

Revelation Appreciation

A Guide to Understanding this Amazing Book.

The book of Revelation is easily the most intriguing book in the Bible. Its vast array of symbols and its connection to the future, have made the source of countless speculations and controversy. Although it is perhaps impossible (and maybe even unnecessary) to come to terms with all the specific details, it is possible to gain an appreciation for the overall message of this book.

What Kind of Book Is It?

In order to understand the book, we must come to terms with why it was written. The introduction of the book describes the book of Revelation in three different ways.

Apocalypse: The word revelation (found in 1:1) is a translation of the Greek word “apokalypsis” which means to unveil or reveal. As the revelation of Jesus Christ, we should expect the book to reveal Christ’s perspective on things. The book is not a mysterious code to reveal the future, but rather is intended to reveal the heart of Jesus.

Prophecy: In 1:3, the book is described as prophecy. Like the Old Testament Prophetic books, however, we must not assume that prophecy is all about foretelling the future. In fact, verse 3 calls people to “keep” or “take to heart) the words of the prophecy which suggests that John feels that this message from God should affect the lives of his hearers.

Letter: In 1:4-5, we also see that the book was written in the form of a circular letter to seven churches. As a letter to a specific historical context, we must assume that the book had historical relevance.

Taking all of this together, we see that the book of Revelation is a highly symbolic work which discloses a heavenly perspective on life. While the book refers to events in the future, it is not a chronological timetable of future events. Rather, the book offers a symbolic picture of history past, present and future with the intent not so much to predict specific events, but rather to inspire people of all times to place their confidence in the power of God even in the midst of terrible forces of evil.

If Revelation is Supposed to Reveal Things Why all the Symbolism?

It is important to see that Revelation has relevance for Christians of all times. Many people make the mistake in thinking that the Book of Revelation was primarily intended to describe the future and then they get confused as they try to break the symbolic code. In fact the primary role of the book was to outline future events, why confuse the matter with all kinds of symbols.

Because the book was intended to be relevant to the original hearers and to us, the primary intent of the book is to inspire faith by providing a heavenly perspective on life and history. And when you are trying to inspire people with a heavenly perspective, the best thing you can do is use symbolism. Symbols appeal to the imagination and convey truth in a way that is more powerful than a mere reporting of the facts. It is much more powerful to portray Satan as a dragon than to merely tell someone that he is dangerous. The symbols of the book of Revelation are intended to captivate our hearts in order to inspire a confidence in God and suspicion of worldly things. The symbols open our eyes of faith to the unseen heavenly reality. We need to see the wonderful portrayal of how Jesus Christ is ruling in heaven and working in and through history to combat evil.

What are the Main Themes?

As Christ's heavenly perspective is revealed, we will be inspired in several ways:

1. **It Inspires Confidence in God:** Revelation shows us Almighty God exercising his control in the midst of worldly confusion. We are presented with a God centered reality and invited to participate in worship.
2. **It Inspires Resistance to Compromise:** Revelation exposes the ugly reality of evil. As we see the beastly nature of this corrupt world and the Satanic forces that oppose God, we are strengthened to resist being sucked into worldly ways
3. **It Inspires Resistance to Evil:** The book of Revelation shows us that we are in a spiritual war and that Christians need to stand and fight. In contrast to the destruction of the worldly powers, Christians achieve victory through, humility, loyalty to Christ and a willingness to embrace suffering. The book challenges us to be faithful witnesses to Christ.
4. **It Inspires Hope Amidst Affliction:** The Book of Revelation continually shows us the blessedness of a future with God. It reminds us of our destiny in Christ which is infinitely greater than our present pains. It encourages us to stand firm in the face of persecution and suffering.
5. **It Inspires Holy Fear:** Revelation portrays the horrible destiny of those who rebel against God. As we see the terrors of judgment we are warned to repent and to turn to God. It calls us to take God seriously.

The Book of Revelation inspires a godly imagination so that we might see by faith that which we cannot always see with our eyes. It portrays a heavenly reality where evil is horrible, God is sovereign and our future in Christ is blessed. We are challenged to adopt Christ's perspective on life and history and reject the perspective of this world.

How Does it All Fit Together?

One of the main ways to appreciate the book of revelation is to gain a sense of its overall structure. One of the easiest ways to get confused by this book is to assume that it has a straightforward linear structure. However, the events of the book do not flow in chronological order.

Perhaps the greatest help is to see that the book divides in half between chapters 11 and 12. Chapters 12 through 22 re-describe the time period and some of the events which were already portrayed in chapters 1 through 11. For instance, the 7th trumpet described in chapter 11 speaks of the final coming of God's kingdom. This is then described in much more detail in chapters 21 and 22.

