

Understanding Revelation

The Book of Revelation is a Chinese puzzle that no one can understand!” I must have heard those words a hundred times when I was growing up in the Church. Guess what? I wrote the book off as a lost cause and ignored it for 30 years. Why waste time trying to decipher a mysterious book that even biblical scholars could not understand?

For the past 20 years I have been teaching Bible prophecy all across America and around the world. As I have talked with Christians from all denominations, I have discovered that most are ignorant of the Book of Revelation, and many are downright afraid of it.

The Significance of Revelation

This is the state of affairs for the Church as a whole as well as for individual Christians. It’s like reading a great novel, but never reading the last chapter to see how the story comes out. Reading and understanding the Book of Revelation is vitally important to Christendom because it tells us that *we are going to win in the end!* It is a book of victory that is designed to encourage Christians as they try to cope with and overcome this pagan world.

Studying the Book of Revelation today, at the beginning of the 21st century, is particularly important because Christians are faced with two great challenges — the decay of society and growing apostasy in the Church.¹ As we face these grim realities, we need the encouragement that is contained in the Book of Revelation.

There is another reason we should be focusing on the Book of Revelation at the beginning of the 21st century. The signs of the times clearly indicate that we are living in the last days — that Jesus is at the very gates of heaven waiting for His Father’s command to return. The state of Israel has been re-established. The Jews are back in Jerusalem. Europe has united. And modern technology has given meaning to numerous prophecies that we never understood before.

One hundred years ago there were no signs at all which indicated the Lord’s soon return. The first sign appeared in 1917 when the Balfour Declaration was issued by the British government, promising that Palestine would be turned into a homeland for the Jews. Today, there are so many signs pointing to the Lord’s soon return that one would have to be spiritually blind not to discern them. I am no longer looking for signs; I am listening for sounds — for the blast of a trumpet and the shout of an angel: “The Bridegroom comes!”

Glory or Wrath?

Jesus is returning soon, and that fact makes the Book of Revelation relevant to our lives. The book begins and ends with the promise that Jesus will return. It is the theme of the book. In Revelation 1:7 we are told, “Behold he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him.” The book ends with Jesus himself making the same proclamation: “Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done.” (Rev. 22:12)

The return of Jesus will be the climactic event of history. For some, it will be the most glorious day of their lives, for Jesus will come as their glory — as their “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

For others, His return will be a terrifying experience, for He will come as their holy terror, pouring out the wrath of God upon all those who have rejected God's gift of love, grace, and mercy (Rev. 19:11).

The Bible says that every person on the face of this earth is under either the wrath of God or His grace: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). It is glory to be under the grace of God. It is terror to be under His wrath.

The return of Jesus will mean glory or wrath for each of us. It will mean both for Jesus. When He returns to this earth, He will come in wrath to judge and make war against the enemies of God (Rev. 19:11). But the wrath will be followed by glory as He is crowned the King of kings and Lord of lords and begins His majestic reign from Mount Zion as the "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). He will manifest His glory before the nations (Isa. 24:21–23), and He will receive the honor and praise which He was denied when He came the first time (2 Thess. 1:10).

Wrath and glory — these two words sum up the meaning of the Lord's return for you and me and Him.

God in His unfathomable grace does not desire that any should perish, but that all should be brought to repentance and salvation (2 Pet. 3:9). God has therefore given us the magnificent Book of Revelation to warn us of His wrath and to call us to His glory. When we stand before Him, we will have no excuses. He has spelled it all out for us in advance and in detail in the Book of Revelation.

The Neglect of Prophecy

Let's begin our consideration of Revelation by looking at two verses from 2 Timothy 3 — verses 16 and 17. Paul wrote these words to a young preacher: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."

These are verses that most Christians know very well. You may know them by heart because you've memorized them, or you may have them almost memorized because you've heard them so many times. You're probably wondering why in the world someone would begin a study of the Book of Revelation with these two verses.

Well, I'll tell you why. There is no portion of God's Word that has been more ignored by students of the Bible and by the Church in general than God's prophetic Word. This is incredible when you consider the fact that almost one-third of the Bible is prophetic in nature.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. Most young men studying to be preachers today will go all the way through seminary and never take one course on Bible prophecy. They'll graduate and preach for years and never preach one sermon on Bible prophecy. They, in effect, ignore one-third of God's Holy Word.

That's unfortunate because Paul says by inspiration of the Holy Spirit that *all* Scripture — not just the New Testament, not just the history books of the Old Testament, but *all* Scripture — is inspired by God. That includes Bible prophecy. When Paul said that “all Scripture is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God might be adequate, equipped for every good work,” he meant that statement to include Bible prophecy.

All of God's Word is practical, down to earth, and is necessary if we are to be shaped by the Holy Spirit into the image of Jesus. We need all of God's Word, and that includes God's prophetic Word, and that includes the Book of Revelation.

A Personal Experience

I guess I grew up in a pretty typical church. I was raised in a church that emphasized the New Testament and ignored Bible prophecy. I went to church faithfully every time the door was open. I was there Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and during vacation Bible school. Yet, after

30 years of going to church, I knew absolutely nothing about Bible prophecy because we almost totally ignored it.

Any time we got into a study of prophecy, we just ran over it very quickly and tried to get through with it as soon as we possibly could. The result was that after 30 years of going to church, I was so ignorant of Bible prophecy that if you had asked me what the Rapture was, I probably would have said, “It’s a sensation you feel when your girlfriend kisses you!” In like manner, I would probably have identified Gog and Magog as a comedy team. The Antichrist to me was a “denominational preacher,” because we thought we were non-denominational, and we thought we were the only true church.

We just simply ignored God’s prophetic word. The tragic consequence is that our spiritual growth was stunted. Our sanctification — that is, our development into the image of Jesus — was delayed because the spirit of Man was designed to feed upon the Word of God — not just the New Testament, not just the Old Testament, but *all* of God’s Word.

The Major Barrier to Revelation

The preachers that I grew up under generally took the position that the Book of Revelation was impossible to understand. I think about the only time we studied the book was when a minister got a little carried away and would make a rash commitment by saying, “I tell you what we’re going to do. We’re going to start with the Book of Matthew, and we’re going to go all the way through the New Testament and study every book.” Three years later when he reached the Book of Revelation, he would regret that he ever made the promise. But he had made it, and, therefore, he felt like he was obligated to keep it.

So, he would get up before the congregation and say something like this: “Well, folks, I made the vow we’d go all the way through the New Testament. We’ve reached the Book of Revelation. I’ll tell you right now, nobody can understand it. Nobody ever has. Nobody ever will. It’s a Chinese puzzle.” I can’t begin to tell you how many times I’ve heard that.