

Course Study Guide

NT228

***Revelation: The Book
of Revelation–The
End & The Beginning***

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Updated 2014



**Our Daily Bread
Christian University**

Lesson 1 Study Guide

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of Revelation–The
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Revelation: What is the Book of Revelation
and What's it About?

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Objectives

Lessons One and Two explore the most controversial and, in many ways, difficult New Testament book: John's Revelation of Jesus Christ. Lesson One will guide you through introductory matters of date, authorship, audience, purpose, and structure. Then you will learn about approaches to studying apocalyptic literature and the various theological approaches to Revelation. All this prepares you to more profitably interact with the epistle's content. The second part of this lesson will then move you into the book, surveying the material from 1:1 through the seven seals judgment in 8:5.

When you complete this lesson, "Revelation: What is the Book of Revelation and What's it About?" you should be able to:

- Define "apocalyptic literature" and discuss four options for interpreting it.
- Define and explain the meaning of various terms used in the book of Revelation.
- Interact with various options for understanding the chronology of the tribulation and millennium.
- Discuss the messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor contained in Revelation 2 and 3.
- Describe John's vision of God's throne List and describe the seven seals judgment.

Scripture Reading

Read Revelation 1-7.

Transcript

Course Title: Revelation: The Book of Revelation—The End & The Beginning

Lesson One: Revelation: What is the Book of Revelation and What's it About?

I. Introduction

With our next two lessons we turn to the last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation—certainly one of the most intriguing and controversial books in all of Scripture, and one which has spawned numerous different interpretive approaches throughout the centuries of church history.

A. Authorship

It is the only one of the five books that the church historically has attributed to John that actually includes John's name in the opening chapter. John, however, does not describe himself here as an apostle, or even as an elder, as we saw with 2 and 3 John, but in terms of one who is a prophet or a seer. And there have been, as with a number of the New Testament books, questions in the modern era whether this John is in fact the apostle by that name or not. Following more conservative tradition, we will accept the traditional ascription of authorship here.

B. Readership, Circumstances, Date

The readers, outlined in the opening chapters of Revelation as well, are seven churches in Asia Minor, the westernmost province of what today we would call Turkey. This is clearly a circular or an encyclical letter, meant to be read, passed along—perhaps after having been copied—to seven different churches, all of which were joined by a roughly circular road in that part of the ancient world.

The circumstances are that John is in exile on the Greek island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, an island known to be a penal colony in the ancient world, and therefore presumably exiled as part of the persecution at the end of the first century under the emperor Domitian—sporadic though it was, affecting Christians and particularly Christian leaders in different parts of the empire. This would mean that we should date the letter to roughly the mid-90s, during the short-lived but at times intense persecution that the emperor Domitian spawned.

C. Genre

Perhaps the most significant introductory question for the book of Revelation, however, deals with its genre. That, in turn, spawns a whole host of interpretive questions that have divided commentators, ancient and modern. As we mentioned in our opening lesson, the term for Revelation in the Greek is *apokalupsis*, from which we get our English “apocalypse.”

An apocalypse was a well-known literary form in the ancient Jewish and Greek and Roman world, involving a discussion of human history, sometimes past or present, but almost always culminating in some future prediction about how God would cosmically and supernaturally intervene to bring the events of this world as we know it to an end, to vindicate His people against their enemies, and to encourage and to comfort the oppressed.

An apocalypse was also a very highly symbolic form of literary writing, often involving animals or inanimate objects symbolically depicting humans, encrypting in a code-like fashion, therefore, the events that were being described. That means that a very literal interpretation of this kind of literature, however important it may be in other more straight-forward kinds of writing including scriptural writing, may at times mislead us when we come to interpreting an apocalypse. The book of Revelation contains dragons, it contains strange beasts, it contains both good and wicked women: none of which are meant to be taken at face value, but all of which symbolize key events—past, present, or future—of God’s interaction with human history. Unfortunately, the book of Revelation, particularly at the lay level, has often been read too straightforwardly and too literally as simply a code encrypting the events of the future: If only we understood current events and the way contemporary world patterns are developing, we could see the fulfillment of numerous precise details of the book of Revelation.

It is more in keeping with apocalyptic literature, rather, that instead of this kind of detailed knowledge in advance, major themes and broad emphases characterizing the time of the end are what are being depicted in each particular passage. Revelation, however, is not simply pure apocalyptic; it also includes the genre of prophecy. However symbolic the events are that are being described, there are real, public, universal, significant events that the future will yet bring us that are being described in this symbolic form.

Revelation also partakes of the literary genre of an epistle, not only in chapters 2-3 that give seven brief letters to the seven churches that are being addressed, but also in the sense that the entire scroll would have been sent as a letter to circulate among these churches. That also reminds us that Revelation is not some mystical description of the future detached from any historical circumstances, but that it is being addressed to seven very specific Christian communities, presumably in ways that they were meant to understand. God gave visions to John that would have been understandable in the context of his Jewish upbringing, Old Testament literature, intertestamental literature and developments, and current events in the first century that were meaningful to the Greco-Roman communities and the Christian audiences of both Jewish and Greco-Roman backgrounds that Revelation is written to. In short, we must seek to identify what the first audiences of Revelation would most likely have thought of when they heard a description of the wonderful, and at times bizarre, imagery of the visions God granted John. It is not nearly as significant what those imageries and symbolism would conjure up to someone today; and we must be careful of reading anachronistically our impression, in light of current events, of the imagery of the Revelation rather than what these symbols would have meant in their original historical context.

D. Four Interpretations

Another way of describing this same debate is to point out four broad approaches that have been taken throughout history to interpreting Revelation. These are called preterist, futurist, historicist, and idealist. (1) The preterist approach assumes that everything in the book of Revelation is, from our perspective today, past—that it describes merely first-century events, and that the persecutions and great tribulations depicted are simply those events surrounding the persecution at the time of Domitian. Perhaps only the triumph of God at the end of the book in the final three chapters is that which is yet future. (2) The futurist approach by way of contrast, takes virtually everything after the opening three chapters as never having been fulfilled and referring only to events of a future date. (3) The historicist tries to identify various periods of church history that correspond to the different events depicted in the book of Revelation, (4) while the idealist approach gives up assigning a particular chronological time to any of the themes or depictions of the book, seeing it rather as a timeless description of the battle between the forces of good and evil.

