

# The Book of Revelation

## LESSON ONE

## THE BACKGROUND OF REVELATION



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# The Book of Revelation

## Lesson One

### The Background of Revelation

#### INTRODUCTION

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When Jesus died, many of his disciples and admirers believed that he had experienced his final defeat. Some even believed that all his teachings and miracles were for nothing. What his disciples didn't understand until the third day was that Jesus' death wasn't the end of the story. In fact, his resurrection proved that his death was actually his victory. His resurrection allowed his disciples to understand Jesus' ministry, suffering and death from a completely new perspective. And when John wrote the book of Revelation, his readers needed this new perspective too. The early church faced persecution from the powerful Roman Empire. And many Christians began to view this as a defeat. But John encouraged his readers to find both comfort and confidence in the victory that Jesus achieved at his resurrection. He wanted them to understand that even if their lives ended in martyrdom, that wouldn't be the end of their story either. Eventually, Jesus would consummate his kingdom, and every believer that had ever lived would share in his victory.

This is the first lesson in our series on *The Book of Revelation*, sometimes called The Apocalypse, or The Apocalypse of John. We've entitled this lesson "The Background of Revelation." In this lesson, we'll see that Revelation's context and setting can help us understand its original meaning, and apply its message to our own lives in the modern world.

This lesson on the background of Revelation will divide into three parts. First, we'll explore the historical background of the book of Revelation. Second, we'll discuss its theological background. And third, we'll consider its literary background. Let's begin with the historical background of Revelation.

#### HISTORICAL

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The book of Revelation has fascinated both believers and unbelievers ever since it was written. But different interpreters understand the symbols and imagery of the book in very different ways. The strange creatures, the cosmic battles, the plagues and judgments — some interpreters find these images so confusing that they lose all hope of understanding this part of Scripture. But the truth is that much of this confusion stems from our unfamiliarity with the historical context of the book. So, in order to learn how to interpret and apply Revelation rightly, it helps to understand something about its history.

**There is great value in being able to understand the setting of each of the biblical books. I wouldn't say it is essential, mind you — God's**

Word has an eternal function, and people can relate to it directly, and if you don't happen to know original setting, it doesn't stop it from being true. Having said that, we're going to get far more out of the Bible if we understand the original setting in which it was written, and we can understand that it was written to people in this culture, in this time, with these particular issues. And when we see that, we can get a better handle on, well, how does that apply to us? Even though we're in a different situation we can, as it were, match over what the original message meant. And so, a great deal of effort is given into trying to find the historical setting of the books, and sometimes it doesn't come up with great answers, but sometimes we can get a very good understanding of what the original context was. And when we get that, we're in a much better position to apply from that context to our own.

— Dr. Peter Walker

We'll look at three fundamental aspects of the historical background of Revelation: its author; its date of composition; and its original audience. Let's begin with the author of Revelation.

## AUTHOR

We'll explore the author of the book of Revelation in two ways. First, we'll see that the traditional attribution of the book to the apostle John is reliable. And second, we'll explore John's location and experience when he wrote it. Let's turn first to the traditional view that the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation.

### The Apostle John

The author of the book of Revelation identified himself by the relatively common name "John." He mentioned his name in Revelation 1:1, 4, 9 and 22:8. But he didn't specifically identify himself as John the apostle. He did mention that he faithfully served Jesus, and that he had suffered for the kingdom of God. And it seems clear from the book that he was a prophet. But these general details aren't sufficient to demonstrate that the man who wrote the book of Revelation was the apostle John.

Even so, there are at least two good reasons to affirm the traditional view that the apostle John wrote this book. For one thing, many credible early witnesses testified that he was the author.

As early as the second century A.D., church fathers like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria identified the apostle John as the author of the book of Revelation. Justin made this claim in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 81. Justin's

testimony is particularly valuable because he lived in Ephesus in the early second century, among people who had known John personally.

Irenaeus mentioned John's authorship in his work *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 18, section 11. His testimony is also very helpful, because Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn had been a disciple of the apostle John. As a result, Irenaeus was in a superior position to know which works John had actually written.

Finally, Clement of Alexandria seems to have assumed John's authorship in his work *Who is the Rich Man that shall be Saved?*, section 42.

