

## New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 27 – Revelation

The book of Revelation is meant to be a great comfort to Christians, not a comfort to shield them from trials and tribulations, but a comfort to prepare them for such troubles, to assure them that the Lord will enter the fiery furnace with them, that these trials are for their sanctification, that He will give them everything they need to endure them as they look to Him, and, in so doing, that they may learn to rejoice with unfailing hope in the midst of them.

At the same time, Revelation is also meant to give a fair and compelling warning to unbelievers, a warning of the wrath to come, a warning to seek the Lord while He may be found, a warning that the gracious call of God in the gospel may be withdrawn from them if it is ignored, withdrawn at any time, and that will happen, in fact, if their cup of iniquity is filled and the Lord then hands them over to go their own way. Revelation is about these two themes, comfort and warning, and we must never lose sight of them as we read through this book.

The book itself consists of seven visions. These visions, which come from the Lord Jesus Christ and are given to the apostle John while he is exiled to the isle of Patmos, are full of graphic symbolism, and such symbolism is typically found in visions throughout the Bible. Each symbol stands for something, of course, and is intended to teach us about what God is doing, even into the future – not to teach us everything about the future, but those things the Lord would have us to know – and the rule for that is found in Deuteronomy 29:29.

As different as these seven visions are from one another, the one thing they have in common – and this is clear from the text itself – is that they all cover the same span of history, from the first to the second coming of Christ. The symbols, therefore, do not represent any particular persons, or isolated events of history, but reflect principles of human conduct and recurring trends of action which can be witnessed in every age to the end of the world. We may at times see more of these principles at work than at other times, and some of them do get progressively worse toward the end of time, but we must avoid pinning any one of them down to a specific year and location.

Since these visions all cover the same span of history, from the birth of Christ in Bethlehem to His coming again on the clouds of glory, all these actions here described are contemporaneous to one another. The dragon of the fourth vision, for instance, is hard at work at the same time of the lampstands shining light in the first vision. Each vision presents its own snapshot of what is happening, but when they are overlaid one upon another we get the more complete picture in all its textures and colours of what is actually going on in that timeframe.

One more thing we should observe at the outset is that there are two major sections to this book. The first section, visions 1-3, gives us what is observable to the naked eye: the fact that the Church is persecuted by the world. The second section, visions 4-7, shows us what is not on the surface and is not therefore visible: the underlying conflict between good and evil, between Christ and the devil, and our own role in that warfare (see Ephesians 6:12). Let us turn now to each of the visions.

Vision #1, chapters 1-3, is about Christ in the midst of the lampstands. The lampstands are identified as the seven churches of the western part of Asia Minor, which is today part of Turkey, and the seven stars in His hand are the seven angels, or pastors, of those churches. As lampstands are for shining light, so these churches are to shine the light of the gospel to all the world. The fact that there are seven of them, seven being the number of fullness or completeness, implies that they represent churches everywhere and in every generation to the end of time. John is directed to write letters to these churches, and while each letter is personal in nature and somewhat different from all the others, it is clear that the strengths and weaknesses he describes in these churches may be found in any congregation at any given time.

We see here in this first vision the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Himself, and out of His mouth proceeds a sharp, two-edged sword. This is a picture of His coming to judge those who persecute His people and do everything they can to lead them astray. The lesson of this picture is that Christ is in the midst of His people and is so for their good. O dear Christian, He will never leave us nor forsake us. His promise stands firm, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20), and He is so by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Vision #2, chapters 4-7, is about the scroll with seven seals. Churches shine the light of the gospel to the world about them, but the world hates the light, and so persecutes the Church in its reaction to it. It is important to see, though, that this is all part of God's sovereign plan, that nothing happens without Him, and for that reason this vision opens with a graphic (not literal) view of God on His throne in heaven. He has a scroll in His hand which reveals future things, what He has planned and purposed for times still ahead, yet these things cannot be executed unless someone is found worthy to break the seals of this scroll, that is, to do what needs to be done in order for those things to be realized.

Only Christ is found worthy to break the seals, for He has conquered sin and Satan, death and hell, on the cross. He then sits at the right hand of the Father, and from that position of supreme authority and power He rules over all. He does so in the best interest of His people, those for whom He died, and, as He breaks the seals, He works all things together (even their persecution) for the good of all who love Him and have been called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

The Rider of the white horse is Christ Himself who conquers and has still to do so. The rider of the red horse represents the bloodshed that comes from the persecution of God's people. The rider of the black horse represents the injustice and economic hardship which believers must experience at the hands of their enemies. The rider of the pale horse is identified as Death, and it carries all the adversities which are associated with it.