While there may be elements of truth to all these views, we believe that a combination of the preterist and futurist approaches is best, in keeping with what we have already said. Much of the imagery makes sense in Revelation only when we understand what that imagery would have meant in the first century and the events of the persecution that foreshadow or parallel what will probably happen on a much larger and grander and even more awful scale in the events that immediately usher in the coming of Christ and the end of this phase of human history.

E. Theological Perspectives

There are also debates that interpreters have divided over as to whether a pretribulation, midtribulation, or posttribulation approach best describes the relationship between the Rapture, the Tribulation, and Christ's second coming throughout this book. Though as we commented in our discussion of 1 Thessalonians, the term "rapture" appears nowhere here—only in that epistle of Paul—and the concept of tribulation appears here and not there. So any reconstruction is admittedly speculative, and we must allow for diversity among interpreters and agree to disagree amicably on this topic. This particular perspective, nevertheless, will proceed from a posttribulation point of view and we will point out some reasons for that route.

Finally, there is a debate on the interpretation of the millennium—the thousand-year period of human peace and prosperity as God's people reign with Him on earth, as depicted in Revelation 20. Postmillennialists believe that this is an era that Christians, through the power of the Spirit can bring about in human history prior to Christ's return. In other words, Christ comes back post, or after, the millennium. But despite various periods of social and even utopian optimism throughout church history, the sad realities of the depths of the evil and the fallen nature of humanity have generally made this the least popular and convincing approach.

Amillennialists take the concept of a millennium entirely symbolically. Traditionally, they have equated it with the church age, but again this seems to be a bit too optimistic. More recent amillennialists have often seen the millennium as simply depicting the period of the new heavens and the new earth of chapters 21-22 in a slightly different form. This particular approach that we will take here follows the third major interpretive scheme— namely premillennialism, which believes that Christ must first return before a golden age of perfected and glorified humanity can occur, and that that age is a literal period of human history in between the world and its course of events as we know it now, and the new heavens and the new earth of chapters 21 and 22, with which the book of Revelation closes.

II. Analysis

We may begin, then, our survey of the contents of the book of Revelation.

A. Introduction (1:1-20)

Chapter 1 is entirely introductory. It sets the stage for John being in the Spirit worshipping Christ in exile on Patmos, and receiving the first of the series of visions with which his book is concerned. After the introductory information, that does bear resemblance to the typical epistolary form that we have become familiar with throughout these series of lessons, John is then introduced to a very powerful Jesus—one who is depicted as a warrior, as sovereign in majesty, as glorified, as almost too unbearable to remain in the presence of. This is the one place in the canon where Jesus appears consistently in strength, as one triumphant, and a reminder that Christian belief about Jesus is not just the sweet baby in the manger at Christmas time, or the crucified Jesus on the cross of Good Friday, but the resurrected, exalted, triumphant Jesus who one day will return to rule the earth and to vindicate Himself against His enemies.

B. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

Chapters 2-3 then form a clearly discrete section, in which John addresses in turn each of the seven churches of Asia. Perhaps the best way to understand these letters is to see them as covering the sweep or spectrum of the types of churches that existed in John's day, and arguably have existed in virtually every era of church history in a broad geographical arena. (1) The church at Ephesus is one which is described in the famous phrase that they have "lost their first love," 2:1-7. (2) The church at Smyrna (2:8-11) is one of two churches that John praises without giving any condemnation, as persevering despite difficult circumstances. Interestingly, they are not promised freedom or liberation from this persecution, but are simply encouraged to stand fast. (3) Pergamum, addressed in 2:12-17, is a church that is largely condemned, which has mixed faith with immorality. (4) Thyatira, has confused the devilish with the divine (2:18-29). (5) Sardis, which is entirely condemned, one of two churches without any praise, is described as almost totally dead (3:1-6). (6) Philadelphia, the most mature of these congregations, addressed in 3:7-13, is described as obedient and faithful, and is the second church which receives no condemnation. Interestingly, however, apparently through no

particular merit of their own, they are promised that they will be kept from the hour of great tribulation that is coming upon the whole world.

For those who believe in a pretribulational rapture, the church at Philadelphia is often viewed as symbolizing and representing faithful believers who are alive at the time of the events immediately preceding Christ's return and therefore will be raptured out of the world so that they do not have to go through the Great Tribulation that is coming. Posttribulationists, nevertheless, often point to the fact that the expression that is used here, "to be kept from," is the same two-Greek-word expression that appears in John 17:15, where Jesus prays for His followers that they might be kept from the evil one and from his influences, even while they remain on earth after His death and resurrection. It could be that both of these approaches, however, are reading too much into this text, inasmuch as nothing else in Revelation 2 and 3 clearly refers to any point in the future beyond the immediate circumstances of the Domitianic persecution. Perhaps the Great Tribulation of "the whole world" is the whole world as the *oikoumene*, namely the whole empire—the empire-wide persecution—and that Philadelphia is being promised preservation from what Domitian is up to in the first century—nothing more than that, and nothing less.

(7) The final church of the seven is the church at Laodicea, which is generally seen as depicted in the most negative terms, and the second of the two churches for which John has no commendation. Laodicea we might characterize as undrinkable and useless. There is a misinterpretation that has plagued readers of this part of Revelation that we must be careful to correct here. Laodicea is said to be neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm, and therefore in danger of being spewed out of Jesus' mouth. The water supply of Laodicea, in fact, was proverbial in the ancient world for being lukewarm and therefore virtually undrinkable, because it had no fresh water supply of its own. Either the cold, fresh water of the mountain streams near nearby Colosse or the hot, refreshingly and therapeutically warm, water of the hot springs at nearby Hierapolis were piped in to provide the drinking water for the town of Laodicea. In other words, both hot and cold in this context are positive metaphors.

