace of the Cult, and Pergamum had a prominent temple devoted to the emperor-worship. Those who take this interpretive approach say that this beast represents Nero, the risen emperor. Others say this beast simply represents Rome in general and the persecution the church faced. Still others say that this is the Antichrist who will come and rule on behalf of Satan in the tribulation (though, as we have previously noted, the rest of the New Testament teaches that there isn't just one Antichrist).

The second beast rises in service to the first, causing it to be worshipped (13:12) and performing various signs to lead people astray (13:13-15). Perhaps this represents the Imperial Cult that fostered worship of the emperors, especially Nero. Perhaps this is simply the agents of Roman rule. Perhaps this is the “man of lawlessness” from 2 Thessalonians 2:

***The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.***

- 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10

Things start to get murky down certain lines of interpretation at this point. If the first beast is the Antichrist, and the man of lawlessness is the Antichrist, then it's unclear who the second beast is meant to represent. Either way, the main lesson is the same: Christians must be on guard for those who "lead astray, if possible, even the elect" (Matthew 24:24).

## **THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST**

I do not know why some numbers stick in the general zeitgeist and others fall by the wayside. The number 3.5 is mentioned many more times in Revelation than 666, but I would wager that most American adults are familiar with the "number of the beast." What does 666 mean, and what does it mean to be marked?

This is one of the most abused passages in the whole Bible. Any time there is some new technology or some threat of authoritarian rule, people cry out about the mark of the beast. Social credit systems and citizen registers of all stripes are spoken against with dire undertones. Can I be plain? This is ridiculous!

We must *at least try* to be consistent with our interpretation of Revelation. If the beasts are real historical figures who will come before the last days, it will not be without warning. Such an interpretation also assumes that the rapture has already happened; has it? Has it ever? If you want to interpret the mark of the beast literally, you can at least feel safe until all the saints (or at least 144,000 Israelites) disappear in the rapture.

If it's symbolic, then what does this all mean? The simplest explanation of the number 666 is that it is perfectly incomplete, being 3 (a symbol of perfection, in the vein of the trinity and the resurrection of the third day) incomplete numbers (6 being one shy of 7, another number used to denote completeness or perfection in the Bible). 666 is perfectly incomplete!

666 is used a couple other times in the Bible. One is in a list of genealogical records and can be dismissed as pure randomness (Ezra 2:13). The other is during the reign of Solomon:

***Now the weight of gold that came to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold, besides that which came from the explorers and from the business of the merchants, and from all the kings of the west and from the governors of the land...Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom.***

***- 1 Kings 10:14-15, 23, paralleled in 2 Chronicles 9:13ff***

This was an absurd amount of money. What did Solomon do with all that wealth? He bought many horses and chariots (1 Kings 10:26) in *direct* violation of God's instructions for kings (Deuteronomy 17:16). The very next chapter (1 Kings 11) details Solomon's fall from the Lord. The immense wealth and allure of foreign wives drew Solomon away from God.



What did the beast do with the mark in Revelation? He limited trade (13:17). Perhaps the number is meant to evoke the fall of Solomon and remind people that material wealth corrupts even the wisest of God's people, and therefore those who control its distribution (like the leaders of the empire) have many ways to allure and entice the faithful away from God.

## **GET TO THE POINT!**

This brings us, finally, to the main point of the whole section:

***If anyone has an ear, let him hear:  
If anyone is to be taken captive,  
to captivity he goes;  
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,  
with the sword must he be slain.  
Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.***

**- Revelation 13:9-10**

Jesus had already warned the church in Smyrna (where the Imperial Cult was founded):

***I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.***

**- Revelation 2:9-11**

Whatever interpretation one ultimately decides to go with, the main point of the text is the same: Satan is going to use any means he can, including the governments of earth and prominent earthly figures, to wage war on Christians. Sometimes he will use overt violence and force. Sometimes he will use more insidious incentives to lure Christians away from the faith. What the seven churches of Asia needed to be reminded of, what *we* need to be reminded of, is the importance of enduring! Only the one who is "faithful unto death" will receive the crown of life.

We are part of a spiritual war. Perhaps the bulk of John's visions have already passed, representing the oppression and fall of Rome. Perhaps it is yet to come, foretelling the tribulation of the last days. Either way, they and we need to hear the same message: *here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints!*

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Refer to the chart on page 55; at this point in our discussion, which view of Revelation seems most reasonable to you? Why or why not? (Remember, we should not feel comfortable in our interpretation of the book until we have studied the whole thing!)**

**2. Do you feel the enmity of Satan in your life? What kinds of events or situations in your life might be due to his influence? Do you feel like you are in a war? What are you doing to combat him?**

**3. If we are in a war with the great dragon, what are some tools God has given us for the fight? How can we put them to use for our own sake and in defense of others?**

# 14. INTERLUDE

## Revelation 14:1-20

The narrative pauses for a bit again in chapter 14, after John's visions of the war in heaven and the beasts, and before the last cycle of seven, the bowls of wrath. During this interlude we again see the 144,000, this time in greater detail, and the world is given a dire warning: repent or face judgment.

### THE STORY SO FAR

At this point it is fitting to again summarize some of the major themes we have seen so far in the book of Revelation.

**Major Theme 1: God is mighty!**

**Major Theme 2: Jesus is worthy!**

**Major Theme 3: Expect persecution!**

**Major Theme 4: Judgment is coming!**

**Major Theme 5: Only the Christian has hope!**

All of these themes serve a singular purpose: to reinforce, encourage, and buttress a people facing dire persecution and difficult circumstances. Not only were the original readers *already* facing hard times, the book foretells more difficulty to come. To sustain them, Jesus shows John many visions that ultimately end with the enemies of God being destroyed and the people of God being victorious. This is a book about hope and endurance (Revelation 13:10).

To this end, the book certainly has value for Christians of any age. Nailing down the specifics of the visions is hard, but the overall message is clear: we are at war, but those who serve God should have total confidence in victory. That victory may not be in this life (many of the visions refer to saints who have been slain in spiritual battle), but God will avenge the fallen.

### THE REST OF THE STORY

As has probably become apparent, I am inclined to agree with the *Preterists* (who think the bulk of the text describes the fall of Rome) or the *Spiritualists* (who think the text conveys general principles unmoored from specific historic situations) in their interpretation of Revelation. The former interpretation would have been the most relevant

for the original audience, while the latter allows the book to harmonize most with the rest of the teachings in the New Testament.

The remaining chapters of the book escalate in importance to the *Historicists* (who think the book outlines all of history) and the *Futurists* (who think the book primarily depicts the time of the end). Most of their interpretations are based in these final chapters and the word-pictures therein. Many of the ideas that have taken hold of modern pop-religion come from these chapters.

I want to pause before we continue to remind us to be ever alert for *confirmation bias*, the tendency to interpret new information in ways that confirm our previously held beliefs. In our interpretation of Revelation, I hope we have seen the value in returning to Old Testament stories and prophecies to aid in our understanding. And, I hope we have kept the original audience in mind as we have strived to understand the text the way it was intended.

A final note, before we continue; many people in every generation since John have thought that the book described events of their lifetime. If the *Spiritualists* are wrong, then so far, each generation has been wrong. We are all inclined to think that events of *our* time are the most important and momentous in human history. But we are wrong. The most important 30 years of history has already happened: when God incarnate walked the earth and died for the sins of humanity. Not even Jesus knew the time when he would return; it is hubris in the utmost to think that we can figure it out. We must be careful to allow the text to speak for itself and not impose our own biases.

## THE 144,000 REVISITED

It is probable (though not certain) that the 144,000 in chapter 14 are the same as those seen in chapter 7, unless 144,000 is meant to be purely symbolic, representing the total number of the faithful. In chapter 7, they were sealed from the tribes of Israel; the same specificity is not used in chapter 14.

These 144,000 stand in contrast to those who succumbed to worship of the beasts in chapter 13. What makes them stand out from those in the world? They stand on Mount Zion (14:1), they sing a new song (14:3), they are virgins (14:4), and they tell no lies (14:5). Conveniently, no one who believes the 144,000 are a literal number of people who will be raptured tries to hold to the requirement of virginity.

More importantly, these 144,000 serve as a positive example of the warning to follow.

## A DIRE WARNING

Three angels appear to give three words of warning. First is the command to “fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made

heaven and earth” (14:7). One of the major themes we have seen thus far is the importance of worshipping God. Revelation is a book full of worship. We must take the warning to heart; God and Jesus are worthy of worship!

The third warning states the same in the inverse: “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath” (14:9-10). Who do we give our loyalty, praise, and worship to? Who commands our allegiance? Every reader of the book must continually ask themselves this question.

Once again, the angels make a plea to the reader:

***Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”***

**- Revelation 14:12-13**

If we can maintain our faith and obedience, if we can reserve our worship for God and Jesus, then we no longer need fear death (Hebrews 2:15)! We can view death, not as the end, but as a rest from our labors on earth. Considering the rest of the book, full of suffering and persecution for those in this life, death might indeed seem like a relief.

## **BABYLON THE GREAT**

The second warning seems reserved for a specific entity:

***Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.”***

**- Revelation 14:8**

This is the first mention of the city Babylon in the book, but it will not be the last. Any reader of the Old Testament would have been very familiar with Babylon, an ancient city that had been an oppressor and conqueror of Israel. Babylon stood alongside Egypt, Philistia, Canaan, Edom, and Assyria as one of the primary antagonists of the Old Testament.

By the time of John's visions on the island of Patmos, Babylon had faded from geopolitical prominence as Greece and then Rome supplanted it. So it is unlikely that the angel is referring to actual Babylon; rather, as we shall see, Babylon is another Old Testament mental shortcut to help the reader quickly understand a deeply complex issue. We will unpack the image of Babylon more as we continue.