A second reason to affirm the traditional view that the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation is its vocabulary. There are many distinctive similarities between the vocabulary in the book of Revelation and the vocabulary in John's other works. For the sake of time, we'll mention just two.

First, within the New Testament, the designation of Christ as the "word" or "logos" is found only in Revelation 19:13 and John 1:1, 14. Similar language also appears in 1 John 1:1.

And second, Jesus' statement "Whoever is thirsty, let him come" in Revelation 22:17 is paralleled in the New Testament only by his statement "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" in John 7:37.

Despite these strong arguments supporting the apostle John as the author of the book of Revelation, critics as early as the third century have disputed his authorship. For example, the third century bishop, Dionysius of Alexandria, pointed out that the author of Revelation identified himself as John, while the author of John's gospel and letters never told us his name. Dionysius also called attention to other differences between Revelation and John's other works, such as their different literary styles and use of Greek. And some critics continue to make similar objections today.

Of course, there are good explanations for why one author might have produced works that look different. For example, John may have attached his name to this work so that people would be certain that it came from an authoritative source. Or he may have stated his name because he had been commissioned by Christ himself to deliver this book to seven specific churches. And just because John didn't name himself in some writings is no reason to conclude that he would never name himself in any writings.

Furthermore, the stylistic differences between Revelation and John's other writings can also be easily explained. The visions John recorded in the book of Revelation are very different from the revelation he received during Jesus' earthly ministry.

Also, unlike John's other biblical writings, Revelation was written in an apocalyptic style, which probably occasioned many of the differences in his literary style and use of Greek. These differences might also have resulted from John's different purposes for writing and even from his different relationships with his various original audiences.

In summary, the evidence favoring the apostle John's authorship substantially outweighs the evidence against it. For this reason, in these lessons we'll affirm the traditional view that the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John.

Having spoken of the apostle John as the author of Revelation, let's turn to John's location and experience when he wrote the book.

## Location and Experience

According to Revelation 1:9, John wrote the book of Revelation while he was on Patmos, a small island in the Aegean Sea, approximately forty miles southwest of Ephesus. Patmos is a rocky and barren place, virtually devoid of trees. Its unpleasantness made it a good location to punish popular people who were perceived as threats to the civil order of the Roman Empire. And Revelation 1:9 strongly implies that John had been exiled to Patmos.

While John was enduring these harsh conditions, he received several visions from Christ. And the book of Revelation is John's record of and commentary on these visions. Listen to John's account in Revelation 1:10-11:

**On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea" (Revelation 1:10-11).**

Here, and in other passages like Revelation 21:5, John made it clear that he wrote in obedience to this command from God. God was going to show him a vision, and John was to record this vision and send it to these seven churches in Asia Minor.

Knowing that the book of Revelation resulted from a supernatural vision given to John has led some interpreters to diminish the importance of John as the author of this book. After all, if it's just a record of a vision, then what difference does its author make? What possible input could John have made?

**I think that when we think about how the Holy Spirit worked with people in the production of Scripture as God's Word and as a human word, that we can say both, that these are human writers that are thinking things through, and they're articulating what they understand and what they want to make known, and we can see that the Holy Spirit is shaping them and working with them and guiding them in the things that are written. There are some cases where the Holy Spirit is just directly telling people what to write, so we have some dictation, we have clear oracles. But in other cases, you've got the literary artistry of a human author, and he's expressing things in cultural forms in the way that he wants them to be understood, and God is working with those free decisions to make them exactly what he wants. It is a compatibility of God's sovereign direction and human responsibility to do things. It's God's word, it's a human word altogether.**

— Dr. John E. McKinley

**The Spirit uses the different circumstances, the different personalities, the different vocabularies, the different historical chronology of each person and highlights that in such a way as to bring the optimum amount of clarity to the particular truth that is being demonstrated by the argument of the writer. And so throughout Scripture what we have is this complete interaction of the gifts, and the historical background, and the knowledge, and the experiences of the writers, and at the same time, the particular activities of the Holy Spirit in guiding them to use all of these personal gifts which God in his providence has prepared them to have — using all these personal gifts in a way to create a book of divine revelation that is precisely as he would have it to be including all of the literature types, and all the historical narratives, and all of the angst of the writers. All of this is a matter of divine superintendence and divine revelation without, in any sense, destroying the genuine personality and history of the writers.**

— Dr. Thomas J. Nettles

With the possible exception of the letters in chapters 2 and 3, God revealed visions to John, not the actual words he was to write. Generally speaking, John wrote about his visions in his own words. So in this regard, the book of Revelation is a lot like the Gospel of John.

