

# Introduction

A survey was conducted among members of various church congregations. They were asked which book of the Bible they most wanted to study. Can guess what the number one answer was? Revelation. That same survey asked pastors which book of the Bible they least wanted to preach. Can you guess the answer to that one? That's right, Revelation.

*Why do you think that is?*

That's been my experience as well. Over the years, as I've led different Bible study groups, I've asked the ladies if there was a particular topic or book of the Bible they wanted to study, and Revelation always came up. I was always quick to shoot that idea down, though. I've never felt confident to teach Revelation because I didn't understand it. It's a complicated, confusing, even controversial book, and, admittedly, it's a book that I've avoided over the years.

That all changed last year, though, when one of my favorite Bible teachers, Nancy Guthrie, published a book called *Blessed: Experiencing the Promise of the Book of Revelation*. Because I like her work, and because I thought I should at least try to understand Revelation, I bought the book and started reading. I really appreciated Nancy's approach. She didn't get caught up in the controversy, trying to deal with all the various interpretive issues. Her goal was to focus on the big picture, trying to determine what the text would have meant to the original audience, and then applying that meaning to our current situations. In fact, she states in the introduction of her book, "It is my goal to cut through the confusion and help you to see the beauty, the hope and help, that is uniquely presented in this book."<sup>1</sup>

That's my goal as well. I want you to see Revelation as an accessible book, one that is meant to be understood. It has a lot of value for us if we take the time to study it. In fact, God promises blessing to those who read and keep what's in the book, as we see in Revelation 1:3, "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." So, Revelation is not a book to feared or neglected. It's one to be read and enjoyed.

There are several different ways that Revelation is interpreted. I don't plan to spend a lot of time on those, but I want you to be familiar with them.

- There's the historicist view, which actually is not widely followed these days. It's the belief that the seven seals and the trumpets and the bowl all point to the successive ages

---

<sup>1</sup>Guthrie, Nancy. *Blessed*, 23.

church history.<sup>2</sup> So they look at the timeline of church history from the ascension of Christ to modern day and try to find events that line up with the prophecy.

- Next is the preterist view. This one states that the prophecies of Revelation were all fulfilled in the first century, and that they predict the fall of the Jerusalem in 70 AD. Full-blown preterists believe that even the return of Christ has already taken place, although partial preterists argue that that's the only prophecy that hasn't been fulfilled yet.
- Then is the futurist view, which is probably the most familiar. That's what you get if you read the Left Behind series. It's the idea that once you get past the first three chapters, the prophecies in the rest of the book have yet to be fulfilled. All of the prophecies are concerning events surrounding the return of Christ.<sup>3</sup> They are the ones who believe in a secret rapture, a literal seven years tribulation with an actual person who is the anti-Christ.
- Finally, there's the idealist view. That one states that the prophecies of the book don't line up with actual events in history. Rather they describe realities that are true of the Church in all ages. So rather than a single seven-year tribulation, for instance, Christians in every century face tribulation and trials. Satan has attacked believers throughout history, so it's an ongoing battle. So, this view sees Revelation as describing principles that apply to the Church rather than literal events.

Now, I do feel like I need to issue a disclaimer here. I have my own opinion about the proper way to interpret Revelation, and I'll be teaching this class accordingly. I personally lean toward the idealist approach, so if you're here looking for a more sensational interpretation like you get in the media, you're probably going to be disappointed. Before you walk out on me, though, please bear with me. I admit that I could be wrong in my chosen approach, but I think that the principles we're going to discuss are biblical. I think we can all benefit from this discussion. So, if you personally hold to a different view, that's fine. Let's agree to disagree on that, but let's try to focus on what God would want us to learn from this study rather than focusing on any differences of opinion that we may have.

We're going to begin with an overview of the book. Let's look at the big picture and get a feel for what the book is all about.

---

<sup>2</sup>Beale, Greg. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, 7.

<sup>3</sup>Beale, 8.