## THE HARVEST OF EARTH

There are several alternative ways to interpret the harvest in Revelation 14:14-20. Jesus, of course, used harvest language to describe the final judgment (Matthew 13:24-30), but he also used the word to describe evangelism more generally (Luke 10:2). The language of reaping was also used almost in a karmic sense to describe people receiving the proper consequences for their actions (2 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 6:7-9).

So what is meant by this harvest? The second part of the section (Revelation 14:17-20) might illuminate this for us. The angel is “gathering the grape harvest” in order to feed “the great winepress of the wrath of God” (14:19). The idea of “reaping what you sow” makes the most sense in this context. God is gearing up to pour out great wrath upon the unrighteous!

This makes the first part of the chapter all the more important! God is getting ready to dispense wrath and judgment; who will be able to avoid it? Only those who have been obedient to God, worshipping Him, and steadfast in their faith. The judgment is not the time to get ready; we get ready for judgment by a lifetime of faithful service to God. The time is growing near to being too late (Matthew 25:1-13).

Only the Christian has hope!

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. What are some of the things John has listed so far that make a person a saint? What kinds of actions and attitudes must a person have to be faithful?**

**2. If the 144,000 are a literal number of people to be raptured either before or during the tribulation, how can you be sure you are in the group? How can anyone?**

**3. Read Revelation 14:12-13 again: do you consider death to be a blessing? When you think about death and dying, how does it make you feel?**





# 15. THE SEVEN BOWLS

## Revelation 15:1 – 16:21

Revelation 15:1 is perhaps the strongest evidence in favor of the idea that Revelation is sequential, rather than cyclical:

*Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished. And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb...*

- Revelation 15:1-3

This doesn't seem to be a repetition of the previous cycles of seven, but their conclusion, further evidenced by the escalating level of destruction we noted earlier (from a quarter to a third to total). Does this signify the nearing end of God's wrath on Rome or the end of the future seven years of tribulation? Or perhaps is this symbolic of how God treats all unholy nations that Satan uses to lead people away from God?

### THE SONG OF MOSES AND THE EXODUS

By evoking the “song of Moses,” the visions of John immediately bring to the reader's mind the story of the Exodus. There are two “songs of Moses” in the Bible: One is in Exodus 15, sung after the crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of their pursuers. The other is found in Deuteronomy 31-32, sung as the people are about to enter the promised land. Both stories serve as appropriate foundational analogies for what is going on in the text of Revelation. The enemies of God are about to be defeated, and the people of God are about to have their rest and reward!

It is clear we are nearing the end of something in Revelation (“with them the wrath of God is finished”). As the Exodus signaled the end of the Israelite's captivity, and the entrance into Canaan signaled the end of their rebellious wandering, so Jesus draws the reader's attention to the ending of things.

In keeping with the Exodus analogy, the angels are given plagues to send as the final judgment. The sequence does not exactly parallel the 10 plagues poured out on Egypt (sores, water to blood, darkness, and hail being the commonalities), but the similarity is striking,

given the previous callback to the song of Moses and the promise of rest in Revelation 14:13. Twice (16:9 and 11) the people upon whom this judgment is poured *refuse to repent*, again evoking elements of the exodus (Pharaoh's refusal to repent). Even after seeing all the judgment of the plagues, the Egyptians *still* followed Israel into the Red Sea, to their doom. Even after witnessing the total devastation of the seven bowls, God's enemies in Revelation still refuse to stop worshipping the beast and begin worshipping God.

In some ways, the book of Revelation is simply a highly stylized version of a story that has played out over and over throughout history. Some world power (Egypt, Babylon, Rome, etc.) oppresses the people of God, and God hears their prayers and suffering (Exodus 3:7; Revelation 8:4) and sends wrath and condemnation on the offending nation. This is one reason why many think the book symbolically foretells the fall of Rome; it would be just another version of an ancient story.

However, it's possible there is another lesson here. After the fall of Rome, did God stop operating this way? Did God just decide to let nations do whatever they want after that, or is God *still* listening to the suffering of His people and intervening on their behalf? The rise and fall of nations still continues; it would be naïve or downright unfaithful to think that God has suddenly decided not to take an interest any longer. God *still* hears the prayers of His saints, and God *still* sends judgment on the unrighteous. It's just harder for us to nail down specifics in this time because the prophetic gifts have ceased.

Indeed, as we have previously discussed, the discipline and judgment of God can still play a vital part in bringing people to repentance. The escalating nature of God's judgment in Revelation is another thing that mirrors Old Testament stories and New Testament reality. God often sent "warning shots" to urge people to repent and turn to Him, and the longer they resisted the worse judgment got. Finally, if people were totally unwilling to repent, God sent a final judgment of destruction upon them, so that new people could try again in the future. Might God still do the same today?

## THE OLD TESTAMENT GOD

One of the most unfortunate ideas to come out of modern American Christianity is the separation and distinction between the "Old Testament God" and the "New Testament God." Many people either can't or won't accept that the loving God of the New Testament could still act like the God depicted in the Old Testament. Yet, Revelation is here to disabuse people of such a notion:

***The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. And I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For***

***they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments!”***

**- Revelation 16:4-7**

Perhaps the most obvious lesson of the book of Revelation is that the “Old Testament God” hasn’t gone anywhere. God hasn’t suddenly changed. While a message of love and hope is the primary thrust of the gospels, there is still the same undercurrent of judgment. Just as God judged the Egyptians, Canaanites, Assyrians, Babylonians, and even the Israelites, He will continue to judge His enemies in the present and the future.

It can be difficult to come to grips with such a picture of God. That is not His problem; it’s ours. The angels continually reassure the reader that God’s judgments are just (fair and right) and true (based in the truth of a situation and guaranteed to happen). It can be difficult to accept, but that is one of the tools Satan, the great deceiver, uses to lure people away from God. We currently live in a time when God’s forgiveness is freely offered and easily accepted, but that time is drawing to a close.

## **ARMAGEDDON AND BABYLON**

The idea of a “last battle” where the forces of evil meet the forces of good in an actual, literal fight is so captivating to so many people. Our culture is littered with books and movies about the last battle and Armageddon. As we noted at the very beginning in our section on important terms, the word “Armageddon” in Revelation depicts a place, the “Hill of Megiddo” from Judges 5:19 and Zechariah 12:11. The verse in Judges is found in the middle of the song sung after the victory of Deborah and Barak. Zechariah uses the phrase in a section foretelling the grief and renewal that would follow the crucifixion of Jesus.

It’s curious that many people are familiar with the concept of a last battle of Armageddon, yet almost no one mentions the demon frog spirits that gather the kings of earth for battle (Revelation 16:13-14). Regardless, this interlude in the seven bowls foreshadows visions to come a few chapters later.

Babylon, as we have noted, is primarily interpreted in one of three ways. Perhaps this is a reference to a future world power that will rise at the behest of the Antichrist (unlikely, as we have discussed), or an allusion to Rome, the primary enemy of the church at the time, or more simply as a stand-in for the ways that Satan uses earthly powers to further his goals.

Here, with the seventh bowl, Babylon is beset by God’s wrath manifesting in natural disasters unlike the world has ever seen (Revelation 16:17-21). Remember that the seven

bowls are the completion of God's judgment (15:1). What follows in the next two chapters describes God's wrath on "Babylon" in greater detail.

## **ANOTHER WARNING**

Amid all the fantastical visions and horrific judgment have been brief, dire, practical warnings for the reader (Revelation 13:10; 14:12). A parenthetical (at least, the ESV uses parentheses) insert in Revelation 16:15 follows the same mold:

***("Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!")***

**- Revelation 16:15**

The use of the word "thief" and the warning to "stay awake" most obviously calls the reader back to the words of Jesus in Matthew 24-25, as well as several statements by the writers of the New Testament that we have previously examined. As we noted then, the pre-Revelation teachings on the return of Jesus emphasize the sudden, unexpected nature of his return. If Revelation indeed describes the End of Days, it does so in stark contrast to those teachings.

Interpreted as being about the End of Days, Revelation shows a steady ramp up in persecution, natural disaster, judgment, conflict, and difficulty. Whereas the rest of the New Testament describes Jesus's return as being during times of "peace and security" (1 Thessalonians 5:3), Revelation would seem to be showing the opposite; that Jesus will return not in times of peace and security but in times of extreme difficulty and turmoil. This is perhaps the more glaring indicator that the bulk of the text should not be interpreted as being about the End of Days, as is most common in popular theology.

Either way, Jesus continues to have John warn the reader to endure, remain faithful, and, in this section "stay awake" (Revelation 16:15). These warnings are just as vital to us, and to readers of all times, because Jesus could return at any moment! Are you ready?

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. We have referenced *a lot* of Old Testament verses and stories in our study of Revelation. Prior to this study, how likely would you have been to notice the references? What does your answer tell you about your habit of studying the Old Testament?**

**2. Do you struggle with the picture of God as a wrathful Being dispensing judgment? If so, how can we internally reconcile the "God of the Old Testament" with the loving picture of God on display in much of the New Testament?**

**3. We will talk about it more later but start thinking about it now: there are several different main ways that people interpret Revelation. What changes, or should change, about your day-to-day life depending on which way you interpret Revelation?**



# 16. THE PROSTITUTE

## Revelation 17:1 – 18:24

We now come to the last great set of symbols in the book of Revelation, the woman, a prostitute (“harlot” in many translations), riding on a beast. John is again taken “in the Spirit” (17:3) from the throne room in heaven (where he has presumably been since 4:1) to a wilderness scene.