Christ is not saying, through John, that he would rather people either be warmly on fire for Him or so cold as to be clearly against Him, rather than lukewarm. Surely that makes no sense theologically. Christ would prefer people to be very close to coming to genuine Christian faith. No, instead, both hot and cold are metaphors for what is either refreshingly, revivingly cold or therapeutically warm, but the Laodiceans are like neither. Therefore, Jesus cries out to them, using another famous metaphor in verse 20, that He stands at the door of their hearts, as it were, and knocks—hoping that they will open the door to Him that He might come in and eat with them. Although this verse has often been used in evangelistic contexts, perhaps derivatively in an appropriate sense, in its original context it is a call for revival; it is a call for what today we might call rededication of those who profess faith in Christianity but have become lukewarm in that faith.

C. Throne Room of God (4:1-5:14)

With chapter 4, we clearly enter a very different portion of the book of Revelation. Chapters 4 and 5 take us from earth to heaven and describe the heavenly throne room of God Himself, Christ, and the various angelic creations that surround Him. We might characterize these two chapters as chapters of heavenly praise. The main point of chapter 4 is the complete worthiness of God to receive all glory and honor. It is not until chapter 5 that a problem intrudes into this heavenly vision, namely the apparent absence of anyone who is worthy to open the scroll—a scroll on which presumably the events of the end times are being depicted. The opening of the scroll, then, would refer to the ability to begin to usher in that period that would culminate human history.

Nevertheless, one appears who is called both a lion, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and a Lamb, who is worthy to open the scroll. This clearly is a pair of metaphors referring to Jesus, the Christ, the one who was slain for the sins of the world, the one who was God's very expression of Himself to provide the atonement that was necessary before the final age of human history could be inaugurated. The same hymns of praise that are addressed to God the Father in chapter 4 are addressed to the Lamb. He is the one who is worthy to receive all honor and power and blessing and glory and strength, and the like. These chapters implicitly point out how Jesus is "very God of very God"—as the early creeds phrased it.

But they also introduce us to a very typical apocalyptic strategy that will be crucial to help us interpret events that come later in the book of Revelation. Jesus is, as we have seen, depicted as both a lion and as a lamb. If we pay more careful attention to the sequence of John's writing in 5:5-6, we see that he actually hears the mention of the one who is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, but then turns to look to see this individual and what he sees is a lamb. Of course we know that Jesus was neither literally the animal a lion or the animal of a sheep, but that these refer to His power and majesty and warrior traits on the one hand and His humble and sacrificial work on the other. The fluidity of apocalyptic literature to describe one and the same incident or event in quite different language is important to keep in mind.

D. First of Three Series of Seven Judgments (6:1-8:5)

With chapter 6 we then proceed to the events that will usher in the final epoch of human history. Chapter 6:1-8:5 introduce us to the first of three series of seven judgments, depicted respectively as seals, trumpets, and bowl judgments. How these judgments are related is a point of considerable debate. There are those who see them as twenty-one consecutive judgments. The problem for this view, however, is that the sixth in each series seems to be so cataclysmic as to bring us to the very end of human history in ways that the universe as we now know it cannot continue. Others have seen the three as recapitulative, each depicting the same period of tribulation from three different perspectives. The trouble with this view is there seems to be an intensifying or climactic nature to the three series of judgments.

Perhaps the best approach is one which combines the strengths of these first two and sees the judgments of the seven seals as proceeding sequentially up to the sixth seal, which then is, as it were, a flash ahead, putting us on the very brink of the abyss of the end of human history, only to have John and his visions withdraw a little bit from the edge of the cliff, as it were. The seventh in each series, interestingly, does not introduce any new judgment. Indeed, on one occasion there is silence in heaven, and in the other cosmic rumblings. It may well be that the seventh seal is meant to introduce and embrace all seven of the next judgments, in this case the trumpet judgments, and that the seventh trumpet is meant to introduce and embrace all seven of the final bowls of God's wrath.

It is also significant to notice that the first set of judgments, the seven seals, do not refer to events that are on the scroll of events about the end times, but are preliminary events. Just as one had to take imperial or official seals off of a scroll before one could open it and read it, these are events which must take place first. This fits the nature, particularly of the first four seal judgments, which include militarism, warfare, famine, and death—events which Christians as well as others have experienced in the world, in the first century, and throughout church history. The fifth seal is quite different; it reflects the cries of the martyrs: How long must they wait? And the answer that is given to them is “a little longer.” Clearly we are not at the very end with this event either. The sixth seal, reflecting cosmic upheaval, clearly does bring us to the threshold of the end, but we still have numerous judgments to go and so it would appear that John and the visions he has received from God shrinks back at this point.

Before describing the seventh seal, John therefore offers an interlude of sorts that accounts for chapter 7. Here we have two pictures: one of 144,000 Jews, one-twelfth from each of the tribes of Israel, and a second vision of a numberless multitude of people of all ethnic groups praising God. Surely one could not have picked two more disparate groups, and those who favor a pretribulation approach to Scripture naturally understand the numberless multitude, those who have come out of the Great Tribulation, to be the church raptured prior to that Tribulation. The 144,000, then, are literal Jews who either are stuck living through the Tribulation, Jewish Christians, or those who come to faith in Christ after the church has been raptured.

But if we remember Jesus as the Lion who is also the Lamb, there is another interpretation consistent with the posttribulationist approach that perhaps should be preferred. John again hears the number of those who are sealed, who are protected, who must live through the Tribulation, but who are exempt from God's wrath. He then turns to look at them, and what he sees, presumably, is the group just described. But what he sees, much as a sheep differs from a lion, is a very different kind of group. The one is describing the literal multiethnic, giant size of the church of Jesus Christ of all time. The other describes the church symbolically as the new or true Israel, the one who is the fulfillment of all of the hopes and prophecies of the Old Testament. “They who have come out of the Great Tribulation” uses a phrase that is slightly more naturally understood as meaning having lived through it, and then having been brought out of it. Although this view is perhaps less well-known, it is one that deserves to be taken seriously.

