

## The Book Of Revelation

**Opening Story:** Mt. Saint Helens belched gray steam plumes hundreds of feet into the blue Oregon sky. Geologists watched their seismographs in growing wonder as the earth danced beneath their feet. Rangers and state police, sirens blaring, herded tourists and residents from an ever-widening zone of danger. Every piece of scientific evidence being collected in the laboratories and on the field predicted the volcano would soon explode with a fury that would leave the forests flattened.

“Warning!” blared loudspeakers on patrol cars and helicopters hovering overhead. “Warning!” pleaded radio and television announcers, shortwave and citizens-band operators. Warnings echoed up and down the mountain for days as people fled for their lives, but one man refused to budge. Harry Truman was the caretaker of a lodge on Spirit Lake, just five miles north of Mt. Saint Helens. The rangers warned Harry of the coming blast. Neighbors begged him to join them in their exodus. But Harry ignored the warnings. From the picture-postcard beauty of his lakeside cabin reflecting the snow-capped peak overhead, Harry grinned on national television and said, “Nobody knows more about this old mountain than Harry, and it don’t dare blow up on him . . .”

On the morning of May 18, 1980, as Harry Truman cooked his eggs and bacon, fed his sixteen cats the scraps, and began to plant petunias around the border of his freshly mowed lawn, Mount St. Helens exploded at 8:31 a.m.

Did Harry regret his decision in that millisecond he had before the concussive waves, traveling faster than the speed of sound, flattened him and everything else for 150 square miles? Did he have time to mourn his stubbornness as millions of tons of rock disintegrated and disappeared into a cloud reaching ten miles into the sky? Did he struggle against the wall of mud and ash fifty feet high that buried Harry inside his cabin?” (Billy Graham, *Revelation*, 13-14)

There are many people like Harry today. They refuse to heed the signs of the times, which according to biblical prophecy, warn of coming tribulation and judgment. Scoffers continue to ridicule biblical predictions saying, “Where is the promise of Christ’s coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:3-4). There is a book in the Bible that scoffers should read and heed. This book, the book of

Revelation, contains warnings far more dire than those Harry Truman refused to heed.

The Book of Revelation contains warnings of a time of tribulation and suffering like the world has never seen. John's words of warning to the churches of his day are just as urgent and relevant today as they were when he wrote them twenty centuries ago in A.D. 95. The Book of Revelation predicts the climax of God's plan for the ages, and the sequence of events leading up to the return of Jesus Christ to establish His Millennial Kingdom on this earth.

As we begin our verse by verse study of Revelation, permit me to provide a brief introduction to this amazing book.

### **I. Author, Date, And Title**

A. Authorship: According to the book itself, the author of this final book of the Bible called himself John four times (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Although the author refers to himself only as "John," it was traditionally held in the early church that this was none other than the apostle John. John is also referred to as a prophet in chapter 22, verse 9.

B. Date: There are two primary views concerning the date this book was written: (1) early in the seventh decade of the first century during the reign of Nero (A.D. 68-70), and (2) late, A.D. 95-96, during the reign of Domitian, who ruled from A.D. 81-96.

Those that propose an earlier date, during the reign of Emperor Nero (A.D. 68-70), overlook the fact that the persecutions under Nero were confined primarily to Rome, while the latter persecution under Domitian (A.D. 90-95) extended to the further limits of the Roman empire. The later date is further supported by accounts of the early church father Irenaeus, who placed the apostle John as an exile on the Island of Patmos during the reign of Emperor Domitian.

C. Title: The title of this book is given in the opening verse (1:1). It is the *Ἀποκαλύψις τοῦ Θεοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* ("The Revelation of Jesus Christ"). The word rendered "*apocalypse*," means literally an "unveiling" or "disclosure." Revelation is an unveiling of the Person of Jesus Christ, as to His Person, His Power, and His Program, for the final chapter of human history. Christ is revealed as the Lamb rejected,

coming to reign on His Messianic throne as the glorified Lamb of God (Matt 24:29-31; Rev 19)!