Revelation 17 and 18 are the chapters that best support the *Preterist* interpretation of the book, which claims that the book primarily describes God’s judgment on Rome. As we shall see, the woman and the beast are described as having many features in common with the Roman Empire as a whole and the city of Rome more specifically.

### WHO IS THE PROSTITUTE?

We are given quite a bit of specific insight into the identity of this prostitute, none clearer than the end of chapter 17: she “is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth” (17:18).

As an anthropomorphized city, she is described as having several prominent features: she is “drunk with the blood of saints” (17:6), is seated on “seven mountains” (17:9), has kings of her own and further subjugated kings (17:10–12), possesses “people and multitudes and nations and languages” (17:15), and is hated by her subjugated kings (17:16). The poetic language of her fall in chapter 18 describes a city that was wealthy and full of trade (18:3, 11–13, 15) and full of sinful behavior (18:4–5).

She is described as “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations” (17:5). At the time of writing, Babylon, which had once been a great city, had been supplanted by the great cities of the Greek and Roman Empires. John was not seeing literally Babylon, but in evoking the name, Jesus calls the reader’s mind back to the kind of city Babylon was: a city of wealth and prominence, a subjugator of God’s people, and one that ultimately passed into war and destruction and obscurity.

### WHAT ABOUT THE BEAST?

The woman is seen “sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names” (17:3). The beast, like both the dragon and the first beast in chapter 13, has “seven heads and ten

horns” (17:3). The beast is scarlet, like the dragon (12:3), but has blasphemous names like the first beast (13:1). What does this beast represent?

The heads, we are told, represent kings, some of whom had already come and gone by the time of writing, and some of whom were yet to come (17:10). The horns represented future kings who would receive power for a short time (17:12). The heads also represented seven mountains upon which the woman was seated (17:9).

All this adds up to a fairly compelling picture of Rome. Rome, as a city, was famously situated on seven hills. Rome indeed subjugated many nations and people and languages, and furthermore allowed local kings to rule under the ultimate authority of the empire. Rome was indeed fabulously wealthy yet was often hated by those it ruled over. Moreover, Rome fits as a continuation of the legacy of worldly powers that oppressed God’s people, like Egypt and Babylon which have been referenced often in the book of Revelation.

The main problem with this view lies in the connection of symbolism to reality. John is told that the heads “are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while” (17:10). Many attempts have been made to align the succession of Roman Emperors with “seven heads,” but making a one-to-one correlation is difficult, because of the timeline of the book’s authorship and the empire. By the time most people think the book was written (late 90s), there had already been 11 emperors, or 7-8 if you disregard the year that four emperors each had very short rebel reigns.

What is clear is that the beast represents earthly power, human rule, and governmental authority that opposes itself to God and His people. The “woman,” a prominent city within such an earthly empire, also exalts herself against God’s people and indeed persecutes them. Several Roman emperors, some already gone by the time of writing (like Nero) and some yet to come (like Domitian), were incredibly hostile to Christianity. Yet, many think that this represents a future one-world government that will rise under the rule of the Antichrist.

More generally, the lesson is the same as in the rest of the book of Revelation; Satan wants to use earthly rulers to oppress and undermine God and His people. The prostitute is “drunk with the blood of the saints” (17:6) and the rulers of the beast (the ten horns) “hand over their power and authority to the beast” and “make war on the Lamb” (17:13-14). Whether the beast represents the dragon (Satan) or the first beast in chapter 14 is irrelevant, since the first beast served at the behest of Satan. Satan wants to use whatever he can, including the governments of the world, to subvert God’s plan and protection of His children!



## PROSTITUTION: THE GREAT ANALOGY FOR SIN

Before we dig into the fall of the woman-city, we should spend some time thinking about her designation as a prostitute:

***Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.”***

**- Revelation 17:1-2**

Prostitution is a common term for sin and temptation in the Bible, both literally and metaphorically. Solomon describes the “adulteress with her smooth words” who drags the one who would be wise away from true understanding (Proverbs 2:16-19). Ezekiel 16 is a great denunciation of Israel as one who “played the whore” and put her own desires ahead of God’s (16:15). Hosea is a book almost entirely devoted to the metaphor, as God commands the prophet to take a prostitute for a wife and thereby demonstrate God’s own love for the faithless people of Israel. Prostitution is a very powerful metaphor for sin because of what James says about temptation:

***Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.***

**- James 1:13-15**

Our desires often compete with what should be our primary desire: God and His love. We *should* remain faithful to the one who made us and bought us with His blood, yet we chase the cheap, easy fulfillment that comes with no strings attached. Except, there *are* strings attached; that’s one of the main points of this section of Revelation!

The woman-city enticed the kings of the earth to live in defiance of God, either intentionally or by virtue of just being selfish. The language of sexual immorality in Revelation 17 is metaphoric: how can a city have sex? The metaphor is that people chased fulfillment and satisfaction of their own desires at the expense of holiness. This is why the city and the kings hated the children of God; they stood out as separate and holy and reminded the society of their sinful, debased ways.

But in the end, judgment comes on those who forsake faithfulness to God and chase selfish pleasure. Babylon always falls.

## THE FALL OF BABYLON

Chapter 18 describes the fall of this great city, which had already been cracked by the seventh bowl of wrath (16:17-21). It is likely that chapters 17-18 zoom in on the judgment of that seventh bowl and show us the wrath of God in greater detail.

Note that the judgment shown is not total over all the earth. The city falls, and the nations and kings around her suffer, but the wrath of God is not poured directly on them. This is another point in favor of a *Preterist* or *Spiritualist* reading of the book; Revelation 18 does not seem to describe God's wrath poured out on the whole earth.

Of particular note in the fall of the great city is the way she is mourned and treated by those who participated in her "sexual immorality." The merchants (18:11-17) and the shipmasters (18:17-20) mourn for her but make no attempt to help her. She is left alone in her fall, with no one to help. The nations profited off her prostitution and wealth, but when times got tough, they felt no loyalty to her and made no attempt to soften the blow of God's wrath.

This is another great warning of the book of Revelation. All throughout the book, Satan is shown as deceiving, persecuting, cajoling, and destroying God's people in any and every effort to draw people away from God. But in the end, Satan will not stand by you. The beast will not help you. When the judgment of God comes, those we sold our souls to will not stand up for us, because they can't and because they don't care enough to. A life lived in rebellion to God might be prosperous for a time, but in the end, it is crushing in its isolation and devoid of hope.

## A PLEA TO THE SAINTS

This section contains yet another warning in the sequence of occasional warnings to the reader of Revelation:

***Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.***

**- Revelation 18:4-5**

For those Christians living in the great city, it would have been easy to "the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality" (18:3). The plea to the residents of the city is the same as it is in the rest of John's visions: do not become like the people around you! Do not succumb to the temptations of the world! Do not give in to worshipping anything other than God!

The vision of the prostitute is the culmination of the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls. Whether Babylon is a code word for Rome, or a prophecy of the one-world government at

the end of time, or a stand in for any world power that oppresses the church, its end is the same: “vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19). The symbolic prostitute had killed and martyred untold numbers of Christians. It is fair and right that God’s vengeance should be visited upon the killers of His people. The saints had pleaded for such vengeance way back in Revelation 6:9–11.

Every part of the book is designed to strengthen and encourage Christians facing persecution in a hostile world. To this end is offered the promise of retribution; judgment is coming, and only the Christian has hope!

## THE DANGER OF REVELATION

And yet, in some ways this message is at odds with the Christian message:

***The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.***

**- 2 Peter 3:9**

Should we, as people who love the lost, be eagerly awaiting the punishment of the wicked, or should we be mournful over the condemned souls? The plea to “come out of her” in the context of the rest of the New Testament carries with it the implied imperative: *bring as many people with you as you can!*

The kings and merchants of the world mourned Babylon, but it was for selfish reasons: they were going to lack trade partners, and everyone’s wealth would be diminished. The Christian should also mourn for Babylon, but for different reasons. It is always a tragedy when people die apart from the Lord!

This is one of the difficulties in Revelation. John is shown grand themes of good and evil, a spectacular vision of the bigger picture. It is a cause for rejoicing that evil will be destroyed, in the overall scheme of things. Using symbolic language like Babylon, or the prostitute, help separate the concept of an evil empire from the very real tragedy of the individual sinner living in that city. But destruction eliminates the possibility of repentance.

It is not spiritually healthy to view the coming punishment of the wicked with eager anticipation. We should eagerly await our own salvation and freedom from suffering, but as we sometimes sing, “there’s a *sad* day coming...” We can rejoice over the destruction of wickedness itself while also lamenting over the loss of the wicked person. Revelation, dealing as it does with grand themes and big picture theology, can be twisted by the reader into leading to the wrong conclusion. We should hate our enemy, the adversary Satan, and his works, while also striving to snatch as many as we can from his clutches.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Consider the analogy of prostitution for sin. What does this tell us about how God feels about sin? How should this inform our own feelings about sin?**

**2. When you think about the lost in your life (especially those who have wronged you), are you more sad about their lostness or glad for their impending judgment? How do our feelings on this matter affect our evangelism?**

**3. What tempts you the most? What lasting satisfaction do those temptations offer you? How are you going to feel about them in 20 years? 40 years? What about in eternity?**

# 17. VICTORY!

## Revelation 19:1-21

### SEQUENCING IN REVELATION

Before we dig into the next few chapters, it is worth taking some time to consider the sequencing of the visions that John receives toward the end. According to Revelation 15:1, the seven plagues in the seven bowls are “the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.” Revelation 16:17 – 18:24 focus on the fall of Babylon, “the great city” (17:18), who seems to be the primary earthly enemy of God’s people, subservient to the beast and the dragon. Revelation 19, then, celebrates the victory of God’s people over their enemies (we will unpack 19 more in this chapter). However, it should be noted that, even in Revelation 19, there seems to still be people on earth who are not Christians, who are seemingly all destroyed in 19:17-21. If the book stopped here, this would seem to be the fulfillment of the supposed “battle of Armageddon” foretold in 16:12-16.