Discussion Questions

There are many interpretations of the teaching in the book of Revelation. Since it can be so confusing, why do you think God gave us this book as part of the Bible?

What new things about interpreting the book of Revelation did you learn from this lesson?

What advice would you give a new Christian who wants to read the book of Revelation?

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 75: “Believers and Bosses” (3 John)

Philip Yancey Devotional

The Final Word - Revelation 1

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Rev. 1:8)

Imagine the Bible without the book of Revelation. After the Old Testament come the four Gospels, which then lead into Acts and its account of missionary ventures, followed by the letters to the resulting churches. All fine so far, but one thing is missing: Where is history going? Where will it end up?

One would have to reach beyond all credibility to make a case that the prophets’ promised kingdom of peace and righteousness has come about in the years since Jesus’ Ascension. Our own century has included two World Wars, several hundred lesser wars, two atom bomb attacks, a Holocaust, and numerous mass killings by half-crazed dictators. Where is the time promised by Isaiah when swords will be beaten into plowshares and the lion will lie down by the calf?

Revelation adds a two-word message: Just wait. God is not finished with this planet. The Bible stakes God’s own reputation on His ability to restore this planet to its original state of perfection. Only when that happens will history have run its course.

As the book opens, the apostle John has been banished on the island of Patmos, a hard-labor colony. In that bleak setting, he receives a vision remarkably similar in style to those reported by the prophets Ezekiel and Daniel. Many details of John’s vision no one can claim to understand with confidence. But this first chapter establishes why the visions were given. John presents a new picture of Jesus.

Yes, Jesus is the babe in the manger, and the Good Shepherd, and the teacher of disciples, and the model of humanity, and the Son of God who died on a cross. But He is something else as well: He is the blazing supernatural creature whose very presence knocked John to the ground. He is the Creator of this world who will someday return to re-create, and make new all that humankind has spoiled.

Life Question: Does your “image” of Jesus include the image given in this chapter?

Glossary

Apocalypse — A prophetic book or portion thereof written in apocalyptic style

Apocalyptic — (Apocalyptic Literature) Apocalyptic is a collective term used to designate those ancient visionary writings or parts of writings that purport to reveal the mystery of the end of the world (age) and the glories of the world (age) to come.

Domitian — Titus Flavius. The son of Vespasian, he succeeded his brother, Titus, as emperor of Rome in A.D. 81. His reign (81-96) marked a new epoch in imperialism. His autocratic spirit even led him to take the title of “Lord and God,” thereby approaching the absolute monarchy of Diocletian.

Prophecy — This is an utterance, whether originally oral or written, of a prophet. In biblical tradition, a prophet was one who proclaimed the will or mind of God. The prophet’s interpretation of divine will often pertained to the future; the identification of prophecy with foretelling future events naturally followed.

Quiz

1. As shown in chapter 5, who is able to open the scroll signifying the culmination of human history?
 - A. John
 - B. One of the four living creatures
 - C. One of the 24 elders
 - D. The Lamb

2. Which emperor was persecuting Christians at the end of the first century, when the book of Revelation was likely written?
 - A. Domitian
 - B. Nero
 - C. Augustus
 - D. Titus

3. The first series of seven judgments in Revelation is depicted by:
 - A. Bowls
 - B. Trumpets
 - C. Plagues
 - D. Seals

4. The Greek term *apokalupsis* can best be defined as:
 - A. A mystery
 - B. A cover-up
 - C. An unveiling
 - D. Both A and B

5. The idealist approach to the timeframe of Revelation:
 - A. Sees all the events as past
 - B. Sees the book as tracing the development of the entire Church age
 - C. Sees the book as a symbolic presentation of the timeless struggle between good and evil
 - D. Sees all the events as future

6. In what way(s) does the book of Revelation take on the form of an epistle?
 - A. It contains many bizarre visions.
 - B. It foretells future events.
 - C. It contains letters addressed to seven specific Christian communities.
 - D. All of the above

7. This characteristic of Jesus is depicted in his appearance to John in chapter 1:
 - A. Suffering
 - B. Innocence
 - C. Strength
 - D. Humanness

8. What does the term *apocalypse* signify?
 - A. Ancient writings that prophesied the total destruction of the world
 - B. A form of writing involving symbolism; depicting past, present, or future events; and giving assurance that evil would not triumph
 - C. A form of prophetic writing that assigned symbolic imagery to correspond with literal future events
 - D. The final battle between good and evil

9. Which of the seven churches received a letter condemning it for being neither hot nor cold?
 - A. Ephesus
 - B. Pergamum
 - C. Philadelphia
 - D. Laodicea

10. Premillennialists believe:
 - A. Christ will return after the age of perfected humanity.
 - B. The millennium is equated with the church age.
 - C. The millennium is the period of the new heavens and new earth.
 - D. Christ must return before an age of perfected humanity can occur.

Answers: 1. D 2. A 3. D 4. C 5. C 6. C 7. C 8. B 9. D 10. D

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Its Content & Meaning

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Objectives

This lesson completes the study of Revelation by surveying the text contained in 8:6 through the end. The completion of the Great Tribulation, the two interludes to judgment, and the various events and personages are discussed as they appear in this fascinating book. Along with studying the content of the book, you will gain additional skill in understanding the imagery and symbolism associated with apocalyptic literature. You will have a clearer understanding of this essential section of Scripture so you can use it as a guide to living in the present.

When you complete this lesson, “Revelation: Its Content & Meaning,” you should be able to:

- List and describe the judgments contained in the seven seals and seven bowls.
- Identify and explain various persons, groups, creatures, and events presented in Revelation.
- Explain various views of the chronological sequence of events described in Revelation as a basis for forming your own views.
- Describe how Christ’s return concludes the Great Tribulation and introduces the visible reign of God.

