

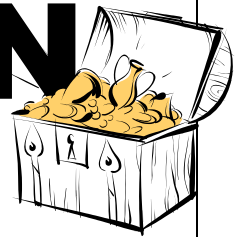


A Guide to

Reading

THE BOOK OF

REVELATION



Church of the Resurrection, Kallaroo

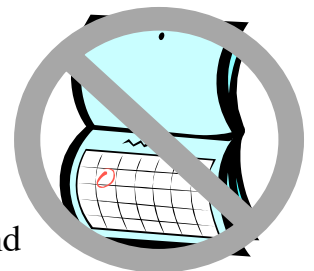


Equip
Build up
Build out

"The Book of Revelation seems to occupy one of two positions in most people's affections. Either it is almost totally neglected or it is elevated to a prominence shared by no other biblical book." Graeme Goldsworthy

The Book of Revelation is a masterpiece of sights, sounds and smells, of dreams and visions involving heaven and earth, angels and Satan, reward and judgement, hope and fear, assurances of events yet without times or dates, and a grand scale view of the end of one creation and the beginning of the new. As the Bible started, so it concludes, with the tree of life, God in his kingdom and his people gathered around him.

It is a squandering of this marvellous gift of God to us that the Book of Revelation has been reduced to little more than something like the guide to the Festival of Perth, telling us the order of the big events and the times they'll be happening (and so be ready!). But "it is not *when* these [events] will happen, but rather *what* it is that happens, which constitutes the urgency." (*Graeme Goldsworthy again*).



To neglect Revelation, for whatever reason, is to fail to listen to God's word to us, and this is to our great loss, since "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Careful reading of Revelation, as with any part of the Bible, will reward us in equipping us for the life of faith. However, Revelation is just one book within the Canon of Scripture and as such must be read in the light of the rest, Scripture must interpret Scripture. And we find Revelation is thoroughly consistent with the rest of the Bible. Indeed, it contains more Old Testament quotes and allusions than any other book in the New Testament. And as with the rest of the Bible, we find that Revelation is supremely about Christ, his person, his work and the implications of that; the gospel features heavily throughout the book.

This does not mean that reading Revelation is easy! There are more straightforward parts of the Bible to be sure. But if a few principles for reading it are kept in mind, we will be greatly helped in our reading.

SOME PRINCIPLES FOR READING

Firstly, as mentioned, Scripture must interpret Scripture. No part of Revelation must be used against another part of the Bible. Before looking to the newspapers or the latest 'end-times' seminar or book, we ought to look back through the Bible itself to help us understand what we're reading.



Secondly, we must understand the *type* of literature we are reading. We read the main story of a newspaper in a different way to how we read the advertisements, or the letters to the editor, or the comics or the sports section. The Bible is made up of different types of literature, some historical narrative, some poetry, some prophecy, some letters and so on. Whatever we read, we need to do so according to its "literary sense" (the correct meaning of to read something "literally").



Revelation is a mixture of prophetic and "apocalyptic", both of which are full of symbols and figures of speech, and must be read as such. As Craig Keener says, warning against too strict a system of interpreting the symbols,

"Is it not more respectful to Revelation to hear it on its own terms (symbols included) than to read into it a system of interpretation the book itself nowhere claims? That Revelation clearly includes symbols and sometimes tells us what they mean (e.g., 1:20) should lead us to suspect any interpretive method that ignores the intense symbolism of the rest of the book."

Revelation begins by telling us that God "signified" the book to John (1:1; NIV "made it known"), a word that is related to the one John occasionally uses for "sign" or "symbol" (12:1, 3; 15:1). This suggests that the opening verses forthrightly announce a book communicated in symbols."

We must bear in mind that Revelation was first addressed to churches who were facing a time of trial and crisis. They did not have the luxury of time to ponder over the subtleties and finer points of interpretation of symbols. John wrote to reveal, not obscure! The main point of the book is not about the symbols and their correct interpretation, but the big picture of God's sovereign control of history and Christ's victory, won ultimately in the historic event of the cross.



Having said this, the churches to whom John wrote must have understood many or all of the symbols as part of this type of literature. Following are some of the more commonly used symbols in apocalyptic literature (including Revelation).

Numbers and their multiples

3 = Spirit world (good or evil)

4 = Earth

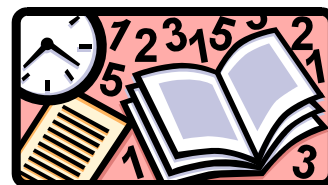
7 = Perfection

3½ = Incomplete (half of 7)

5 & 10 = Approximate numbers - not particular numbers.