First, John observed the events of Jesus' life. Later, he reported those events in his gospel, in a way that was designed to meet the particular needs of his audience. In much the same way, John observed the visions he reported in the book of Revelation. Then he wrote his book as a true record of his experiences. And as we'll see in these lessons, John selected and arranged the material in the book of Revelation in ways that addressed the needs of his original audience.

Like the rest of the Bible, the book of Revelation was inspired by God. The Holy Spirit superintended John's work so that everything he wrote was true and authoritative. But as we'll see throughout these lessons, John was still an active, thinking author. With the possible exception of the letters in chapters 2 and 3, John didn't receive dictation from Jesus. He was responsible for recalling his vision, for understanding it, and for presenting it in his own words.

Now that we've considered John's location and experience when he wrote the book of Revelation, let's look at the date when he composed it.

## **DATE**

Evangelical interpreters generally point to one of two probable dates for the writing of Revelation: either an early date during the time of the Roman emperor Nero, or a late date in the time of the Roman emperor Domitian. We'll consider both these dates, beginning with the time of Nero.



## Nero

The Roman emperor Nero reigned from A.D. 54 to 68, and historians that argue for a date in Nero's time tend to place the writing of Revelation at the end of his reign. In Nero's early years, competent advisors had great influence with him. But over time his rule degenerated dramatically. Nero is notorious for having blamed Christians for the fire of Rome in A.D. 64, and for using this accusation as an excuse to persecute Roman believers in large numbers.

**Emperor Nero undertook this persecution in the middle of the first century mainly to use Christians as scapegoats. Fire broke out in the city of Rome, and Emperor Nero was known for his urban renewal projects, so with that fire hitting the landscape very heavily and then other forces coming in and clearing out buildings some felt unnecessarily, there were a number who felt that they were really on the receiving end of the urban renewal project, and it was the emperor's fault. So there was an uprising threatened. He was looking for someone to blame it on and attached that to the Christians. And in that, various forms of torture were employed to try and extract from the Christians an admission that they were behind this.**

— Dr. James D. Smith III

The arguments for dating the book of Revelation during the late years of Nero's reign are based on at least three pieces of information. The first main evidence is John's reference to seven kings.

In Revelation 17, John described a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. And in verses 9-11, he said that the seven heads represented seven kings. Most interpreters agree that these seven kings were Roman Emperors. Julius Caesar is sometimes counted as the first emperor of Rome. He was followed by Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, and Galba. In fact, in Revelation 17:10, we find the detail that the sixth king of Rome was in power when John received his vision and wrote the book of Revelation. This reference has led many interpreters to conclude that John's Apocalypse was written during the reign of Nero.

A second major argument that John wrote during Nero's reign comes from John's reference to the Jewish temple. In particular, John mentioned the temple in Revelation 11, and some scholars interpret this to mean that the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was still standing when Revelation was written. But history records that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, two years after Nero's reign ended. So, if the temple was still standing when Revelation was written, it's likely that the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Nero.

The third factor that may point to a date in Nero's time is that John wrote during a period of persecution. The book of Revelation frequently mentions the fact that John's readers were suffering. We can see this in Revelation 1:9; 2:9, 10, 13; 6:9 and 20:4. And as we have already said, Nero was well-known for promoting the persecution of

Christians. He wasn't the only Roman emperor to do this, but he was the first to do so in a noteworthy manner, even if his persecutions were generally limited to the area around Rome.

**The Roman Emperor Nero who reigned from 54 to 68 was known to be a pretty brutal emperor. He also was known to persecute many people in a number of ways. For example, he killed members of his own family, and he was probably the first Roman emperor to really persecute Christians. Now how did he do that? Well, we have an ancient historian named Tacitus who tells us that some Christians were covered with pitch and burned actually as lamps in Rome. Some were put inside of the skins of wild beasts and fed to the animals, and some were also said to be nailed to crosses.**

— Dr. Brandon Crowe

Although there's no specific historical evidence that the persecution under Nero spread beyond Rome to other parts of the Empire, this possibility can't be ruled out. So, this can also be seen as supporting a date during Nero's reign.

