

Revelation: A Book Both Daunting & Captivating

Several months before I started seminary, I read William Hendriksen's commentary on Revelation, *More Than Conquerors*. It was the first book I had ever read that made Revelation's symbolism understandable to me.

It was then that I began longing to preach through Revelation – someday, eventually, when I felt competent to do it justice.

I'm not sure whether that day has arrived or not ... but I'm hoping!

I suspect that many people share my view of Revelation as a book which is both daunting and captivating. The matters of which John writes clearly are central to the scope of human history. If only for its view of world events from a heavenly perspective, it seems necessary to come to grips with this book.

Yet, at the same time, the book is packed so full of symbolism that it's hard to know what to do with it. Do we regard it all as dealing with events now past, no longer relevant to the church? Or shall we read Revelation with the *Left Behind* book series, as a prophecy of events that still have not occurred?

My desire to preach through Revelation rests, in part, on the conviction that God gave this book to His church for good reason. John saw and recorded these visions for the benefit of God's people; and the Holy Spirit preserved them through the ages, because they remain an essential message for us. Therefore we, the Church at Hills, *need* what God reveals in these 22 chapters.

I also have been struck by the tragic news that has been piling up on every side in recent months. Disasters natural and man-made, political tyranny and intrigue, wars and rumors of wars – the horrific headlines never cease. It would be easy to throw up our hands in defeat, convinced that this world is lost and that we can only keep our heads down while awaiting the return of our Lord.

But that's not God's will for us! Revelation reminds us that, although the war rages around us, *our King reigns victorious! We are conquerors* – and we are called to live as conquerors while awaiting the fullness of Christ's Kingdom.

We *need* the book of Revelation. Therefore I pray (and I ask you to pray) that God will help us to understand this book that's so crucial for the church.

As we begin to study a book so challenging, it seems wise to pause and get our bearings. What is the history of this book before us? How is it structured? What are the keys to understanding this climactic conclusion to God's Word?

Revelation was written by the Apostle John, brother of James and son of Zebedee. He saw these visions while he was in exile on the island of Patmos, which is located in the Aegean Sea between modern-day Turkey and Greece.

The time of John's vision is a matter of debate. However, the evidence presented within Revelation itself points to the mid- to late-60s, during the reign of the infamous Emperor Nero. This was before the destruction of Jerusalem – which, as we shall see, was one of the messages of this prophetic book.

John's book describes visions revealed to Him by the Holy Spirit. Yet those visions were revealed in a carefully structured manner. The book has seven main sections – seven being the number of perfection and completion. Each section is parallel, emphasizing one aspect or another, but for the most part covering the full sweep of the period between Christ's first and second coming.

Within those seven sections, there are four descriptions of judgment, each of which has seven parts. This mirrors the covenant curses set before Israel in Leviticus 26 – tipping us off to the fact that Revelation is concerned, in large part, with revealing God's judgment against Israel and His resolve to bring His Kingdom through the Gentiles. In fact, the entire book is structured according to God's covenant, mirroring the structures of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel.

Yet another division allows us to see that the first half of the book – chapters 1 through 11 – focuses on Christ, the Bridegroom; while the second half of the book focuses on His Bride, the Church.

That leads us to ask how we should interpret John's Revelation. To that end, scholar David Chilton provides five helpful guidelines.

First, Revelation is an intensely "Biblical" book. It is packed with quotes, imagery and allusions from the Old Testament, with Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel and Daniel being favorite sources. Chilton notes, "In order to understand Revelation, we need to know our Bibles backward and forward."

Second, Revelation has a *system* of symbolism. The imagery John uses is not random. Instead, the images and symbolic numbers flow directly from the Old Testament – which is the key to unlocking their meaning.

Third, Revelation is a prophecy about events that were *near* when John wrote. The apostle was not writing about the Reformation, the age of Hitler, the Soviet Union, Islam, or any other major conflict that came later in world history. He was writing about the destruction of Jerusalem, the persecution of God's people by the Roman Empire, and the rise of the New Creation under Jesus' lordship. *That* is the situation God was initially addressing.

Fourth, Revelation is a worship service. Throughout the book, John offers us glimpses of heavenly worship— and of the church's participation in that worship. Therefore, the book provides essential insights about *our* worship.

And **fifth**, Revelation is a book about *dominion* – about the *Kingdom* of *Christ Jesus*. The focus is not on Satan's power or his kingdom's fearsome reign. Instead, the focus is on Jesus, His victory, and the kingdom He has established, which shall grow to fill all of the creation.

In all of this, the book is immensely practical for *us* – because we belong to Jesus and His Kingdom. We face the *same kinds* of persecutions and challenges as the early church faced; and we are called to respond by embracing the victory of Christ, just as the early church was.

"The theme is the victory of Christ and of His Church over the dragon (Satan) and his helpers. The Apocalypse is meant to show us that things are not what they *seem*. The beast that comes up out of the abyss *seems* to be victorious. ... In reality it is the believer who triumphs," explains William Hendriksen. "The theme of this book is stated most gloriously and completely in these words: 'These shall war against the Lamb, and the Lamb shall conquer them, for He is Lord of lords, and King of kings; and they also shall conquer that are with Him called and chosen and faithful' (Rev. 17:14)."

What a *glorious* message! Let us pray that God will give us the full benefit of it as we examine His Revelation over the coming weeks and months!!