It is curious, then, that in Revelation 20:7-10, there still seems to be people around who might oppose God and His people. Weren’t they all destroyed at the end of chapter 19? Where did they come from? This puts the Millennium (which we will discuss *at length* in the next chapter) in an interesting spot. The victory shown in chapter 19, and the Millennial reign in chapter 20, are not *the end*. People are still around on earth who oppose God, who might be deceived by Satan (20:8).

Finally, the narrative of Revelation *does* seem to describe the absolute end of all things beginning in 20:11. Up until that point, we must be careful not to think John has yet been shown the final judgment.

### MAJOR THEMES IN REVELATION

#### MAJOR THEME: JESUS IS WORTHY!

Revelation 19 is kind of a parallel, or bookend, with chapters 4 and 5. We once again see the 24 elders, the four living creatures, and the multitude of nations praising God. There is a profound statement about worship in this chapter:

***And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.” Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must***

***not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.***

**- Revelation 19:9-10**

Only God (in all His aspects) is worthy of worship. The first half of the chapter is basically all worship.

### **MAJOR THEME: GOD IS MIGHTY!**

The second half of the book mirrors Revelation 1:12-16 in showing us a terrifying (to his enemies) and inspiring (to his followers) picture of Jesus. The rider on the white horse is definitely Jesus; his name is “the Word of God” (Revelation 19:13; John 1:1). He is the child who would rule “with a rod of iron” (Revelation 12:5; 19:15). He is the Lamb who is the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (17:14; 19:16).

This version of Jesus is the leader of the Lord’s armies (Revelation 19:14, evoking the image of the “commander of the Lord’s armies” who accepts the worship of Joshua in Joshua 5:13-15). What is Jesus’s job in this scene; To “tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (Revelation 19:15).

### **MAJOR THEME: JUDGMENT IS COMING**

The rider slays the armies of the earth with the sword of his mouth (19:15, 21). Despite all the work of the dragon, the beast, the second beast, the city Babylon, and the nations who align themselves with the dragon in persecuting Christians, it is all for naught. The rider on the white horse *will* come for his people, to avenge them and conquer over all the forces arrayed against them.

Remember, this vision is not of the final judgment (which comes later in chapter 20). Coming as it does after the fall of the great city Babylon, it reminds the reader that no matter what earthly forces marshal in rebellion to God, Jesus and his purpose will always win out. That’s why it’s so important to align ourselves with the winning side!

### **MAJOR THEME: ONLY THE CHRISTIAN HAS HOPE**

There is another call for faithful endurance in this chapter:

***Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are***

***invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”***

**- Revelation 19:7-9**

The analogy of marriage in the Christian life is used several times in the New Testament, paralleling the use of the word *prostitution* to refer to sin. Of course there is a sense in which the marriage feast is yet to come. Jesus uses the analogy in a parable (Matthew 22:1-14), warning people not to reject his invitation under threat of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (22:13). Yet Paul eloquently describes the church’s relationship with Jesus in this way:

***In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.***

**- Ephesians 5:28-32**

It’s important to note that Paul uses the marriage analogy *in the current tense*. The church is *already* the bride of Christ; he nourishes us and cares for us as a husband *should* for his wife. He is already doing these things! We have left the world and become one with Jesus (John 17:9-11).

This sheds new light on the prostitution analogy for sin. We belong to Jesus, yet we seek satisfaction and pleasure in other places. James says it this way:

***You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.***

**- James 4:4-8**

God is mighty enough to conquer all His enemies. Only He is worthy of worship. Because of this, judgment is coming on those who do not align themselves with Him! Who can face judgment with confidence, rather than fear (1 John 4:17)? Only those who are “invited to the marriage supper” (Revelation 19:9). Who will that be? The church, those who have already become his bride and united themselves with him (Romans 6:5)!

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Would you rather think about Jesus as a loving husband or a mounted commander? Why or why not? What does each analogy offer for the Christian?**

**2. What are some things we offer worship to other than God? Even if we don't mean to, how can we worship other things or people or ideas?**

**3. Read Matthew 22:1-14. Who has been invited to the wedding feast? Have you? Have you accepted His invitation? If not, why not? What awaits those who refuse?**



# THE MILLENNIUM

## Four Views of Revelation 20:1-7

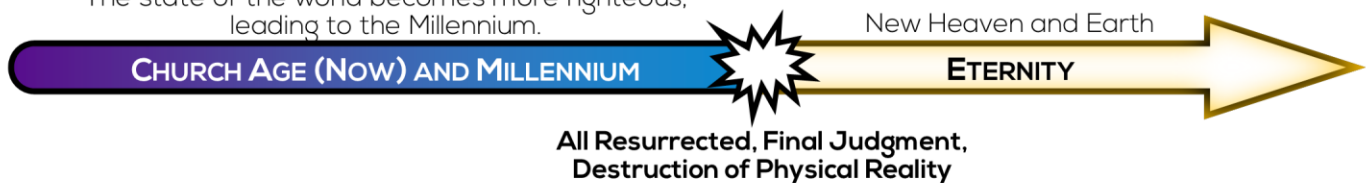
### AMILLENNIALISM

The Millennium symbolically represents the current age of Christ's Kingdom on earth manifested in the Church.



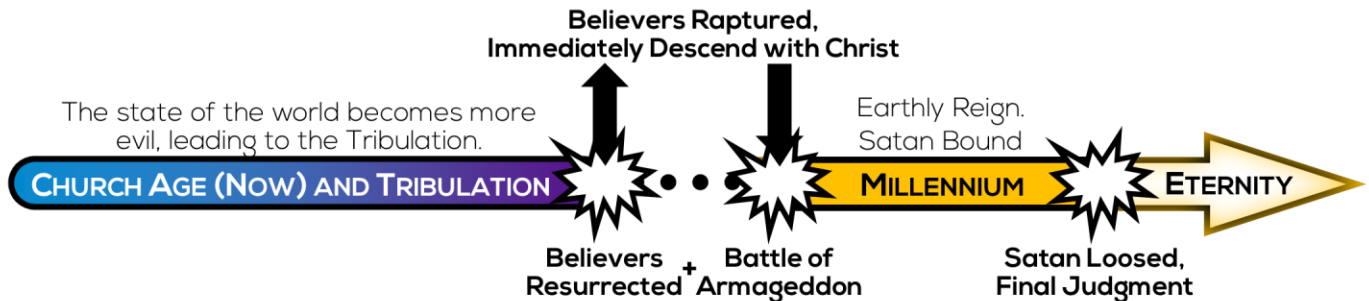
### POSTMILLENNIALISM

The state of the world becomes more righteous, leading to the Millennium.

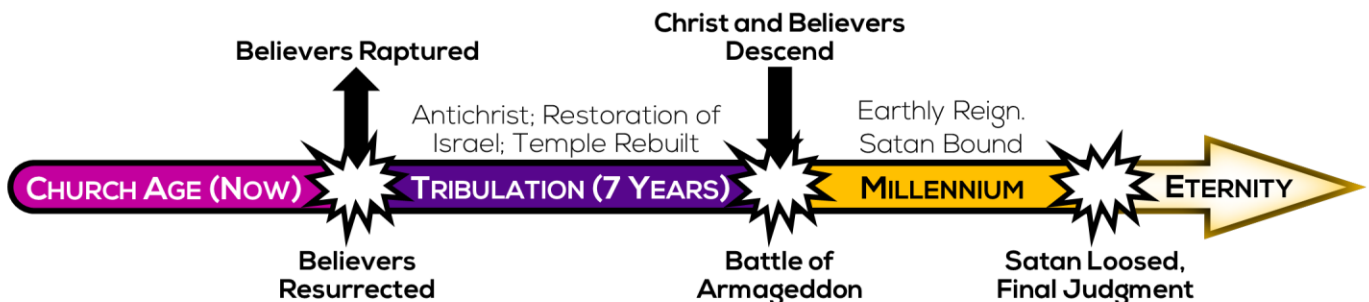


### CLASSIC PREMILLENNIALISM

The state of the world becomes more evil, leading to the Tribulation.



### PRETRIBULATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM





# 18. THE MILLENNIUM

## Revelation 20:1-6

The first six verses of Revelation 20 are, *by far*, the most controversial verses in the whole book. They might be the most controversial verses in the whole of the New Testament. Not because they are the most important, or the most consequential, but simply by sheer volume of argumentative text and books written about them.

It is vital to understand something before we dig in: how you decide to interpret these six verses has *almost zero impact on your day-to-day Christian walk*. The more fantastical interpretations of the Millennium all position it chronologically after the tribulation, at the last stage of human history. Mathematically, the odds that you will be a part such a tribulation are very low; it's much more likely that you will die before (given that every moment is as statistically likely as any other that Jesus will return, there are measurelessly more moments when he will *not* return than when he will).

So, fundamentally, *nothing changes* in your day-to-day life whether the Millennium is a literal thousand-year earthly reign of Jesus or not. You still must be faithful now, strive to understand his will for the church, and find your place in it, because we all have the responsibility to constantly remain “awake” (Matthew 24:42) and “ready” (Luke 12:40). It's not like the potential physical reality of the Millennium means we can slack off from our duty in the here and now.