## II. Historical Setting: *Origin and Destination*

A. *Origin.* The place of writing is specified by John to have been on the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (1:9). Statements by the early church fathers Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and Eusebius affirm that the book was written by John while on the Island of Patmos.

B. *Destination.* Tradition claims that John came to Ephesus in his later years, settling there in around A.D. 70, and while there he appears to have taken charge as the overseer of seven churches of Asia (1:11).<sup>1</sup> As stated above, John was apparently exiled to the Island of Patmos during the reign of Emperor Domitian who died in A.D. 96. During his exile on Patmos, John was commissioned by the resurrected Lord Jesus to record in a book all that he was about to see, and to then send it on to the seven churches of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:10-13). Although Christ directed John to record and send His message to the seven churches of Asia, the book is also intended for believers and churches of all ages, including our own.

## III. Interpretative Approaches

There are four main schools of interpretation that have been used by expositors to interpret this strange and often misunderstood book so filled with visions and symbols.

1. *The Preterist School (Contemporary History).* “Preterist” is derived from a Latin word meaning “past.” Proponents of this position feel that virtually all of the material in Revelation speaks of events that transpired in early church history (all fulfilled by A.D. 312). It depicts the conflicts between the early church and the Roman Empire. Preterists contend that the book contains no supernatural predictions of future events. If this approach is correct, the Book of Revelation tells nothing of the future. It has no real message for us today. Yet, a natural reading of the book seems to demand a prophetic character (1:3, 19; 22:18, 19). Chapters 4–19 deal with a relatively short period of time (seven year Tribulation

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<sup>1</sup>Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 320.

- period), which culminates with the second coming of Jesus Christ (19:11-21). The plain reading of Scripture does not at all fit with this view.
2. *The Historicist School (Continuous History)*. This interpretation contends that Revelation gives a prophetic narrative of continuous history from Apostolic times up to the second coming of Christ and the establishment of His kingdom on earth. Those holding this view see in the symbols the rise of the Papacy, the corruption of the church, and the various wars throughout church history. This was the prevalent view among the Reformers and the interpretation promoted by the classic commentators of past generations.<sup>2</sup> While the Preterists contend that all the events of Revelation have already happened, the Historicist's says that most of Revelation is now history (usually through chapter 18), but some of it yet remains to be fulfilled in the future. **One weakness of this position** is that a person would have to be an expert in Western history to interpret the book. I find it hard to believe that God would write a book that only the religiously trained in history could fathom.
  3. *The Idealist School (Spiritual History)*. This school of interpreters is committed to an allegorical approach of spiritualizing the symbols.<sup>3</sup> Revelation is approached as a pictorial presentation of the triumph of divine truth over evil. The book does not intend to depict actual events as such. Rather, the visions are merely expressions of the principles and forces active in all ages. All of this is designed to tell us that truth will triumph ultimately in the end even though evil and righteousness are in constant combat. This book has only spiritual value. **Now**, it is to be freely admitted that there are spiritual values in this book, however, this viewpoint simply does not take the symbols of the book seriously. It avoids the persons and events in the book and simply looks at the result (truth will triumph). It's like reading the conclusion and not paying any attention to the events that bring about the conclusion. Certainly truth will triumph, but this book presents a very short and yet detailed process by which truth will ultimately triumph.
  4. *The Futurist School (Prophetic History)*. Futurist's contend that the greater part of the Book of Revelation (chaps. 4–22) is yet to be fulfilled in the future at the end of the age. Only chapters 1–3 have already been fulfilled. The phrase “the things that shall be here-after” (1:19 and 4:1) are understood as referring to the distant future or “end of the age.” The major advantage of this position is that it harmonizes beautifully well

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<sup>2</sup>Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, 394.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

with the other prophetic portions of the Bible (Daniel 2, 7, and 9, Matt. 24–25, Luke 21). This interpretive approach to the book requires no specialized extra-biblical training. Any diligent believer with a Bible in his/her hand can interpret the book. Finally, this view permits a “literal hermeneutic,” which allows a person to interpret the language of the book in its normal natural sense (sometimes called “literal interpretation”). As my Bible professor Dr. Curtis Mitchell always used to say, “The more literal an interpretation that one adopts, the more strongly will he be construed to be a futurist.”<sup>4</sup>