Included in the notebook:

- Recommended Resources
  - These resources would be great if you want to dig deeper into the book of Revelation.
  - Books by Guthrie, Thomas, Poythress are easier to read; Commentaries by Schreiner and Beale are more in-depth
- Outline
  - It's helpful to get an idea of how the book is organized. Revelation seems like a jumble of visions and images. But there's actually a flow to the book.
  - Every author has his/her own opinion of how the book should be outlined.
  - These two are similar, but they have a slightly different perspective. These outlines determine the outline for our study.
  - The visions are not revealing events in chronological order. Rather, they tell the same events from different perspectives (recapitulation).
- Summary in Seven Sentences
  - I've summarized the overall message of Revelation in seven sentences to help you understand what the book is all about.
- Themes
  - These themes repeat throughout the book.

## Prologue (1:1-3)

Now that we have an idea of the organization of the book, the main message, and the overall themes, let's see what the book itself has to say. We'll start with the prologue, chapter 1 verses 1-3.

From these few verses, we can actually glean a lot of information, so we're going to look at one phrase at a time:

First, we see that what we're reading is a "revelation." The Greek word translated revelation is *apokalypsis*<sup>4</sup>, from which we obviously get the word apocalypse.

*What does the word apocalypse bring to mind?*

My first thought when I see the word is some major cataclysmic event, such as a zombie apocalypse. When I googled the definition of apocalypse, what I got was "the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation." That's the way the English word is used today. However, the Greek word actually means a "disclosure of truth concerning things before unknown."<sup>5</sup>

So, in the book of Revelation, God is making known to His people things that they didn't previously know. His intention is not to confuse or divide people into various interpretive camps. Instead, according to Nancy Guthrie, Revelation was "written to give servants of Jesus Christ in the first century, and servants of Jesus Christ in every century since then, confidence in what God is doing to bring about His intended purpose for His world."<sup>6</sup> She describes it as God pulling back the curtain "so that we see beyond the time and space of this earthly life into the heart of ultimate reality."<sup>7</sup> In Revelation, God is pulling back veil that separates our physical reality from the spiritual realm that surrounds us.

I'm sure we're all aware that there's a spiritual realm surrounding us that we cannot see. There are things going on in that realm, concerning angels and demons and so on, that we're often not aware of. In Revelation, God allows us a glimpse into that spiritual realm, letting us see reality from His perspective.

*Can you think of any examples in Scripture where God allows someone a glimpse into the spiritual realm?*

---

<sup>4</sup><http://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g602/kjv/tr/0-1/>

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>*Blessed*, Guthrie, 28.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 16.

We see an example of this in 2 Kings 6:15-17 (read passage). God opened the servant's eye to see the spiritual reality of what was going on. Through Revelation, He basically does the same for us.

So, this word *apocalypse* refers to God's revelation to His people, but it also refers to the genre of the book of Revelation.

*What does the word "genre" mean?*

It refers to the type of literature that something is written in. Revelation is written in the form of a letter, but it is comprised mainly of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature is unique, in that it reveals "secret things of God inaccessible to normal human knowledge."<sup>8</sup> It shows us things that we wouldn't be able to figure out otherwise.

Apocalyptic literature is similar to prophecy and is used in various Old Testament passages, such as Isaiah 24:1-27:13, Ezekiel 37:1-39:29, Daniel 7:1-12:14, and Zechariah 9:1-14:21. In fact, Revelation has a lot in common with these Old Testament prophecies. Both call people to turn away from the pagan cultures surrounding them, to resist compromise, and to renew their commitment to God.<sup>9</sup> They also both include *forth-telling* God's message to the people in the present, as well as *fore-telling* what would come in the future.<sup>10</sup>

Apocalyptic literature often involves visions, symbolism, numerology, angelology, demonology, and predicted woes, all of which are seen in Revelation,<sup>11</sup> and this gives us a clue as to how Revelation should be interpreted. We know that the Bible is comprised of a variety of different literary genres

*What are some of the literary genres found in Scripture?*

There's historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, letter. We must be careful to interpret whatever passage we are reading according to the genre that it belongs to. We do not read poetry in the same way that we read narrative, for example. Because Revelation is highly symbolic, we must not be too literal in our interpretation. We shouldn't expect actual beasts and dragons and lions and lambs to appear. We know that these things point to another reality. According to Greg Beale, "We have to distinguish between the vision given to John, what that symbolizes, and to what or whom the vision may refer."<sup>12</sup> The point is that Revelation is symbolic and must be interpreted accordingly.