It is ironic, then, that this will be the longest chapter in this book, by a fairly wide margin. The major themes we have seen throughout Revelation carry far more weight in our day-to-day life, yet it is these six verses that have been written about the most. I'm inclined to think that these two facts are linked: people are willing to believe a wide array of things about the Millennium precisely *because* there aren't any obvious practical effects of doing so. The Millennium doesn't impact teachings about salvation or church conduct and organization or holy living. So, in some sense, it's “safe” for disagreement and controversy.

Having said all that, it *does* matter how we interpret the Millennium because God has never demonstrated the possibility that there might be more than one way to interpret His Word. It is true that there are numerous Messianic prophecies that also had more immediate fulfillment and interpretation in addition to their future meaning (see Psalm 22 for example), but nowhere in the New Testament do the authors allow for the possibility that their words should mean different things to different people. Most of the latter half of

the New Testament (1-2 Timothy, Titus, 1-2 Peter, Jude) focus *heavily* on warning the reader against false teaching and false teachers who will “accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Timothy 4:3) and twist the Scriptures “to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16). Revelation 20:1-6 does mean *something*, and it’s important to discover what that meaning is.

So yes, we will spend quite a bit of time thinking about the Millennium. As we do so, I want us to keep two things in mind:

First, we must remember to let the very plain teaching of Matthew-Jude inform our interpretation. This has been one of our guiding lights throughout our study, and it doesn’t change here at the end of Revelation.

Second, Paul warns the next generation of preachers several times not to let the church get bogged down in “foolish controversies” (2 Timothy 2:23; Titus 3:9) and “quarrels about words” (1 Timothy 6:4; 2 Timothy 2:14). I am going to strive to follow this instruction and keep us focused on the things that help us live “upright and godly lives in the present age” (Titus 2:12). The Millennium is important, because it is in the Bible, but we mustn’t let it keep us from “weightier matters of the law” (Matthew 23:23).

## **FOUR VIEWS OF THE MILLENNIUM**

I have provided a chart on page 131 that graphically shows the four major views, but let’s briefly discuss each one. They are arranged in order from the most figurative interpretation of Revelation to the most literal.

### **AMILLENNIALISM**

This view posits that the Millennium is entirely symbolic, representative of the current time in which we live. This view essentially equates the term “last days” in the previous 26 books of the New Testament with the thousand-year reign in Revelation 20. The binding of Satan represents the cessation of demonic possession and demonic supernatural signs.

### **POSTMILLENNIALISM**

According to *Postmillennialism*, the state of the world will gradually become more righteous over time, eventually leading to an age of extreme spiritual and physical prosperity for the church, including the mass repentance of the Israelites and potentially the total restoration of the physical kingdom of Israel. The binding of Satan represents his waning influence in the world leading to almost total success of the church on earth for a thousand years before the final judgment.

## **CLASSIC PREMILLENNIALISM**

*Classic Premillennialism* has fallen from prominence recently in favor of the last view, but this is basically the opposite of *Postmillennialism*. Under this view, the state of the world will gradually grow more and more evil, leading to incredibly difficult times for the church (the tribulation). There won't necessarily be a rapture or the rise of a literal antichrist, but things will get very dire until Christ returns, raptures the faithful, raises the dead in Christ, and restores the kingdom of Israel and reigns on earth for a thousand years.

## **PRETRIBULATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM**

This is the most common view in pop-religion, the one that Hollywood has latched onto, popularized by the *Left Behind* series of novels and espoused by all manner of authors claiming to have "cracked the code" of Revelation. This view states that the tribulation will be a literal seven-year period following the rapture of the faithful, during which time the Antichrist will rise performing all manner of false wonders and institute a one-world government to oppress the faithful. After the tribulation, Jesus will return, win the battle of Armageddon, and reign on earth in the restored Israel for a thousand years.

## **SO WHICH IS IT?**

It is really in this section that the need for the first part of this study becomes clear; any version of the Millennium as a literal earthly thousand-year reign of Christ almost directly contradicts the first 26 books of the New Testament. There is no indication from Matthew-Jude that Jesus's return will be preceded by increasing wickedness on the earth, nor that believers will be raptured seven years before the final judgment.

Remember from the last chapter our discussion of the sequencing of Revelation. The thousand-year reign, if it is literal, does not seem to be worldwide. There are still people around to challenge and rebel against God by the end, in Revelation 20:7-10. So where would this kingdom be? What would the extent of it be on earth? This leads us to another interesting strain of modern religious thought.

A literal interpretation of the Millennium depends on and leads to a very specific set of doctrines concerning another hot-button topic in modern American Christianity: will God physically restore the kingdom of Israel to its prior glory? And, connected to this, is the kingdom of God present in the world today?

# THE RESTORATION OF THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

The question, in a nutshell, is this: will all Jews eventually repent and turn to Jesus, leading to the restoration of the land promise and the reestablishment of an earthly throne of Israel? Many (if not all) proponents of a literal, earthly Millennium would answer “yes.”

This answer is founded on three premises:

- 1. God’s promise to David of having a king on the throne forever was literal and eternal.**
- 2. The land promise to Abraham was literal and eternal.**
- 3. Paul promises the eventual conversion of the Jews.**

## AN ETERNAL THRONE

God’s initial promise to David is found in 2 Samuel. David wanted to build God a temple, but God turned it around on David:

***When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.***

**- 2 Samuel 7:12-13**

This promise is reiterated several times throughout the Old Testament, including (but not limited to) God’s promise to Solomon (1 Kings 11:12-13) and later God’s words through the prophet Isaiah:

***For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.***

**- Isaiah 9:6-7**

It should seem clear from Isaiah that God intended to, and indeed did, fulfill this promise in the person of Jesus, the “Prince of Peace”. Peter makes this connection clear in Acts:

***Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor***

***did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.***

**- Acts 2:30-32**

So while it is obvious that Jesus is the one meant to fulfill God's original promise to David, the question remains: would this be on a literal throne in Jerusalem? Doesn't this mean there must be a throne in Jerusalem for Jesus to sit on? This is where a literal interpretation of the Millennium comes in: the Millennium is the earthly fulfillment of God's promise to David all those centuries ago!

The main problem with this idea is Jesus's own interpretation of the nature of his kingdom:

***So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world."***

**- John 18:33-36**

Pilate was questioning Jesus over the nature of his relationship with the nation of Israel. One of the primary accusations of the Jews was that Jesus wanted to establish an earthly kingdom in defiance of Rome; this was the pretext under which they could get the Romans to crucify him. But Jesus tells Pilate that his kingdom is "not of this world." Now, one could make the argument that a kingdom established after the tribulation is definitely not "of this world," except that such a kingdom would be "of this world." It would have borders, boundaries, and physical characteristics. Jesus addresses all these things in another place:

***Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."***

**- Luke 17:20-21**

When Jesus says the kingdom "is in the midst of you," is he saying that the kingdom would be in the middle of the Israelites, physically speaking? It seems not, since people would not be able to point to it and say, "here it is." An earthly kingdom, even one as majestic as the Millennial reign, could definitely be observed and pointed out. Or is Jesus rather

saying that his kingdom would be wherever his people were, across time and space? Moreover, Jesus seemed to think that his kingdom would arrive soon:

***And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.”***

**- Mark 9:1**

The kingdom “came with power” during the lifetimes of his original audience! But maybe there would be a greater version of the kingdom later to come? There is never any indication given that there would be two different, earthly manifestations of Jesus’s kingdom. There are two versions of the kingdom, but the Hebrew writer seems to think that when Jesus returns a second time, it will be accompanied by the removal of all things physical:

***See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.***

**- Hebrews 12:25-29**

One more time Jesus *will* appear and dramatically alter the course of events. When he does so, he will remove the “things that have been made” in order to establish the perfect, eternal kingdom. Yet, a literal interpretation of the Millennium does not support this; Jesus would return and allow the “things that are shaken” to remain, including rebellious nations!

We have received the eternal kingdom! God’s promise to David has been fulfilled, but in an eternal, spiritual way. Truly there is a descendent of David on the throne and let us be grateful that we have received a “kingdom that cannot be shaken.”

## **THE LAND PROMISE**

In addition to confusion about the promise to David, there exists some confusion surrounding God’s promises to Abraham:

***I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and***



***you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”***

**- Genesis 17:6-8**

It certainly sounds like the land promise was supposed to last forever. Yet, even in the Old Testament, there were times when Israel did not truly control the land (the captivities in Assyria and Babylon). Each time, the land was returned to Israel through God's intervention (for example, Nehemiah 9:7-8). But then the land was taken again under Greece and Rome. And so it has been for the last 2,000 years, fluctuating between control of the Jews and invasion by other nations.

Yet, we must consider the promise more deeply. Who was the promise made to: to Abraham's "offspring." While the nation of Israel certainly qualifies as Abraham's offspring, the New Testament seems to expand the definition:

***For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.***

**- Galatians 3:27-29**

What promise is Paul referring to at the end of verse 29? Was he referring to all of the promises to Abraham or just specific promises? He does certainly call Gentiles "Abraham's offspring." Does this mean that Gentile Christians should be considered recipients of an eternal land promise?

Even if we try to circumvent the inclusion of the Gentiles in the promises to Abraham (not that we should, but even if we tried to), the promise to Abraham was later reiterated as part of a *covenant*. Covenants were agreements between God and man, with conditional promises based on humanities' willingness to uphold their end of the bargain. The land promise to Israel was part of a larger covenant between God and a specific group of humans (the Israelites). Moses warned Joshua that the covenant was conditional on Israel's willingness to follow through:

***“And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed. But just as all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon***

***you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the Lord your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you.”***

**- Joshua 23:14-16**

As long as Israel remained unfaithful, God was under no obligation to fulfill His promises to them. As we have noted, this happened multiple times throughout history. God upheld the covenant by helping Joshua take possession of the land, but when they broke faith with God, He followed through on the warnings stipulated in the covenant and took the land from them.