6 = Human number - just under 7, ie incompleteness of humans

12 = God's redeemed community



Creatures Can be in combinations.

Lion = strength

Bear = stealth (caution)

Tiger = Ferocity

Goat = Coarse evil

Lamb = Sacrifice

Ox / calf = Patient service

Eagle = High flight / spirituality

Face of man = Intelligence

Colours

White = Triumph more than purity

Purple = Royalty

Green = Eternal life

Red = war, strife

Black = famine

"Pale" (*greenish/grey - colour of corpse*) = death

Natural events



Many mean judgement and doom; eg Darkened (or blood) moon & sun, hail, fire, earthquakes, smoke & ashes.

Thirdly, as mentioned above, John was more concerned with *what* was happening than with *when* it will happen. And as we read Revelation, it makes most sense to see the event described not as consecutive event through history, but as concurrent. John presents things in a kind of cyclical pattern. So the events within the vision of the Seven Seals, 6:1-8:1, is not necessarily prior to the events described in the Seven Trumpets, 8:2-11:19 or even the Seven Bowls, 15:1-16:21, since each vision ends with the conclusion of history and the establishment of the eternal Kingdom. In fact, it may even be most helpful to see these events as different descriptions of the same events described in chapters 2-3, with the visions just showing us where this will all end, and assuring us *that* it will all end in such a way.

Fourthly, and this follows on from the previous point, as with true prophetic writings, the Book is concerned with how we ought to live now. When Peter described the cataclysmic end of this world and history, he concluded, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat." 2 Peter 3:11-12. John has the same intent in Revelation. This is not so much about predicting the future as how we are to live now in the light of *what* will happen (and what already has). Revelation describes not just the judgement of Satan, Death and Hades, it addresses the fate of "liars" as well! (21:8). How then will we live knowing what God is doing in and through history?



THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK

Keener summarises the following points at the heart of the message of Revelation;

- God is awesomely majestic, as well as sovereign in our troubles
- Jesus' sacrifice as the Lamb ultimately brings complete deliverance for those who trust him
- God's judgements on the world are often to serve notice on the world that God will avenge his people
- Regardless of how things appear in the short run, "sin does not go unpunished," and God will judge
- God can accomplish his purposes through a small and persecuted remnant; he is not dependent on what the world values as power
- Worship leads us from grief over our sufferings to God's eternal purposes seen from a heavenly perspective

- Proclaiming Christ invites persecution, the normal state of committed believers in this age
- Christ is worth dying for
- A radical contrast exists between God's kingdom (exemplified in the bride, the new Jerusalem) and the world's values (exemplified in the prostitute, Babylon)
- The hope God has prepared for us far exceeds our present sufferings
- God's plan and church ultimately include representatives of all peoples

Keener adds these words to this summary, emphasising the immediacy and relevance of this Book to our times,

"Revelation's most distinctive contribution to the New Testament is one that many of us find uncomfortable, especially when we find full satisfaction in this world. Revelation provides a better hope for a church enamoured with this age or despairing of the next: 'It is only in that interval of the already and the not yet that hope is situated, in what can be experienced as the silence of God, or dryness, when it seems difficult to believe.' [J. Ellul] Revelation reminds us that we do not belong to this world and must not be seduced by what it values. John's Revelation calls for persecuted churches to remain vigilant (2:10; 3:11) and other churches to resist compromise with the spirit of their age (2:16, 25; 3:3, 18-20).



RECOMMENDED READING:

Paul Barnett *Apocalypse Now & Then Reading Revelation Today* AIO, 1989

Graeme Goldsworthy *The Gospel in Revelation* Paternoster/ Lancer, 1984

Craig S. Keener *The NIV Application Commentary Revelation* Zondervan, 2000

Leon Morris *Tyndale Commentaries Revelation (Rev Ed.)* 1987

Michael Wilcock *BST Revelation* 1975

READING GUIDE FOR THE SERMON SERIES:

The following guide is primarily meant as preparation for each sermon in the series, to get you thinking about the passages and some of the major themes in them, rather than as a thorough Bible study on Revelation.

REVELATION : TRIUMPH OF THE LAMB

1. 1:1-20 The Risen Christ

- i. The book of Revelation is often treated as though it was written specifically for our current generation. How does this view hold up when reading chapt 1?