The martyrs cry out from under the altar (that is, from the intermediate state of heaven), they cry out for final judgment on the wicked, and that is followed by the crying out of the wicked who seek by any means to escape that judgment. Before this great day of judgment, though, those who are declared righteous through faith in Christ are transported to heaven to serve the Lord and to dwell in His glorious presence forever. "In the world you will have tribulation," said Jesus, "but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Vision #3, chapters 8-11, is about the seven trumpets of judgment. This is now the third time we view this period of history from the birth of Christ to His return at the end of the world. These trumpets are not the final judgment, but recurring temporal judgments which fall upon the wicked and unbelieving world over time in order to call them to repent of their sins, especially their persecution of the

righteous, and to warn them of the wrath to come. They are severe judgments, yes, but they are still judgments of mercy and they show us the longsuffering of God. Sadly, however, men in general do not repent, and failing to do so they call for the final and everlasting judgment upon them from which there is no escape.

John's eating of the little book in the angel's hand is meant to show us that, while some things are revealed, other things are concealed and deliberately kept from us. His measuring of the temple, but not its outer court, is to show us how important it is to God Himself to distinguish and separate the holy from the profane. (The temple would have been destroyed by this time – but, remember, this is the symbolism of a vision.) And the two witnesses represent the missionary arm of the Church; their death implies that the Church no longer has a powerful influence on the world, but at the second coming of Christ the Church is received up into glory. “Shall not God avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them” (Luke 18:7)?

Vision #4, chapters 12-14, is about the woman and the male Child persecuted by the dragon and his helpers. Starting this latter section of the book, we go below the surface now to the underlying conflict and are introduced to the enemies of Christ and His Church who, though less tangible, are exceedingly dangerous. They are as follows: (1) the dragon – the serpent of Genesis 3 – who is Satan; (2) the beast from out of the sea (which was Rome in the first century, but could well become one global empire in our own day); (3) the beast from out of the earth, the false prophet which is false religion and vain philosophy; (4) the harlot Babylon which is seduction and every perverse means of overturning the morals of believers; and, lastly, (5) all the people who bear the mark of the beast, namely, unbelievers of every description.

The fall of those who bear the mark of the beast is recorded in chapters 15 & 16; the fall of the harlot Babylon and the two beasts is given to us in chapters 17-19; and the fall of the dragon we find in chapters 20-22. It is reasonable to assume that, since they all rise together, so they will also fall together. It is of particular interest to note, however, that eight chapters are devoted to describing their devastating defeat, a fact which should be carefully considered by believers and unbelievers alike.

The woman of this vision is the Church, her Child is Christ, and Satan sought to devour Him as soon as He was born. The devil did not prevail, however, and was cast out of heaven with his evil spirits to the earth (see Jude 6). He then went after the Church, but God provided her refuge. The devil was enraged by this and continued to attack the faithful within her number. It was at this time that the beast from the sea arose, and then came the beast from the earth who mandated that everyone bear the mark of the beast.

We cannot be sure what this mark of the beast may ultimately be. (Seven is the number of fullness – the Holy Spirit is referred to as the seven Spirits in Revelation – whereas six is the incomplete number of man, so 666 may be intended to show how incomplete man is in every dimension.) In the first century this mark would have been having to say, “Caesar is Lord!” In our day it is more likely to be a digital ID, a social credit scheme and having to pay for things using a QR code instead of cash. But whatever it may yet prove to be, it will still be government controlled and utterly blasphemous. It will be something that Christians must not accept, and they will be denied the right to buy and sell without it (13:17).

Nevertheless, God’s people are not to be disheartened by this. The fall of the enemies of Christ and His Church is announced. Christ Himself will come again and first gather His own for heaven, and then, having done so, gather the rest for hell. As God declared to Satan from the beginning, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” (Genesis 3:15).

Vision #5, chapters 15 & 16, is about the seven bowls of wrath. We go through this same period of history now for the fifth time. It is important to understand, however, that these bowls of wrath are not the same as the trumpets of judgment in the third vision. Trumpets are for warning; these bowls are for pouring out God’s wrath. Who are the ones upon whom this fierce wrath is poured out? They are the ones who received the mark of the beast in the fourth vision; they worship the dragon and are friends of the two beasts and the harlot Babylon.

When men receive one warning after another, yet they still fail to repent, what happens in God’s appointed time is that He hands them over to their own vile affections. There is no greater curse that can befall anyone in this present life

than to be given over to go his own way. God will not strive with men forever. There comes a time when He withdraws His gracious gospel call and shuts heaven's door to them. This is known as the sin against the Holy Spirit, and it is unpardonable; there is no place given even to pray for such people, and this is why the temple door is shut (15:8; compare 1 John 5:16). From this point forward the final judgment is inevitable. Are you an unbeliever? If so, I plead with you by the mercies of God to heed the gospel call. Repent of your sins, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. Do it today. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

The sixth bowl is Armageddon, the last great battle on earth. This is when, for the elect's sake, Christ Himself will appear and gather His people to take them home. The seventh bowl is the day of final judgment – "indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil" (Romans 2:8,9).