There are two ways to look at this. One is to ask the bigger question, “Is God’s covenant with Israel still binding anyway?” (we will do so momentarily). The other is to consider the mechanics of how God’s covenants work. To this day, the Jews *en masse* remain unfaithful, having rejected the Messiah and refusing to integrate into the new covenant relationship with God. As long as that persists, God is under no obligation to restore their kingdom.

But what if they all decide to repent and turn back to God?

## **THE PROMISED RETURN**

Finally, we must consider Paul’s words to the Roman congregation in Romans 11. Upon this chapter hangs much of the literal Millennial doctrine. As we have seen, God’s promise of a king is fulfilled in Christ. As we will see, we shouldn’t be hanging on to the stipulations and promises of the old covenant anyway. But if we were, it would hang on the Jews’ willingness to return to Christ as a nation. Some believe that this is exactly what Paul promises in Romans 11.

After a lot of discussion about the importance of the Jews in the salvation narrative, and the necessity of the inclusion of the Gentiles, we come to this passage:

***Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”***

**- Romans 11:25-27**

Note the phrase “in this way all Israel will be saved.” In what way? Through their rejection of Christ, the Jews facilitated a vital part of God’s plan of salvation, the crucifixion of Jesus.

Yet, does that alone save *all* the Jews, regardless of personal repentance and faith in Christ? Consider another verse that talks about salvation through a particular work:

***For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.***

**- 1 Timothy 2:13-15**

Does Paul really mean that women can enter a state of forgiveness just by having children? Or is it rather that childbearing is a good quality in any woman, even the unfaithful? Might we consider Paul's words about Israel in the same vein?

More clearly, consider all the passages that talk about Jesus coming to save the whole world (John 1:29; 3:17; 12:32; 1 John 2:2, to list a few). Does Jesus's sacrifice automatically take away the sins of every person? Or is it rather that his sacrifice makes salvation *available* to all, and we still must fulfill the requirements necessary to access that salvation? The rest of the New Testament overwhelmingly teaches the latter.

So, we keep reading in Romans:

***As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.***

**- Romans 11:28-32**

Another thorny phrase is "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Does this teach the doctrine of "once saved, always saved"? What about passages like Hebrews 3:12, 10:26-31, and 2 Peter 2:17-22 that seem to indicate that a person who is once saved might indeed find themselves again on the outside of the kingdom? Why else would there be so many calls to remain faithful in Revelation? Satan wants to convince us to leave the kingdom; the warnings are so dire because it is indeed possible!

So, what then is meant in Romans 11? Just as Jesus came to save "the whole world" but still demands obedience to access that salvation, so too God still loves and cherishes Israel but demands obedience to access salvation! We have been called by God "out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). If the "calling of God is irrevocable" in such a way that God *must* fulfill the land promise and the earthly kingdom, does that mean that everyone who has entered his light has no need to worry about falling back into darkness?

***That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.***

**- Romans 11:20-23**

Israel may indeed return, “if they do not continue in their unbelief.” But we should not read Romans 11 as meaning they are guaranteed to at some future date. God’s irrevocable calling means that He may still welcome them into His kingdom if they decide to repent and follow Him.

## **COVENANT TERMINOLOGY**

Regardless of all the rest, there is a very important theme in much of the New Testament concerning God’s covenant with Israel:

***Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.***

**- Galatians 3:23-27**

***But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second...In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.***

**- Hebrews 8:6-7, 13**

God’s covenant with Israel is “obsolete.” Even if they were to return to faithfulness and obedience, God wouldn’t be under obligation to restore the land, because that covenant has been supplanted by another in which everyone who believes is “Abraham’s offspring” (Galatians 3:29). There is still a land promise, but it looks forward to the removal of “things that have been made” (Hebrews 12:27). Rather, we are looking forward to something better!

***These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.***

**- Hebrews 11:13-16**

## **SO WHAT IS THE MILLENNIUM?**

Three ideas are built off one another; a literal interpretation of the 144,000 in Revelation 7, the belief in a physical restoration of Israel, and a literal interpretation of the Millennium.

We must make the point one more time: there is no good linguistic or hermeneutical reason to consider the Millennium a literal, earthly reign on earth and discard the seven seals, trumpets, or bowls as figurative. It's completely arbitrary and logically unjustifiable. Consider then what kind of earth such a Millennial reign would take place on, given the catastrophic nature of the seals, trumpets, and bowls. Is it impossible? Of course not, since God can do anything. But it stretches credulity to the breaking point, and no one seriously advocates for such consistency. And given that the concept of the earthly Millennium and the idea of a physical restoration of Israel has no backing in the rest of the New Testament, I am inclined to reject such an interpretation of Revelation 20:1-6 wholesale.

Thus, the question: if the chapter is meant to be symbolic, what does it symbolize? It does seem to be that the thousand years, whenever they are, take place immediately before the end. Revelation 20:7-22:5 certainly seem to describe judgment and heaven in a way that is very consistent with the rest of the New Testament. We might equate the Millennium with the concept of the "last days" scattered throughout the New Testament. This harmonizes with the rest of Jesus's teaching about his kingdom and the timeline of the last days we have previously established based off the previous 26 books of the New Testament.

But the point, as it often is, is buried in a text that is oft overlooked:

***Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.***

**- Revelation 20:1-3**

What does it mean that Satan is “bound”? He is still considered “the God of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4) and the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). He still “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). If the Millennium represents the last days and the current age of the church, how is Satan bound?

It is significant that 95% of demonic possessions in the Bible take place over a 40-year span during the lifetimes of the apostles. Clearly people in the Old Testament were able to do some kind of “false wonders” (the many warnings against witchcraft and sorcery have to mean something, right? Consider what the Egyptian magicians were able to do in Exodus 7:8-24). Yet it is well established that such things are absurd impossibilities today. This is not a coincidence!

Satan *has* been bound; he has been limited in his ability to “deceive the nations” (Revelation 20:3). Remember that the “false prophet” (the second beast, who performed “great signs” in Revelation 13:14) had already been cast into the lake of fire in 19:20. Satan has been limited in a very similar way to how God has limited Himself. Just as the age of miracles has ceased, so has the age of false wonders. Of course, we must be clear that God still supernaturally helps His people, but He does so through answered prayer and providence, not through overt miraculous signs performed by human agents.

Satan cannot make you do anything. The sins you commit are yours alone, despite his temptation and influence (James 1:12-15). Similarly, God has seen fit to limit His own supernatural operation. Does this mean that we are disadvantaged in our ability to evangelize? Of course not! In a parable, Jesus made this profoundly important point:

***And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”***

***- Luke 16:27-31***

Judgment is coming, and no one will be able to make the excuse that “the Devil made me do it.”

***Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.***

***- Revelation 14:12***

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Do you think discussion about the Millennium qualifies as “foolish controversy” or “quarrels about words”? If so, how should we approach the topic with others? If not, how can we resolve this important dispute in the church?**

**2. Why is it so important to remember the warnings of Hebrews 3:12, 10:26-31, and 2 Peter 2:17-22? How is the instruction of these verses manifested in the book of Revelation?**

**3. Consider Hebrews 12:28-29: how do these verses relate to the book of Revelation?**





# 19. JUDGMENT DAY

## Revelation 20:7-15

Almost all interpreters, from all the various camps, agree that starting in Revelation 20:7, John is shown a vision of the end of all things and the final judgment. The face-value interpretation of these verses is apparently so readily understandable that it doesn't matter what you believe about the Millennium or the placement of the first 20 chapters in their greater historical context.

Beginning in Revelation 20:7, the book becomes much easier to harmonize with the rest of the teachings in the New Testament about eschatological matters. The treatment of the judgment seat, the vision of heaven, and the promises of return are all very much in keeping with the greater context of New Testament theology. However, a few bits of the Revelation text stand out.

### FIRSTS AND SECONDS

Much ado has been made of a particular phraseology in Revelation 20:6-15: what exactly are the "first resurrection" (20:6) and the "second death" (20:14)?

It is easier to figure out the first and second deaths. As we have previously seen in 1 Corinthians 15, we will not inhabit eternity in our current mortal flesh. We will all be changed to something different, something indestructible. This means that our physical bodies must, in some way, be done away with. As the writer of Hebrews puts it "it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). If we define death as simply the cessation of life, then even those who remain alive when Christ returns will "die," as their mortal bodies are "thus dissolved" (2 Peter 3:11). Thus, the first death is the death that all humans will inevitably face. The second death is explained in the text itself as that eternal separation from God after judgment and being cast into the "lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14, see also Matthew 13:41-43).

The first resurrection is some sort of process that renders one unable to be hurt by the second death that will be experienced by those who participate in the Millennial reign (Revelation 20:6). However, haven't all those who have ever been saved passed into a state of not needing to worry about the second death? Hebrews 2:14-15 remind us that all who are Christ's need not fear death. John previously told the church that they could have "confidence in the day of judgment" (1 John 4:17).

Is there then some category of people that needn't fear the second death, that *haven't* experienced the first resurrection? How you answer this question largely depends on how literal the Millennium is. If, as we have previously discussed (*at length*) the Millennium represents the current "last days" in which we are living, then the "first resurrection" starts to come into focus. Revelation is not the only place in the New Testament that uses resurrection language to discuss the saved:

***But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.***

**- Ephesians 2:4-7**

God has "raised us up," current tense. Those who belong to Christ have been "made alive," even though we were previously "dead in our trespasses." Is this not a resurrection? The point is made clearer in Romans 6:

***We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.***

**- Romans 6:4-9**

This passage almost directly parallels John's visions: we have died and been raised through our immersion into Christ. There is no need to extract some complicated meaning from Revelation 20:6. Those who have been saved have *already* experienced the first resurrection and will experience the second resurrection when everyone else does; when all of humanity is raised to face judgment. Incidentally, this also reinforces the idea that the Millennium describes the current age, as those who have experienced the first resurrection currently preside as priests (compare Revelation 20:6 and 1 Peter 2:9).