The Book is comprised of four main topics

1. **Establishing a Heavenly Perspective:** In the first five chapters we are presented with several visions which turn our attention to Jesus Christ in Glory and God on his throne. Amidst this God centered perspective, Christ comforts and challenges his people to put aside compromise and complacency and to be comforted in affliction.
2. **The People of God in a Godless World:** In the seven seals of Chapters 6 and 7 along with the Two witnesses of Chapter 11 as well as the material on the Dragon and beasts in chapters 12 through 14, we see the people of God engaging in spiritual warfare with forces of evil.
3. **Warning Judgments:** In the seven trumpets of chapters 8 and 9 as well as seven bowls of chapters 15 and 16 we see God exercising judgment on the world in order to stir people to repentance.
4. **Final Judgment and Salvation:** In the seventh trumpet of chapter 11 and in chapters 17 through 22, we see God bring an end to evil and establishing his people in blessing and victory.

The best way that one can keep from being confused is to focus on these main topics and not to expect that the book flows in chronological order. Although there is undoubtedly a movement towards the end, the book often cycles back to touch on topics and time periods which were already described earlier in the book.

I hope that this outline will help you enjoy the book of Revelation as well as allow you to be impacted by its message. As you read the book or watch the upcoming performance, do so in a prayerful attitude. Do not approach the book with merely a curiosity about the future, but rather be open to how the book might challenge you personally. Reflect on the major themes and look for how the symbols and images might call you to live a God centered life.

A Quick Guide to Some of the Major Symbols:

Having Gained a bit of perspective on the overall book, here is a brief description of some of the major symbols in the order they appear in the book.

The Number Seven: Generally indicates perfection or completeness. For instance the seven spirits of God represents the perfection of God & his presence throughout creation.

One like a Son of Man (1:13-20) Portrayal of Jesus Christ in glory using imagery that emphasizes his power, judgment and presence among his churches

Seven Churches: Seven first century churches in present day Turkey. The number seven indicates that they are representative of all churches. The letters to these churches fall into 3 broad categories which include warnings against sinful compromise, challenges to revive complacency and comfort to the persecuted.

Four Living Creatures: (4:6-8) Angelic beings who worship God.

The Scroll (chapters 5 and 10): Symbolic of God revealing his judgments and warnings

The Lamb (5:6-8) Symbolizes Jesus Christ and his sacrificial death

Seven Seal (chapter 6) The opening of these seals ushers forth destructive forces. Chronologically this refers to a time period leading up to God judgments.

Four Horsemen (6:1-8) Represent destructive forces of conquest, war, economic collapse and death. Probably refer to destructive forces throughout history.

Sealing of 144,000 (Ch 7) Represents God protecting his people spiritually as they prepare to enter spiritual warfare.

Seven Trumpets (Ch 8-9) God's warning judgment on the rebellious, calling them to repentance.

Locusts of 5th Trumpet: (9:1-11) Demonic spirits that torment unbelievers

Cavalry of 6th Trumpet: (9:12-19) Demonic inspired armies which lead to a massive war near the end of time. Paralleled in 6th Bowl.

Two Witnesses: (Ch 11) God's representatives, perhaps two prophets or perhaps generally symbolic of the witnessing church. The role of Christians is paralleled in their story as they call people to repentance, are persecuted, but ultimately are resurrected.

Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19): Brief description of God's final judgment and salvation.

Woman and Dragon: (Ch 12) Woman symbolic of Israel or God's people who are protected from the Dragon who is Satan.

Male Child / War in Heaven (12:7-12): The Child is Christ. The war in heaven is the result of Christ's resurrection and ascension. This is not Satan's final defeat, but rather a picture of the victory Christ has already begun.

Beast out Of Sea (13:1-10) Symbolic of a Godless ruler or kingdom. Probably saw limited fulfillment in Roman empire, but finds ultimate fulfillment in a future Antichrist who will rule the world and persecute God's people. Generally representative of all worldly powers that oppose God and God's people.

Beast out of Earth (13:11-18) Symbolic of a godless prophet or religious system. Probably saw limited fulfillment in Roman emperor cult., but finds ultimate fulfillment in a future false prophet who will persecute God's people. Generally representative of all religious and economic forces that tempt people into idolatry.

Seven Bowls of Wrath (Ch 15-16) God's warning judgment on the rebellious, calling them to repentance. Probably a further description of the seven trumpets.

Great Harlot Babylon: (Ch 17-18) Representative of the power and wealth of Rome and of any other worldly power which tempts people to compromise loyalty to God.

Rider on White Horse (Ch 19) Christ returning to the earth to exercise final victory.

The Thousand Years (Ch 20) Perhaps a literal 1000 year reign of Christ on earth in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Alternatively it is symbolic of the victory and blessings of God's people.

New Jerusalem: (Ch 21) Although describing a city it is also called the Bride of Christ. This is a picture of God dwelling with his people who have been purified by Christ.