Scripture Reading

Read Revelation 8-22.

Transcript

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Lesson Two: Revelation: Its Content and Meaning

I. Trumpet Judgments (8:6-11:19)

The second series of judgments that form the major middle section of the book of Revelation are the seven trumpet judgments: 8:6-11:19. Now we are ready for the depiction of the Great Tribulation proper, that period at the end of human history in which the antagonism between the forces of good and evil seems to come to a climax.

A. Trumpets One through Four

As with the first four seals, the first four trumpet judgments are closely parallel to each other, here calling to mind many of the plagues against Pharaoh and the Egyptians from the days of Moses. Interestingly, in several instances, one-third of the earth is said to be that section of our world that is affected. What is the significance of this fraction? At the very least, it seems to be significant that it is less than a half. The majority of the world still remains unaffected, even as the Great Tribulation begins. Things will intensify before the Tribulation ends, but throughout this period even these judgments that seem to be on a grander and more awesome and awful scale than anything human history has previously experienced, still are meant to bring people to repentance. Chapter 9:20-21 makes this intent clear as, in a backhanded way, John laments that despite all of these judgments the people did not repent. The point of that statement, nevertheless, is that even at this late date in human history, God's judgments are not purely punitive, but remedial in intent, hoping that people would repent and not perish.

B. Trumpets Five and Six

The fifth and sixth trumpet judgments, as in the previous sequence of seals, are of a different nature than the first four—in this case being described explicitly in demonic language. Armies of locusts, reminiscent of the experience and prophecies of Joel, are depicted, but explicitly as coming out of the Abyss. One of the ironies of some modern approaches to the book of Revelation is that unwittingly they have actually taken this supernatural and demonic element out of the Scriptures when they have tried to equate the battles that these locust armies depict simply with merely human warfare. It would appear instead that spiritual warfare is what is being depicted in chapter 9.

C. Second Interlude

Chapter 10:1-11 form the first part of yet another interlude before the seventh trumpet is sounded. Here John's vision is closely reminiscent of the experience of the prophet Ezekiel. He, too, had been commanded to eat a little scroll that would be both bitter and sweet in its taste. In similar fashion, John is being reminded and reminding his readers that the events of the Tribulation period have both bitter and sweet elements to them. For God's people, at last on the threshold of vindication, there is a very sweet taste. But for those who will be judged, the taste is bitter indeed. And even for God's people, who have been sealed and are protected from these judgments that are described as the expressions of the wrath of God, it is clear that they are not exempt from the persecution of unbelievers and from the devil.

D. Two Witnesses

Chapter 11 is, in some readers' minds, the most difficult and complex of all of the visions of the book of Revelation. It centers around the ministry of two witnesses, two individuals who, in John's vision, are described in terminology reminiscent of Moses and Elijah from Old Testament times. But if we allow for the fact that a large community of God's people is living through the Tribulation, a fact that all interpreters agree on (the only difference is whether it is the entirety of the church or some small collection of believers), it seems more likely that rather than two individuals, the two witnesses of chapter 11 are meant to reflect the witnessing community of God's people even in these awful times. As has been true in many periods and places throughout church history, when persecution is greatest so also often is bold testimony. It was the early church father Tertullian who made the famous remark that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Chapter 11 also introduces us to the first of several references, over the next few chapters, to the Tribulation as a period of time depicted with the number three and a half. The various descriptions—forty-two months; or three and a half times; or time, times, and a half a time; and so forth—all add up to a period of three and a half years. Some commentators, adding together various mentions of this three-and-a-half-year period, come up with a seven-year period for the Tribulation. But interestingly, the book of Revelation never makes such an addition, and in fact the next place in which the reference to the three and a half years occurs, in chapter 12, comes in the context of a clear flashback to Christ's first coming: the male child that the woman gives birth to who Satan the dragon stands ready to devour, but he is protected and caught up to the throne of God—a clear reference to the birth of Jesus and to His later resurrection and ascension.

It is not clear at all, therefore, that these three-and-a-half-year periods are meant to be taken sequentially, and since Revelation never adds them up to seven, we must be cautious in doing that. Particularly when we understand the symbolism of seven as a number of completeness, going all the way back to the seven days of creation, consistently used that way throughout the Scriptures, it seems much more natural to understand the Great Tribulation as a three-

and-a-half-year period—that is, an incomplete period that is not God’s final word on human history. In fact, neither three and a half nor seven are probably meant to be taken literally, but rather symbolically or theologically. However long or short a period this Great Tribulation is, is never, then, explicitly mentioned. With the end of chapter 11, we come to the seventh trumpet-sounding. But as with the seventh seal, no separate judgment takes place—only praise to God in heaven and again what we might call cosmic sound effects.

II. Third Interlude (12:1-13:18)

Before proceeding to the final septet of judgments, we have yet another—and the longest—of John’s interludes in chapters 12-14.

A. Unholy Trinity

Here we are introduced to what has been called the satanic trinity, a grotesque trio of characters parodying the functions of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Chapter 12:1-17 tell us about the first person in this unholy trinity, a dragon who is explicitly equated with Satan in verse 9. He is described as persecuting and pursuing Jesus and also the offspring of the woman who gave birth to Jesus, presumably a reference to the church, the community of his followers. Nevertheless, God’s people are protected and taken away from the worst of Satan’s persecution. Although believers are protected from God’s wrath entirely during this period, we are reminded again that they are not entirely exempt from persecution or suffering—even martyrdom, at times, inflicted by the devil.