But while the arguments favoring a date in Nero's reign have some merit, they aren't entirely convincing. In fact, a number of objections have been raised against them.

First, Julius Caesar wasn't actually an emperor. His successor Augustus was the first to claim that title. So, Julius Caesar might not be the first of the seven kings mentioned in Revelation 17:9-11.

Second, as we've seen, Revelation 11 mentions the temple. But John was told in Revelation 11:1-2 that all but the outer court of this temple would be protected from the Gentiles. In contrast to this, in Matthew 24:1-2, Jesus himself had already predicted that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed by the Gentiles. So, it's difficult to be sure that Revelation 11 refers to the temple that was destroyed in A.D. 70.

Third, while it's possible that Nero's persecution spread to Asia Minor, there is no historical evidence that it actually did. So, it's difficult to tie John's descriptions of Christian persecution directly to Nero. Because of problems like these, a majority of evangelicals prefer a later date for the book of Revelation.

Now that we've looked at the arguments for a date in the days of Nero, let's turn to the evidence suggesting that John wrote the book of Revelation during the reign of Domitian.

## **Domitian**

Scholars who favor a late date for the writing of Revelation tend to place it during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, who ruled from A.D. 81 to 96. At least four factors can be cited in favor of this date for the writing of Revelation.

First, several early church fathers indicated that the book was written at this time. For instance, in his work *Against Heresies*, book 5, chapter 30, section 3, the early church father Irenaeus reported that Revelation was written "toward the end of Domitian's

reign.” Earlier in this lesson, we mentioned that Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn was a disciple of the apostle John. So, there is good reason to trust his testimony on this matter.

This date also concurs with the testimony given by some of the church fathers in the early second century, such as Clement of Alexandria, who implied that John was released from exile upon Domitian’s death.

A second factor favoring a date in Domitian’s reign is the same reference to seven kings that some interpreters use to support a date in Nero’s reign. As we’ve seen, in Revelation 17:9-11, John explained that the seven heads on the scarlet beast were seven kings. Those who argue for a date in Domitian’s reign argue that all seven kings are presented as severe persecutors of the church. So, rather than counting all the Roman emperors, they count only those emperors who persecuted the church in significant ways.

By this reckoning, Caligula was the first emperor. He reigned from A.D. 37 to 41. Claudius, was the second, reigning from A.D. 41 to 54. Nero was the third, reigning from A.D. 54 to 68. Following Nero, three minor emperors are ignored, because they did not significantly contribute to the persecution of the church. The fourth emperor that persecuted the church was Vespasian, who reigned from A.D. 69 to 79. The fifth was Titus, who reigned from A.D. 79 to 81. And the sixth, during whose reign Revelation would have been written, was Domitian, who ruled from A.D. 81 to 96.

A third factor that points to a date in Domitian’s reign is the persecution of Christians.

**Domitianus was the son of Vespasian and the brother of Titus. Now, what you need to know about that is Vespasian and Titus were responsible, personally, for the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the rooting out of the leadership of early Judaism and the relentless pursuit of Jews, all the way to Masada, and the storming of Masada and the elimination of Jewish zealots, en masse, in 72 A.D. So, one of the things that you can say about that family is that they were not very Jewish-friendly, to say the least. So, it’s not a surprise that Domitianus would be an emperor who would persecute a sect that he would see as sort of a split-off from Judaism. The persecution seems to have been sporadic, rather than systematic. It seems to have been more regional that it was empire-wide, but it was nonetheless vicious.**

**— Dr. Ben Witherington III**

**Domitian went after everybody, and he was so much hated by the people that after a while, they actually scratched his name out of inscriptions for things like amphitheaters that were dedicated to him, and so they actually went through the empire and wiped out his name because he was so widely hated. Why was he hated? Well, because he crushed any opposition to himself that he saw was out there.**

**— Dr. Brandon Crowe**

The persecution of Jews is better known to us really than the persecution of Christians, but there's no doubt that it was severe in both cases, and as a result of that, many who place Revelation at the very end of the first century will sense that the beast or the monster that's being addressed in Revelation is, in fact, Domitian. He was, even more than Nero, most likely crazy, certifiably crazy. He was one who in his own habits loved to see women and dwarfs battle, would catch insects and stab them repeatedly with needles — these are recorded by some of those who watched him — and ultimately he was executed, murdered by a former slave of his who came back and saw an opening and just couldn't take it anymore. So he was the far edge in many ways of imperial insanity.