- ii. John describes Jesus in many ways in chpt 1. Which descriptions are literal and which are metaphoric? What do we learn about Jesus from each one?
- iii. The original readers were facing a time of trial (or were about to). What things in chapter 1 would have offered them comfort? How do these things speak to Christians churches today, and to you personally?
- iv. How do you respond to the image of the one "like a son of man" standing among the lampstands?
- v. What place does the gospel have in chapter 1?

2. 2:1-3:22 The Church in the World Pt 1

- i. What links are there between these chapters and chapter 1?
- ii. What things do the seven churches have in common? What things set them apart from each other?
- iii. There were other churches in that part of the world at that time. Why are only seven of them addressed?
- iv. These Christians were facing or might soon face a time of trial or even persecution. In the face of that, what was the greatest danger these churches were facing?
- v. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- vi. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

3. 4:1-5:14 The Lion and the Lamb

- i. If you were threatened by opposition and persecution for being a Christian, what might you be tempted to do? What affect would these two chapter have on you?
- ii. Read Daniel 12. How does this help explain what is happening in chapter 5?
- iii. What strikes you most about this scene from heaven? What implications does it have for your life on earth?
- iv. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- v. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

4. 6:1-8:1 Seven Seals Opened

- i. What are the major effects of the Lamb opening each seal? What might you have expected to happen after the fourth seal (ie 5th - 7th seals)? What actually does happen? Why?
- ii. Are there any indicators that we ought to view these "Four horsemen of the Apocalypse" as four, particular, historical figures, or something more general?
- iii. Most of the tribes of Israel listed in 7:4-8 had long since been destroyed. What could this vision mean?

- iv. How much 'action' actually takes place in these chapters? Why?
- v. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- vi. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

5. 8:2-11:19 Seven Trumpets

- i. What is the significance of 8:2-6 in this section? What does this say to us about our prayers?
- ii. How does the 'action' in these chapters compare to the previous section? What is the significance of this?
- iii. What happens to the "inhabitants of the earth"? Does anything surprise you about their reactions?
- iv. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- v. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

6. 12:1-14:20 The Church in the World Pt 2

- i. Some define the woman and child of chapter 12 as Mary and Jesus. What evidence for or against these views are there in the chapter?
- ii. What does the inclusiveness of 13:8 tell us about what is happening in chs 12-13? What does this say about the inhabitants of earth in John's day? In our day?
- iii. What is the impact of the visions of the dragon and the three beasts being bracketed by 12:1-8 and 14:1-20?
- iv. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- v. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

7. 15:1-16:21 Seven bowls of Wrath

- i. What is the context of the song in 15:3-4? ie What are God's deeds that are "great and marvellous", or what "ways" are "just and true"? cf 16:5-7. Can you also praise God and sing about such things?
- ii. What happens to the people of the earth? How do they respond? How do you react to this? What does this tell you about people today who are not Christians?
- iii. How are the seven bowls different to the seven trumpets, or the seven seals? How does the seventh bowl, 16:17-21, compare with the seventh trumpet, 11:15-19, or even the seventh seal, 8:1? What does this tell us about how we are to read this central section of Revelation?
- iv. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- v. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

8. 17:1-19:10 The End of "Babylon"

- i. How do you react to the various descriptions of the "woman" in 17:2-6? How do you think God reacts?
- ii. What causes the destruction of Babylon? What does this teach us about the nature of evil?
- iii. What are the different reactions to Babylon's destruction in chapter 18? How does this help us consider how we ought to think about this world and all it offers us?
- iv. How does the sort of praising in 18:20 - 19:8 compare with the "praising" in most churches today? In our church?
- v. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- vi. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

9. 19:11-20:15 Victory of the King

- i. What do the 'battles' of 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 have in common? What comfort is this for Christians facing persecution?
- ii. How might the similarities between these two 'battles' help us to understand the intervening passage regarding the "thousand years" (millennium)?
- iii. How are we to understand 20:14 and 1:18?
- iv. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- v. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

10. 21:1-22:21 A New Creation

- i. How does 21:1-7 begin to tie together the book of Revelation? How would these verses have impacted the original readers? How do they impact you?
- ii. After all spectacle of the dragon (Satan), the beast, the false prophet, and Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, how does 20:8 strike you? How does this help us better understand Revelation?
- iii. How does John's vision of the new heavenly city compare with his earlier descriptions of Babylon?
- iv. Can you join in the cry, "Come, Lord Jesus"?
- v. What place does the gospel have in these chapters?
- vi. What do we learn about Jesus in these chapters?

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