#### IV. Purpose

The occasion which prompted the book was a direct command from the Lord Jesus Christ for John to record and send His message to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:10-13). The stated purpose of the book is to reveal the exalted and victorious Lord Jesus Christ, and His program for the end of the age. John is directed to record (1:19): first, what he had already seen by way of a vision (chapter 1), second, what he was about to receive concerning conditions that existed in the seven churches of Asia at the time he wrote (chapters 2–3), and third, what he would see concerning all that will take place in the future (chapters 4–22). Gromacki points out that, “The [primary] goal of the book is to reveal the latter stages of God’s eternal plan of redemption through His Son Jesus Christ: [the release of the wrath of God against a Christ rejecting world], and the establishment of His messianic kingdom of righteousness and peace (11:15; 21:1-2). “In all of this, *Christ is central* ‘for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy’ (19:10).”<sup>5</sup>

#### V. Message

John writes in obedience to Christ’s command to comfort and encourage believers in the midst of suffering and persecution at the hands of evil Gentile rulers, assuring them that Jesus Christ will ultimately and finally cause them to triumph; and what is more, He will judge the world and will establish Israel’s Kingdom under His Messianic Kingship, and will rule over the whole world as promised in the Old Testament.

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<sup>4</sup>Curtis C. Mitchell, “Revelation,” (class notes of this student in *New Testament Literature*, Biola Bible College, Fall 1978).

<sup>5</sup>Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, 393.

## **Conclusion: What can we hope to learn from our study of Revelation?**

Revelation reveals the sequence and magnitude of what's to come in the future. David Jeremiah suggests that a study of this prophetic book, and all of the New Testament can be a dynamic school □ for self-improvement. Here are a few courses offered:

- **Problem-Solving.** I don't know of a university that offers this □ course, but the Bible says that understanding the future will put □ our everyday problems into proper perspective (Colossians 3:2).
- **Advanced Loving.** We will be more loving people, because our □ love will "increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else" as the impact of His coming soon penetrates our □ beings (1 Thessalonians 3:12, 13).
- **Church Growth.** There's not a pastor of a large or small church □ who wouldn't be interested in this course. The best place to be □ as that important day approaches is in church worshiping or □ in the world serving (Hebrews 10:25).
- **Goal-Setting.** If we really believed Jesus might come back to-day, we would change many of our habits. "Dear friends, □ now we are children of God, and what we will be has not □ yet been made known. However, we know that when He appears, □ we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone □ who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure" □ (1 John 3:2, 3).
- **Cheerleading.** In the big games, the cheerleaders encourage the □ crowd. How about a course in encouragement? After Paul had □ written to the church at Thessalonica, and the last events on □ God's prophetic time chart had become clearer, he admonished those believers, □ "to encourage one other" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). We do not need □ to be doomsayers, but cheerleaders.
- **Life-Saving.** Even those who can't swim can take this course, □ for it is the most important one to be offered. Prophecy provides us with an urgency to reach others for Jesus Christ, to "snatch □ others from the fire and save them" (Jude 23).

## **Warnings Ignored:**

When the danger from Mount St. Helens signaled sure and certain peril, warnings to evacuate went out. Harry Truman refused to heed the warnings, and as a result he perished when Mount St. Helens' blew its top. God has graciously provided us with warnings of the approaching judgment to come upon this Christ-rejecting world.

For us, the proper equipment has been given to us in God's Word. The escape route has been mapped out for almost two thousand years. As we approach the end of this age many people think time is growing short before Christ returns for His church. In the past twenty years, the culmination of Bible prophecy has been in high gear. In fact, events signaling Christ's return seem to be escalating.

Are we listening today to the warnings from the mountain of evidence in front of us? Harry Truman shows us the foolishness of refusing to heed the warnings.

I pray that our study of the Book of Revelation might be enlightening, encouraging, and motivating. May God be pleased to help us set our minds and hearts on loving and serving one another, and on reaching the lost with the good news about God's love and forgiveness available through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Closing prayer:

Closing song: *In Over My Head* by Jenn Johnson