---

<sup>8</sup>*The Returning King*, Poythress, 46?

<sup>9</sup>*Revelation*, Beale, 2.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup>*ESV Expository Commentary*, Schreiner, 531.

<sup>12</sup>Beale, 12-13.

To help us understand the symbolism, we must understand the Old Testament, because Revelation contains over 500 allusions to the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup> John wrote in language that he and his readers would be comfortable and familiar with, and we must also become familiar with it if we hope to accurately interpret the symbols. Nancy Guthrie advises, “Our first and best step to rightly interpreting various symbols will be to explore if and where a symbol appears in earlier books of the Bible and allow that to significantly inform our understanding. Then we must consider what the symbol would have meant to the first century audience of the book.”<sup>14</sup>

Those are just good hermeneutical principles. Hermeneutics refers to the rules that we use to interpret Scripture. One of those rules is that we interpret Scripture with Scripture. We use more clear passages to help us understand the less clear ones. So, if you’re reading a verse that you don’t understand, look for other passages that talk about the same subject to help you understand. In the case of Revelation, we use the Old Testament to help us interpret the visions given to John.

Another rule of hermeneutics is to consider what the text would have meant to the original audience. Scripture was not originally written to us. Each book of the Bible was written to a specific audience for a specific purpose. When Paul wrote his letters, for example, the church at Rome or Ephesus or Galatia was his intended audience, and he often wrote to address certain problems within those churches. God, in His wisdom and foresight, inspired Paul and the other authors of Scripture to write in such a way that we could benefit from the writing as well, but we must consider the historical context of each passage. There is only one meaning for any given passage of Scripture, although there are multiple applications. Our job then is to find that meaning, and we must remember that the passage cannot mean something to us as believers in the modern American church that it couldn’t have meant to the believers in the first-century Middle-Eastern church.

So, it’s important to understand how the original audience of Revelation would have used the Old Testament to interpret the strange visions that John shared with them. It’s also important to remember the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament allusions used by John “demonstrate that the promise of the Messiah and His suffering, salvation, and victory are the same from the beginning to the end of the Bible and of human history.”<sup>15</sup>

So, we’re moving right along. We’ve covered the first word!

Next, we see that the revelation is “of Jesus Christ.” There’s some discussion as to whether this means that the revelation is *from* Jesus or *about* Jesus. Although there is an element of both,

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>14</sup>Guthrie, 19.

<sup>15</sup>Beale, 2.

because the book of Revelation is highly Christological, the context better supports the idea that the revelation is *from* Jesus. If we follow the flow of the verses, we see that God gave the revelation to Jesus, who then sent it through an angel to make it known to John. So, the ultimate source is God.

*Why is it so significant to realize that the message of Revelation is directly from God?*

This is significant because it gives authority to the words. These are not just strange dreams that John may have had. They are visions given by God Himself. Of course, we know that all Scripture is inspired,<sup>16</sup> but this is perhaps the clearest indication that the words of a certain book are directly from God.

We also see this verse 2, where John writes that he bears witness to the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. So, again God is revealing His Word to John, apparently through visions, since John refers to what he saw. When he refers to the testimony of Jesus, it could be, as with verse 1, that it's the testimony about Jesus or from Jesus. But the point is that God is the source of what John is writing, so we must take the message seriously.

We also see that the revelation was given by God "to show his servants" something. This reinforces the idea that Revelation is not meant to be confusing or to conceal information, at least not to His servants. Rather it is to reveal God's plan and purposes for the world, although this is done through visions and symbols which may not be understood by everyone. These visions serve the same purpose as the parables of Jesus.