B. Two Beasts

Chapter 13:1-10 introduce us to the first of two beasts, this one a beast coming out of the sea. It is described in terms and with symbolism remarkably resembling the dragon, just as Christ is the exact image of His Father. And in the parody of Jesus the Son, the second person of the Trinity, this second person of the unholy trinity has the appearance of having had a fatal wound that had been healed, trying to imitate the Crucifixion and Resurrection—although, interestingly, John says it simply has this appearance. It does not say that the devil successfully imitated Christ’s death and resurrection. This character is the one who is usually equated in Christian thinking with the Antichrist, that individual we mentioned in our survey of Paul’s teaching, particularly in the Thessalonian epistles, that was proverbial in Jewish literature as an archenemy of God’s people, who would arise in the last days. It is interesting, however, though, that the term “Antichrist” never appears anywhere in the book of Revelation. In fact, the only place it appears in Scripture is in the epistles of John, where the false teachers of John’s day are called—small “a”—antichrists, in the plural, as harbinger of the one, larger, worldwide Antichrist yet to come.

The third member of the so-called satanic trinity appears in 13:11 and following, and is depicted as a beast from the land. This beast parodies the Holy Spirit. It has the prophetic and

priestly authority to make unbelievers worship the first beast, using miraculous signs to try to tempt them to follow the devil's wishes rather than Christ's. It is in this context, as chapter 13 comes to a close, that we are introduced also to the enigmatic "mark of the beast," without which believers are not allowed to buy and sell in the worldwide marketplace of the end times. Again, this uses language and imagery that would have been very familiar from the end of the first century, and particularly of the Domitianic persecution, in which one had to make a pledge or take an oath of Caesar Domitian as Lord—often times, in order to function in the public arena. Trade guilds, particularly in and around Asia Minor, often had a religious dimension to them, without participation in which it was very difficult for Christians to buy or sell.

Why the number 666? There are those who believe that this is an example of the Jewish device known as "gematria"—Hebrew letters doubled as numerals. And if one spelled the name Nero Caesar, at least with one possible spelling, in the Hebrew, the numerical value of the letters added up to 666. Given that by the end of the first century there was a myth or story circulating in Roman circles that Nero never had really died, and that one day he would come back from wherever he was hiding and reclaim his throne, this interpretation has some plausibility. But it may be equally likely that, like so many numbers in apocalyptic literature more generally and throughout the book of Revelation, 666 is significant in that it contains three digits, just as the three members of the Trinity and its satanic parody contain, and that each numeral six is one number short of seven. Seven hundred and seventy-seven would therefore be the perfect or holy number appropriate to the Trinity, as in fact was recognized in later early Christian writing. Six hundred and sixty-six would then be an appropriate parody of the number of the Trinity of someone who is trying to imitate but just can't quite match up to the true and living God. If that interpretation is correct, then there is no way that we can read current events as somehow tipping the hand in advance of who the Antichrist will be.

III. Victory and Bowls of Judgment (14:1-16:21)

Nevertheless, despite the horrors inflicted by this grotesque trinity, chapter 14 proceeds to describe the victory of God's people. Finally, when we come to chapter 15 we are ready to return to the final in the series of 21 judgments, three series of seven, that occupy so much attention in the central chapters of the book of Revelation.

A. Seven Bowls

The seven bowl judgments form the framework, then, for 15:1-16:21. Again, heavenly praise accompanies the onset of the last seven plagues. The bowls themselves closely resemble the judgments of the seven trumpets, which in turn, we recall, exhibited close similarity to the plagues on the Egyptians in Pharaoh's day. But this time there are no limiting fractions, there are no references to a third of the earth being affected—a reason for seeing this as not merely recapitulating the Tribulation period, but referring to a further and more intense portion of that period.

B. Armageddon

It is chapters 15 and 16 which also introduce us to the famous place in which the armies of the earth are assembling for the great final battle, the battle which is called Armageddon, from two Hebrew words which refer to the mount of Megiddo, a city on a hill overlooking the Valley of Jezreel, which was the site of many Old Testament battles and therefore had become legendary or proverbial as a great battle place. Again, we must understand what these terms would have conjured up to first-century readers.

Today we speak of Napoleon meeting his Waterloo and therefore can talk about someone's final or decisive defeat in any kind of battle, even figurative battles, as someone having "met their Waterloo." It seems that the term "Armageddon" functioned similarly in the first century, and therefore we should not necessarily assume that the armies of the earth will literally assemble in the Valley of Jezreel in the shadow of the mount of Megiddo for this great and final battle. Rather, the term is simply used to conjure up the idea of a great and awesome combat between forces for and against God. Interestingly, in the one place in the book of Revelation where Armageddon appears, the actual battle is not described—only the preparation for that battle. We will come back to this topic in a couple of chapters and note something very interesting that is not often observed about Armageddon.

IV. The Fall of Babylon (17:1-18:24)

But before we get there, there is still one final chronological stepping-aside from the unfolding sequence of the events of the Tribulation in Revelation chapters 17 and 18.

A. Babylon Described

Revelation 17 depicts the fall of this great evil empire that characterizes the last days, an empire that is described explicitly as "Babylon," but also as the city of seven hills—a term well-known for Rome in the first century. Once again, we are cautioned against taking the language of apocalyptic too literally. Babylon, as we noticed in conjunction with the writing of 1 Peter, was not a city, much less an empire at all, in John's day. Rome, of course, was, but the point of describing the great evil end-time empire as both Babylon and Rome is clearly a theological, and not a geographical, description. Just as Babylon was the most feared of all of Israel's oppressors in Old Testament times, and Rome was the most feared of people living in New Testament times, so too there will develop a great evil end-time empire with these same characteristics—characteristics that are described in Revelation 17 as mixing godless politics and religion.

A harlot is the main character of the vision of Revelation 17, just as throughout the Old Testament spiritual unfaithfulness was regularly depicted as adultery or prostitution. And it is the kings of the earth with which this harlot commits fornication. Clearly, there are religious and political elements to this end-time empire that mix together in godless and

great opposition to God's people. When we realize that this empire is described in terms no more specific than this, many of the major empires throughout human history that have not been distinctively Christian qualify, and we are reminded again that it is not the purpose of Revelation to give us highly detailed information in advance that will enable us to depict the specific events as they unfold at the threshold of the end of human history.