Vision #6, chapters 17-19, is about the fall of the harlot and the two beasts. First, we see a description of the character and nature of the harlot Babylon. A more disgusting and utterly immoral portrayal of self-serving evil can hardly be imagined. She is in company with the first beast, ungodly government, and these two are the embodiment of all lusts of the flesh and acts of tyranny. Together they do everything they can to destroy the Church until the beast ultimately turns on the harlot and destroys her. The pleasures of sin always disappoint in the end, and, rather typically of what the wicked will do, they are not opposed to turning against, and even eating up, each other when it suits them to do so.

This is all of God who, as we are told, puts it into the hearts of men to fulfill His purpose. Men mourn the fall of the harlot Babylon, but heaven rejoices in her complete and final overthrow, and rejoices, too, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride (the Church) has made herself ready. Not to leave anything out, Christ appears again in the final scene of this vision. He is the Rider of the white horse who rides forth with His armies and continues to conquer. Now with the harlot defeated, and her loss duly celebrated, He captures the two beasts as well and casts them into the lake of fire. "The world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17).

Vision #7, chapters 20-22, is about the judgment on the dragon and the creation of the new heaven and new earth. Satan had been allowed to deceive the nations

throughout the Old Testament, with the exception of the nation of Israel which had also served as the Church at that time. In this last vision he is bound for a thousand years (a figure representing these last days until sometime before the end of the world). Satan is not totally bound, mind you, but unable to carry on such widespread deception as he had formerly exercised. This new era would be a time of worldwide missionary expansion for the Church, a prolonged period which had been predicted in Psalm 2:7,8.

At the end of this thousand years this dragon, Satan, is to be released for a short while, at which time he will deceive the nations once again, but on this occasion he will do so in a manner even worse than before. "Gog and Magog" is a reference to evil powers in the history of Israel, the Old Testament Church (Ezekiel 38 and 39), and we should probably avoid trying to identify them more precisely than that. God will ultimately defeat Satan and all his minions, however, and this dragon will be cast into the lake of fire with the two beasts.

John then sees a new heaven and new earth, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to earth, fulfilling the covenant promise of God that He will dwell with His people and be their God. When Adam and Eve fell into sin they were removed from the garden of Eden and forbidden to eat from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24). But now those who are written in the Lamb's book of life are given right to the tree of life and to enter through the gates into the holy city (21:27; 22:14). "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

In closing, let us consider some practical application of what we find in the book of Revelation. If you are a believer, someone who has sought and found refuge in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is surely clear that the Christian community is in for some difficult days ahead. The Church has been marginalized. With the rise of woke culture and the abandonment of moral standards, we are going to see both a rapid increase in the persecution of Christians and a dramatic decline in the effectiveness of our missionary outreach to the world about us.

But take heart, dear Christian. Christ in you is the hope of glory. Now, more than ever, let us look to Him as our Saviour, yes, and as our Example also. "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross,

despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Our Lord testifies in the closing verses of Revelation, “Surely I am coming quickly.” And John responds, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” Should this not be the fervent, persistent prayer of God’s people in every time of trouble, and should not we, in turn, be greatly encouraged that our Lord has promised to do so? Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever, will, for the sake of His elect, come at the appointed time and usher us into heaven, into the very place He has prepared for us, and there, as His bride, we will be united to Him forever!

If, on the other hand, you are an unbeliever, someone who is yet a stranger to God and to His saving grace in Christ, you may perhaps be wondering why Revelation is so difficult to read and beyond your capacity to understand. It is true, of course, that the visions of such books as Daniel and Revelation are indeed difficult to comprehend – the imagery may at times leave us all scratching our heads – and, if that had not been the case, these very writings might well have been destroyed by the enemies of God shortly after they were recorded.

Oh, but the warnings given in these visions are not obscure. They are clear enough for even a child to understand. You need to repent, unbeliever. You must forsake your sins, whatever they may be, in order to embrace Christ instead (Isaiah 55:6,7; John 3:35,36). As the repentance must be real, so as you look to Christ your faith in Him must be genuine as well, from the heart and lived out in your life; head knowledge, lip service and a passing interest in spiritual things is not enough. King Nebuchadnezzar often glorified the God of heaven by statements he made (Daniel 4:34-37), but that in itself, apart from any real change in the life he lived, did not mean that he was converted.

Read again about the trumpets of judgment in the third vision. Read again about the bowls of wrath in the fifth vision. Your sin, unbeliever, is greater than you can imagine, but here is the thing, God’s grace is greater still. Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who come unto God through Him, and, of all whom the Father has so given to Him, He has promised to cast out none!

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