*According to His own words, why did Jesus use parables (Matthew 13:10-11)?*

Basically, Jesus used the parables as a test to expose the true spiritual condition of those hearing. According to Greg Beale, "By their powerful and often shocking imagery, they open the eyes of true believers while leaving hardened unbelievers in deeper darkness."<sup>17</sup> This is true also of Revelation.

We read several times in Revelation something like, "He who has an ear, let him hear" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). John is quoting Jesus' statement from Matthew 13:9. When the disciples asked Jesus why He speaks in parables, He replied, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given...This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand" (Matthew 13:11, 13). The parables were intended to reveal information about the kingdom of God to those called by God. However, God chose to conceal this information from others by not allowing them to understating the meaning of the parables. The visions of Revelation are the

---

<sup>16</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>17</sup>Beale, 16-17.

same...intended to reveal information to God's servants but conceal it from those who have not been given the ears to hear.

Furthermore, the revelation is given to show "what must soon take place." This is a highly debated phrase. Considering the amount of time that has passed without these things taking place, many argue that John must have been wrong. They use this to discredit the Bible.

*What would you say to that? How would you respond to that argument?*

First, we must understand time is a relative thing to God. What seems like an eternity to us is a mere breath to God.<sup>18</sup> We can't hold God to our timeline because He is outside of time.

Furthermore, "soon" is a relative term. To a toddler, if you promise them something soon, it better be in the next five minutes. However, as an example, someone may say they are retiring soon, but it may still be four or five years away. Our understanding of the word "soon" is somewhat dependent on the event happening and the time period in consideration. When you've been working 30 years, what four or five? In the same way, in the scheme of eternity, what's a couple thousand years. That is soon, right?

More than that though, the original audience would have recognized the allusion to Daniel 2 in these words. In Daniel 2, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream in which he saw a statue, the body of which was made of different materials: the head of gold, the chest and arms of silver, the middle and thighs of bronze, the legs of iron, and the feet a mixture of iron and clay. When Daniel went before the king to interpret the dream, he said, "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days" (2:28). Daniel goes on to explain that the dream reveals that several kingdoms will rise and fall, but in the latter days, God will establish a kingdom that will not fall. This kingdom of God prophesied about in the Old Testament was inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Christ (Mark 1:15; Luke 11:20), which means we are now living in the "latter days." However, God's kingdom will not be consummated until Christ comes again.<sup>19</sup> So the "last days" are actually the entire time from the resurrection of Christ to His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. In that sense, we are living in the last days so the time for the events of Revelation is near.

Next, we see that the angel "made it known...to John." The human author of this book is commonly believed to be the apostle, John.

*What do you know about the apostle John?*

---

<sup>18</sup>Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8

<sup>19</sup>Poythress, 70.



He was Jesus' beloved disciple and the author of the Gospel of John and the epistles 1, 2, and 3 John. He most likely received these visions while exiled on the island of Patmos, during the reign of the emperor Domitian, somewhere between 81 and 96 A.D. During that time, there was a rise in emperor worship. Christians who refused to worship the emperor were being persecuted, and some were tempted to compromise their beliefs in order to escape the persecution.<sup>20</sup> The message of Revelation is to patiently endure this persecution because God is in control and Jesus will come again to judge those that stand against Him, but reward those who are faithful to Him.

Finally, we see in verse 3 our motivation for studying the book of Revelation: those who read and keep what is written in this book will be blessed. We won't be blessed just by reading it. We have to keep it, or apply, allow it to change us. That should be our goal of any Bible study. We are going to learn some fascinating facts about Revelation. I get really excited when I learn new things about Scripture. But it can't stop there. It has to go from our head to our heart.

There are actually seven "blessed" statements in Revelation, as you can see on the handout. Let's read through those quickly to see what promises can be our when we read and keep what's in this book.

---

<sup>20</sup>Beale, 3.