## ETERNAL CONSEQUENCES

From the proper perspective, Revelation 20 should be a terrifying section of Scripture:

***And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.***

**- Revelation 20:12-15**

The idea that in eternity, God will simply annihilate the wicked to never experience anything again, is just not found anywhere in the Bible. Jesus taught about the “fiery furnace” on multiple occasions (Matthew 13:42, 50), and alluded to such torment in the parable in Luke 16:19-31. Even the demons know that eternal punishment is coming (Matthew 8:29).

You cannot escape judgment even in death. Physical death is but a temporary suspension of existence, rather than the final end. Everyone will experience the second resurrection, and everyone will live forever. Jesus said as much while he was on earth:

***Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.***

**- John 5:25-29**

I will say it again: *everyone will live forever*. What remains to be seen is what kind of eternity we will experience.

## THE BOOK OF LIFE

The “book of life” is mentioned a couple times in Revelation, the first being in Revelation 3:5, where Jesus promised not to “blot out the name” of those who conquer and remain

faithful. This again reinforces the idea that salvation is not an eternal state until judgment; as long as we live, we might fall from forgiveness.

The language of being “judged according to what was written in the books” (20:12) reinforces the idea that this vision of John refers to the final judgment. Numerous passages in the New Testament reinforce the idea of “appearing before the judgment seat” (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Written in the books are all the things we have done. Some of those things are sinful, of course, which is why the grace and forgiveness of Jesus is so important. Only those who remain steadfast and faithful, as Revelation has warned over and over again, will hear their names called from that book.

## **A FOREGONE CONCLUSION**

Somewhat lost in all of this is an interesting thought: surely the Devil could pick up and read the book of Revelation like anyone else. He must know the end that has been preordained for him. Is he so arrogant to think that he could circumvent the prophecy of the Almighty, or does he simply not care? We ultimately will never know the answer to these questions but asking them highlights similar questions in our own lives. Anyone can know how things will turn out. Are we arrogant enough to think that they simply don't apply to us, or that we can somehow trick God? Judgment day is coming, a “day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16). Are you ready for that day to come?

***Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”***

**- Hebrews 3:12-15**

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. How does one come to share in the “first resurrection”? Have you done what is required? Have you informed others of that requirement?**

**2. How confident are you of your readiness for the day of judgment? If the answer is not “totally confident,” why is that? What can you do to ensure your readiness and confidence?**

**3. Consider your life: What is written in the book of life concerning you? Can you be proud of what is written there, or does the thought inspire shame and fear? Again, what can you do to change that while there is time?**



# ALL THINGS NEW

## Symbolism in Revelation 21-22

THE OLD

### THE GARDEN

#### GENESIS 1-3

- God's literal presence (3:8).
- Tree of life (2:9).
- River of life (2:10).
- No curse or death (1:31).

### THE HIGH PRIEST

#### EXODUS 28

- Perfectly square breastplate (28:16).
- 12 precious stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel (28:21).

### THE CITY

#### EZEKIEL 40-48

- Perfect square walls (48:30-35).
- 12 gates for the 12 tribes (48:30-35).
- Trees with leaves for healing (47:12).

### JESUS'S IDENTITY AND WORK

- **THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD** (John 8:12 > Revelation 21:23, 22::5)
- **THE HIGH PRIEST** (Hebrews 6:20 > Revelation 21:22-27)
- **THE TEMPLE** (John 2:19-21 > Revelation 21:22)
- **ENDED THE CURSE** (Galatians 3:13 > Revelation 22:3)
- **SENT THE APOSTLES** (Ephesians 2:20 > Revelation 21:14)
- **GAVE THE WATER OF LIFE** (John 4:14 > Revelation 22:1, 17)

THE NEW

### THE GARDEN

#### REVELATION 21-22

- God's literal presence (21:3).
- Tree of life (22:2).
- River of life (22:1).
- No curse or death (21:4).

### THE HIGH PRIEST

#### REVELATION 21-22

- Perfectly square city (21:16)
- 12 precious stones on the foundation and gates (21:19-21).
- No priest because there is no sin (21:8).

### THE CITY

#### REVELATION 21-22

- Perfectly square walls (21:16).
- 12 gates in the walls (21:21).
- Trees with leaves for healing (22:2).





# 20. ALL THINGS NEW

## Revelation 21:1 – 22:5

The entire Bible story can be seen as a struggle to return: to return to our Creator, to return to the way things were in the beginning, to return to our whole, perfect state. In the beginning, God “saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). For some time, everything was as intended.

Then, we are introduced to the main antagonist of the story (Satan, the serpent), as well as the primary struggle (our own ineptitude and selfishness). Everything that happens after the Fall in Genesis 3 proceeds from God’s attempts (consistent with His holy and just nature) to bring us back to that perfect, sinless state.

The last two chapters of the Bible describe the completed mission: God has triumphed over Satan, and those who have remained steadfast and faithful (not perfect in themselves, but perfect through the blood of the Lamb) are returned to a perfect state of holiness and communion with the Lord.

There is *a lot* of symbolism in the description of the “new heaven and new earth” (Revelation 21:1). I have provided a chart on the previous page outlining *some* of this symbolism. Do I think that the new Jerusalem will really be made of jasper and carnelian and gold? Of course not! These are part of the “things that have been made” (Hebrews 12:27) that will be removed when Jesus returns. Remember that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50). But how can God describe something that transcends physical reality with words that humans can comprehend? The symbolism serves to reinforce the main components of what heaven will be like, but they cannot describe them fully.

There are five main emphases in the description of the new heaven and new earth.

### **GOD’S PRESENCE AMONG HIS PEOPLE**

In the garden, God literally walked in the presence of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8). When they were banished, they lost that tangible togetherness with God. God’s presence returned to earth several times over the course of Israelite history, but each time carried with it the very present threat of death: only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies in the temple, and only once a year, or he would die (Leviticus 16:2). Isaiah recognized his own

unworthiness to be in the presence of God in Isaiah 6:1-6. While God *could* appear among His people, it was not harmonious.

In the New Testament, God's presence in the Christian primarily manifests as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. While this is awesome and transcendent, it is not anywhere near the tangible togetherness that few have experienced with God in the past. We are still forced to interact with God through the interface of imperfect flesh.

In the end, there will be a perfect reunification between man and God:

***And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.***

**- Revelation 21:3**

In eternity, no more will we deal with God through the fuzzy interface of the physical and spiritual; in the end we will have true, eternal, complete communion with the Lord.

## **FOUNDED UPON PREVIOUS COVENANTS**

The final state of union with God will not be something completely new but will rather be an extension and fulfillment of all the work God has done throughout human history.

***It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.***

**- Revelation 21:12-14**

It is upon the covenants made with Israel and through Jesus's apostles that the new city will rest. Without those first and second covenants with humanity, the city could not have come to exist; they were the primary instruments of God's redemptive work throughout history!

## **VALUE BEYOND MEASURE**

The materials listed in Revelation 21:15-21 are all precious, rare, and valuable. We could never make a city out of these things because there are not enough of them in the whole world (and because they would make terrible construction materials in this version of

reality). But everything in the new Jerusalem, from the roads people walk on to the walls of the city, will be precious, desirable, and valuable.

## THE ABSENCE OF ALL NEGATIVE THINGS

The hardest thing to reconcile about the new Jerusalem is the description of the total absence of uncomfortable or painful emotions:

***He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.***

**- Revelation 21:4**

How can we have no crying or pain, when so many people we know and love will not be in that city with us? Ultimately, this is an unanswerable question. We are asked to trust that God's presence and power will soothe all that pain away in one way or another. We are not told the mechanics, and the mechanics are beside the point. It is a place that has none of the hard parts of human existence.

In large part, this is because the sinful parts of humanity have been excised:

***But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.***

**- Revelation 21:8**

There will be no pain, and no *causes of pain*, either. This is the separation of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25:31-46. *Nothing that is not holy or in harmony with God will be permitted in the city.*

## ETERNAL LIFE

Finally, we come to the primary promise of Jesus's ministry (Matthew 19:29; 25:46; John 4:14, etc.). He came to facilitate this foundational promise:

***For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.***

**- John 3:16-17**

John twice describes the river of life at the end (Revelation 21:6; 22:1). He also sees the tree of life (22:2), which had been barred from humanity since we were cast from the garden. If we can be sure of any concrete detail of the city, it is that it will have no end.

What are we going to do for eternity? Eternity is such a mind-boggling concept; we can't really get our heads around it. We know that we will worship God with all those who have gone before and all the supernatural spiritual beings, but other than that, we can only speculate. But ultimately, the *what* is not so important as the *when* and *why*. We will be with God *forever*, because He first loved us (1 John 4:7-21).

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. What do you think heaven will be like? What kinds of things do you picture when you think about heaven? Where did you get those ideas about heaven? Was it from the Bible, or from some other source?**

**2. How did people in the Bible typically react to the literal, tangible presence of God in their midst? Why did they react that way, and what will make God's presence in heaven different?**

**3. What are you looking forward to most about heaven? How often do you think about heaven in your daily life?**



# 21. THE PROMISE

## Revelation 22:6-21

Jesus concludes his revelation to John with a tri-fold warning and promise:

***And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.***

- Revelation 22:7

***Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.***

- Revelation 22:12-13

***He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!***

- Revelation 22:20

As we studied way back at the beginning of our whole endeavor, the word "soon" is often misunderstood and misapplied in Bible study. The writers of the New Testament used that word often, yet under what reasonable definition of the word could Jesus's return be considered "soon"? Remember that this is what Peter warned about:

***This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation."***

- 2 Peter 3:1-4

God does not look at things from our perspective, as Peter goes on to say in 3:8. Jesus, a being who exists independent of time and space, has concerns with chronology that do not fit into our own.