B. Babylon Lamented

Nevertheless, chapter 18 goes on to describe one additional important element of this godless end-time empire, in the context of the literary genre known as a lament, a form well-known from both the Psalms and the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. It is very telling and instructive to notice what it is that is being lamented by those who stand back, as it were, from the calamity of the end and reflect on the destruction of this great evil end-time hegemony. What they lament, for the most part, is the loss of the empire's great wealth.

This, too, fits the context of first-century Rome. Rome lived off the exports and imports from subjugated peoples and nations. And the list of cargoes that no longer passed on the boats and the channels of trade that chapter 18 describes reads like a check list of the cargoes of all of the various luxuries that went from the subjugated peoples throughout the Roman Empire back for the benefit of the handful of the enormously wealthy political leaders, the emperor and his court, and their clientele—in the nation of Rome. The list, however, also includes ordinary activities of life, such as music, such as weddings. And it includes the great slave trade which the Roman Empire so strongly defended. Yet if we recognize a future as well as a past element to this imagery, we must add this socioeconomic dimension to the empire that stands implacably opposed to God's people in the last days.

For those of us who do wonder if various expressions of life in the twenty-first century are in any way related to the events of the book of Revelation, we must not look merely for some large military machine, we must not look necessarily at all for an empire that is centered in the Middle East or centered around modern-day Rome, as the Vatican and those who have opposed the Catholic church throughout the centuries have often proposed; but rather we must look for an empire which dominates the world socioeconomically—oppressing people who barely scrape by, eking out incomes, in other parts of the world, in order to send massive exports to the enormously wealthy of our world today. Sadly and tragically, it would be the western European and North American nations, for the most part, and the multinational corporations and hegemonies of trade that strangle our world today—often at the expense of the two-thirds world people—who would most qualify.

This is not to say that we dare be any more explicit in pointing fingers in these places, as others have been who have been mistaken with their past identifications. But it is a sobering reminder that we who have the bulk of the world's wealth may be closest to being in violation, particularly if we do not allow our Christian profession of faith radically to transform our attitudes towards that wealth. We do not want to be guilty of falling into the empire that turns out to be opposing Christ.

V. Triumph in Heaven and on Earth (19:1-20:15)

With chapter 19, we then finally emerge with a picture of the triumph of heaven.

A. Return of Christ

After a litany of Hallelujahs, a discussion of the great marriage feast of the Lamb—which itself is balanced by and parodied by the great supper of God, in which the birds of carrion come to feast on the flesh of the fallen generals of this horrid end-time empire—at last we come to a description of the return of Christ and to a culmination of that battle with which the picture of chapter 16 and its reference to Armageddon prepared us. But what is striking is that in chapter 19 there is no description of a battle at all. Before the forces of evil can strike one single blow or take one casualty, Christ returns, riding triumphantly from heaven with the angelic forces surrounding Him, to obliterate and destroy all His enemies.

Therefore, any time a new human war begins we can be guaranteed that it cannot be Armageddon, despite regular speculations from Christians to the contrary. Rather, before any such final great world war can start, Christ comes, the end of human history comes as we know it, and his forces are vanquished. The final verses of chapter 19 describe dealing with the first two members of the unholy trinity: the first beast and the second beast.

B. Satan Bound, Released, and Cast into Lake of Fire

It is not until 20:1-3, however, that we read of the binding of Satan. It seems natural from a literary perspective, therefore, not to see any chronological break between the end of chapter 19 and the beginning of chapter 20. If this observation is correct, then it rules out the amillennialist interpretation, which has to see chapter 20 as a flashback back to what happened at Christ's first coming with the temporary and partial binding of Satan on that occasion. If this interpretation is correct, we must then understand the whole of chapter 20 as referring to a new phase of human history after Christ's returns, a golden age in which evil is decisively held in check, at least until the very final moments.

Then the devil is loosed from his prison, allowed to have one last fling, deceive the nations of the earth (those who are not Christ's followers at this point) one last chance for people on earth to make a free choice; and sadly some will choose to rebel against God and Christ even after He has been ruling over a literally, physically perfected earth. This final battle is again, however, decisively squelched; the devil and all those who have followed him are punished; the devil himself is cast into the lake of fire; there is torment which goes up there forever and ever; and the Great White Throne judgment completes Revelation 20, in which the books of the living and dead are opened, and all are consigned to one eternal destiny—either heaven or hell. For believers, this need not be a frightening moment, because their salvation has already been assured.

VI. New Heaven and New Earth (21:1-22:21)

Chapters 21-22 proceed to describe the new heaven and the new earth, which will last for all eternity, following the millennium and the Great White Throne judgment. This is a beautiful picture of paradise, and inspires hope and encouragement to all who read it. It also is a bit more earthy than many popular Christian conceptions of the life to come. Rather than some ethereal airy-fairy heaven, here are both new heaven and new earth; and the imagery of a new city—a Jerusalem descending from heaven—forms the center of the new earth which Christians will enjoy, a further reminder that Christians of all ethnicity will share in all the blessings initially promised to and reserved for Israel.

It is also a striking contrast from the garden in which our first human parents began. Instead of living in the tranquility of nature in all of its lavishness and luxuriousness, we now find a city—cities with whom in our lifetimes we often associate the worst of human evil, because fallen human beings are thrust in close proximity to one another. But this city is perfected, recreated, where there is no sin or suffering or any tears; but we are reminded that God’s purposes for His people are not that any of us should ever live in splendid isolation, but in redeemed community. There is also no temple in this new heaven and new earth, because God Himself and Christ, through their presence, fulfill all of the functions that temples ever did, and the need for sacrifice for sin is completely done away with.

Revelation ends, however, and therefore the whole of the New Testament and even Scripture itself ends, with a remarkable warning against adding or taking away anything from this book—a reminder and a warning about those who will spend an eternity in hell. It is not simply that all someday will be saved; those who have never accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, sadly and tragically, no matter how many chances they have been given, will eventually be confirmed in their choice to spend an eternity apart from God and everything good.