But there is another way to think about this. If, as has been posited, the bulk of the book is about the fall of Rome, then from the perspective of John and his readers, Jesus *did* indeed come relatively soon to mete out judgment. It was not the final judgment, but it was the wrath of God and the Lamb nonetheless. Even from a broader, more symbolic perspective; any situation we find ourselves in, any time and place where Christians are oppressed by worldly powers, is subject to the judgment of God soon. No nation, situation, or historical context lasts forever. God is constantly weighing out judgment and rearranging earthly situations according to His own eternal purposes. Nothing in this life is forever.

## **WORSHIP IN REVELATION**

The last section of the book reinforces yet again the significance of worship: who do we worship and why?

***I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”***

**- Revelation 22:8-9**

The book is full of instructions about and examples of worship. One of the main contrasts in the book is between those who keep worshipping God, and those who are persuaded to worship something else (the dragon, the beast, the city, etc.). One of Satan's primary objectives is to steal worship away from God and diminish God's glory!

The repeated themes of the worthiness of the Lamb and the might of God should constantly, consistently force the reader to consider their own worship. Are we worshipping God the way that He desires and deserves? What is getting in the way of our worship? What about our relationship with the world? How do we treat our favorite sports icons or political figures? Are they stealing our worship away from God, either intentionally or by accident?

## **THE WORDS OF THIS BOOK**

Several times in the last section John has a sort of metacommentary on the book of Revelation itself, in Revelation 22:10-11 and in the following:

***I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take***



**away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.**

**- Revelation 22:18-19**

It is important to note about these sections: contextually these warnings are not meant to apply to the entire Bible. John specifically is talking about the book of Revelation. He almost certainly did not have the other 26 books of the New Testament canon in front of him as he was writing these warnings. It was not until a few decades after the completion of Revelation that the New Testament as we know it was gathered together and distributed in totality.

Even though John's warning in 22:18-19 is specifically meant to apply to Revelation, does that mean we are free to add to or take away from the rest of the Bible? Certainly not! Inherent in the very concept of Divine Revelation is the idea that these writings are superior to the productions of man. To add to or take away from Romans or Ecclesiastes is to invite the same sort of disaster as to add to or take away from Revelation. God's word stands supreme, in all times and places, because it is from God. It is a sign of gross arrogance that people would even try to add to or take away from it in the first place.

The task of understanding God's word is one of the most important requirements of human endeavor. It is a task worthy of respect, care, intentionality, and devotion. From the beginning of the new covenant, the believers were "devoted to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Paul warns Timothy to "present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). The Israelites were meticulous about preserving and understanding God's oracles for them. God's word is worth all the attention and care we can give!

## **CONCLUSION**

We will wrap up with a chapter on the application of Revelation in the modern Christian life, but as we reach the end of the text itself, it is fitting to note the invitation at the end:

***The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come."  
And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life  
without price.***

**- Revelation 22:17**

While Revelation is a book that says much about war and struggle and conflict, it is primarily a book about hope. As long as the reader lives, there is time to come to Christ! This was true for the readers in the seven churches of Asia, and it will be true for Christians

in the 31<sup>st</sup> century living on Mars. Revelation, like every other book from God, invites and demands in equal measure. God has revealed Himself to you; how will you respond?

## **DIGGING DEEPER**

**1. Take some time to evaluate your worship habits and practice. How often do you worship God, both individually and with other Christians? When you worship, what is your demeanor? How much effort do you put in? What is God worth?**

**2. Consider your approach to the Bible. How careful are you to “rightly handle” the “word of truth”? Implied by Paul’s command is the possibility of wrongly handling it. Are you guilty of that?**

**3. Having concluded a study of Revelation, what are some of your main takeaways? What meant the most to you in this study? What questions still linger?**



# Conclusion

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU AND ME?

What is the book about, really? That is the question that people want answered. What do the numbers mean? When are the events described going to take place? What is the specific meaning of all the symbols and dramatic language?

I haven't provided many concrete answers, as I'm sure you have noticed. It was never my intention to do so. Rather, what I have tried to do is provide a framework of interpretation that is consistent with the rest of Scripture. I have tried to supply a way of thinking about Revelation to arm you to approach the book in a healthy, harmonious way.

There are hundreds of books, theories, speculations, and ideas about Revelation. Everyone has their own idea about what these things mean. They tend to be grouped into the four major views we have discussed, but there are plenty of other less-accepted ideas. This is what makes Revelation so appealing to so many; it's relatively easy to make it mean whatever you want it to mean.

But, as we conclude, I want to reiterate a couple of the most important hermeneutical principles, not just for approaching Revelation but for studying any part of the Bible:

### THE ORIGINAL READERS

Whatever you believe about what the book means, it must have had specific and applicable meaning for the people in the seven churches of Asia. They were the recipients of the book, not us. All of the books of the Bible existed first in a real, historical context. This doesn't mean they can't have meaning for us: the truly awe-inspiring thing about the Bible is how universal it is, beyond social and cultural context. But it does mean that any interpretation that ignores or sidelines those original readers is probably wrong.

### THE CONTEXT OF SCRIPTURE

Just like Revelation exists within the social and historical context of the seven churches, it also exists within the greater context of the whole Bible. Any interpretation of the events in Revelation that contradicts or supersedes the far easier to understand teachings of Genesis-Jude is almost certainly wrong. When we have two competing ideas, one of which comes from the first 26 books of the New Testament and one of which comes from

Revelation, why in the world would we pick the highly stylistic, clearly apocalyptic writing as the basis of understanding?

## **JUST GIVE A CONCRETE OPINION, ALREADY!**

As I consider the book, I find the *Spiritualist* or *Preterists* interpretations most likely. It seems far more likely that the bulk of the book is either entirely symbolic or that it is about Rome.

What did the Christians in the seven churches need? They needed hope, to know that everything would be okay, that despite their struggles, they would be victorious. Incidentally, this is precisely what Christians in the dark ages or Christians today need! We need to know how our suffering under earthly governments and institutions makes sense in light of our Christian worldview. Revelation gives us that.

Even if the bulk of the text isn't describing the eventual fall of Rome, it is unreasonable to expect to directly map the visions onto any other specific nation or era. To be more specific: I do not think the book is about the nation of Islam, or the supposed eventual one-world Government that will be headed by the antichrist. Once you start down that path, interpretation of the book becomes very arbitrary and hard to unify with the rest of Scripture.

It seems to me most likely by far that the book of Revelation is simply about how God, the Devil, and earthly institutions interact in the life of the Christian. So many forces press in on the individual, all vying for priority and worship. Satan is a master schemer, using cultures, societies, and governments as tools in the cosmic war for the souls of people. It is this cosmic struggle that the book describes. Earthly institutions (governments, clubs, business, and social groups) will all at some point turn on the Christian. It *will* seem like those who reject God prosper and thrive.

But just as inevitably, all earthly institutions will fall, either through outside pressure or from internal corruption. No earthly nation will last forever. The bowls, trumpets, and seals describe the destruction and chaos that awaits everything not set up by God. If we place our trust and faith in these things, we will experience the same sorts of horrors as everyone else.

Consider once more the five major themes of the book:

## **GOD IS MIGHTY**

No matter how powerful Rome (or our own corrupted governments, or the bullies at high school) seem, God is more powerful! He will ultimately have the victory, along with all those who have placed their hope in him. This theme is repeatedly reinforced in Revelation

by the seals and the visions of the Lamb as a conquering king or avenging commander of the angelic host and brought to a climax in the descriptions of a final battle.

All that is left to us is to choose a side. Revelation shows us why we should choose God's side.

## **JESUS IS WORTHY**

No matter what people do to try to draw you away from God, remember that only The Father and Son are worthy of your worship! They created you, they uphold you, and they will judge you in the end. The visions of the throne room in heaven serve in the book to emphasize this, as the elders and the four living creatures continually worship God.

## **EXPECT PERSECUTION**

The New Testament is full of reminders about persecution:

***Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.***

**- John 15:20**

Before his ascension, Jesus warned that the apostles would be persecuted. In the last book of the Bible, Jesus reinforces the same thing. We can mentally prepare for what we expect. We should not be "surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). We have been warned ahead of time so that we can be ready.

## **JUDGMENT IS COMING**

What exactly do we need to be ready for? The coming judgment. The odds are not good that we will remain on this earth until the final judgment and Jesus's return, but we must still always be ready, nonetheless. God sends judgment, not just at the end of time, but all throughout history, in the rise and fall of nations and peoples and lands.

More importantly, none of us knows when our own end is coming. The book of Revelation is full of the concept of *martyrdom*, dying for the cause of Christ. From the opening letters to the churches to the seals, trumpets, and bowls, some of God's people are killed by the enemy. So, we must always be ready to face judgment, because who knows when our own end will come?

## ONLY THE CHRISTIAN HAS HOPE

Ultimately, this is the point of the whole book, isn't it? The victory, comfort, and security offered by the world are false, and Satan knows this! He has to! He lies and deceives because he knows that only the Christian has true security and peace. In the day of judgment, when human free will is removed and all are forced to accept the truth of gospel, who will be able to stand? Only those who "wash their robes" (Revelation 22:14) in the blood of the Lamb.

It is fitting to conclude a discussion of a book about war with a call to arms, and there is none better than Paul's:

***Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.***

**- Ephesians 6:10-13**