VII. Conclusion

It is our desire that as you have come through this entire series, if you have never made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, that you will take seriously these final warnings of the last book of the Bible, and accept Him into your heart and begin to follow Him on a path of discipleship. We suspect that most of the students of these lessons may have made already such a profession. We encourage you to persevere and to take note of the many different features we have surveyed throughout our New Testament glance that remind us that Christian life may be a struggle, it may be one in which we have to overcome difficulties. Indeed, the key term that Revelation uses for believers is “overcomers,” and while we can be guaranteed that those who are in Christ will overcome, the only way we know who such people are is to see who in fact do persevere to the end. We may never, therefore, let down our guard, but must continue to depend on the power of the Spirit to bring us to that day of coming glory and perfection.

Discussion Questions

By using specific examples from Revelation, describe what could be called the “good news” of the book and what might be called the “bad news.”

Describe three instances of symbolism in the book of Revelation and discuss your interpretation of the symbols.

What, according to Dr. Blomberg, is the significance of the new Jerusalem discussed in the book of Revelation?

Further Study

Suggested reading for this lesson:

Stedman, Ray C. *Adventuring Through the Bible: A Comprehensive Guide to the Entire Bible*.

Discovery House Publishers: 1997.

Read Chapter 77: “The End—And a New Beginning” (Revelation)

Philip Yancey Devotional

Return to Eden - Revelation 21:1–22:5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.
(Rev. 21:1)

In its “plot,” the Bible ends up very much where it began. The broken relationship between God and human beings has healed over at last, and the curse of Genesis 3 is lifted. Borrowing images from Eden, Revelation pictures a river and a tree of life. But this time a great city replaces the garden setting, a city filled with worshipers of God. Nothing will pollute that city; no death or sadness will ever darken that scene. There will be no crying or pain. For the first time since Eden, the World As It Is will finally match the World As God Wants It.

John saw heaven as the fulfillment of every Jewish dream: Jerusalem restored. For someone else—say a refugee in the Third World today—heaven may represent a family reunited, a home abundant with food and fresh drinking water. Heaven stands for the fulfillment of every true longing.

Revelation promises that our longings are not mere fantasies. They will come true. When we awake in the new heaven and new earth, we will have at last whatever we have longed for. Somehow, from out of all the bad news in a book like Revelation, good news emerges—spectacular Good News. A promise of goodness without a catch in it somewhere. There is a happy ending after all.

In the Bible, heaven is not an afterthought or optional belief. It is the final justification of all creation. The Bible never belittles human tragedy and disappointment—is any book more painfully honest?—but it does add the one key word *temporary*. What we feel now, we will not always feel. The time for re-creation will come.

For people who feel trapped in pain or in a broken home, in economic misery or in fear—for all those people, for all of us, heaven promises a future time, far longer and more substantial than the time we spend on earth, a time of health and wholeness and pleasure and peace. The Bible began with that promise in the book of Genesis. And the Bible ends with that same promise, a guarantee of future reality. The end will be a beginning.

Life Question: What do you long for in the re-created earth?

Glossary

Armageddon — A name found only in Revelation 16:16. The generally accepted view is that the word “har” means mountain (or mountains) and that “mageddon” refers to Megiddo, the biblical city near which many notable battles were fought (Jdg 5:19).

Lament — To express sorrow or mourning. In form-critical studies, the terms *dirge* (funeral song) and *complaint* are more precise than lament.

Megiddo — A royal Canaanite city in north-central Israel overlooking the Valley of Jezreel. It was conquered by the Israelites during the time of Joshua (Jos 12:21) and became a major administrative center.

Quiz

1. According to Revelation 20:2-7, Satan will be bound for
 - A. 10 years
 - B. 100 years
 - C. 1,000 years
 - D. 10,000 years

2. In the interlude between the second and third series of judgments, who do the dragon, the woman, and the child probably represent?
 - A. The Antichrist, his mother, and Christians
 - B. Satan, God's people, and Christ
 - C. A false prophet, a prostitute, and a Christian
 - D. An evil person, a good person, and an innocent child

3. The book of Revelation ends with a warning about:
 - A. Following the Antichrist
 - B. Accepting the mark of the beast
 - C. Adding or taking away anything from this book
 - D. All of the above

4. The great prostitute of chapter 17 is identified as:
 - A. Babylon
 - B. Jerusalem
 - C. Rome
 - D. Israel

5. The return of Christ is described in this chapter of Revelation:
 - A. 13
 - B. 19
 - C. 20
 - D. 22

6. What is predicted to happen at the battle of Armageddon?
 - A. The nations will gather and fight a final battle between good and evil.
 - B. A dragon will fight with a lamb, and will be thrown into a lake of fire.
 - C. Armies will gather for battle, and Christ will return in the middle of the battle.
 - D. Armies will gather for battle, and Christ will return before the battle begins.

7. What key teaching does the book of Revelation provide?
 - A. We can foresee the future and predict the end of the world as we know it.
 - B. Jesus Christ is victorious in the end, and all people will spend eternity either with God or without Him.
 - C. Christians will need to endure God's wrath in the tribulation before the end of time.
 - D. The battle of Armageddon will be the last, worst, and final battle the world will witness.

8. What number occurs frequently in reference to the period of the great tribulation?
 - A. Three and a half
 - B. Seven
 - C. Seven and a half
 - D. Six

9. What should we look for in applying the evil empire described in Revelation 17 and 18 to our own times?
 - A. Military might
 - B. A force located in the Middle East
 - C. A force centered around modern-day Rome
 - D. Socioeconomic oppression

10. Where does the term "antichrist" appear in Scripture?
 - A. 1 Thessalonians
 - B. 1 and 2 John
 - C. Revelation
 - D. Both B and C

Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. C 4. A 5. B 6. D 7. B 8. A 9. D 10. B