— Dr. James D. Smith III

According to many historians, Domitian persecuted the church outside Rome more extensively than any prior emperor had. For example, in A.D. 96, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the Corinthians that spoke of sudden and repeated calamities and mischances that had befallen them. These “calamities and mischances” suggest a more systematic persecution of Christians during Domitian's reign. He is reported to have feared the coming of Christ. And he was even said to have executed his own cousin, the Roman consul Flavius Clemens, because Flavius was a Christian.

A fourth reason suggesting a date in Domitian's time is that Domitian required emperor worship.

What we also know by the time of Domitian is that you've had the growing progress of the Emperor Cult. And the Emperor Cult goes all the way back to the beginning of the days of the empire with Augustus. But by the time you get to Domitianus, he's saying things like, “You should worship me while I'm alive.” In the case of Augustus, he was worshipped as a deified human being after his death. But by the time you get to the end of the first century A.D., they're worshipping, or called to worship, living emperors like Domitian himself. He ran around saying, “Just worship me as ‘*Deus et dominus noster*.’” — Our lord and our god. Which just happens to be the very language that Thomas uses of Jesus, “My Lord and my God,” at the end of the Gospel of John. And it's very frequent language used of Jesus in the book of Revelation as well. So, it does seem that the context of the book of Revelation, is a time of the rise of emperor worship and of the consequent persecution of Christians in places like Asia Minor which is where those churches were.

— Dr. Ben Witherington III

The theme of emperor worship appears in several portions of the book of Revelation. For instance, the beast that represents the seven kings in Revelation 17:9-11 also requires people to worship him in Revelation 13, 14 and 16. This motif may indicate that Revelation was written during a time when the Roman emperor required Christians to worship him.

There is no evidence that Nero demanded that people worship him. But Domitian clearly did. Christians met his disfavor whenever they refused to acknowledge his claim to be "god and lord." Domitian began all of his letters with the phrase "Our Lord and God commands," and he required his subjects to address him in the same way. He also had gold and silver statues of himself placed in the temples to the Roman gods.

But the view that John wrote during the time of Domitian also has its weaknesses. For instance, John never said that the seven kings in chapter 17 were significant persecutors of the church. And he never mentioned the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, which would have already taken place by the time of Domitian.

The precise time when John wrote the book of Revelation can't be identified with certainty. But there seems to be more support for the view that it was written during Domitian's reign. Interpreters who support this view usually suggest a date around A.D. 95, near the end of Domitian's life, just before John was released from Patmos.

In these lessons, none of our interpretations will hinge on a specific date for the book of Revelation. Instead, we'll focus on the fact that it was written sometime during the latter half of the first century, at a time when believers were being persecuted for their faith, and pressured to worship the emperor.

Having examined the author and date of Revelation, let's discuss its original audience.

## AUDIENCE

John explicitly addressed Revelation to seven churches in Asia Minor, in an area that's now part of western Turkey. The churches were located in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Each church received encouragement, and when necessary, rebukes, according to its condition.

**Revelation, its central purpose, its central message is number one, to inform the seven churches of their position in Christ. Just as he suffered and was victorious, so too, they will suffer and will be victorious. That's a theme that permeates the entire book. Secondly, it is they need to put their faith and trust in God's sovereignty, Christ's sovereignty and the Spirit's sovereignty. Because Christ was put to death and rose again, he's now the conquering hero. He is the conquering lion. He is victorious, and he has conquered the Evil One. So he is sovereign. God, Christ and the Spirit are all sovereign, and they can now rest in God's sovereignty in the midst of trials, in the midst of persecution, in the midst of false teaching. They need to rely on him because they are undergoing severe persecution, severe trials, severe testing, and it's very easy for them to commit idolatry, to**

become part of the world's system, but instead they need to rely on God's sovereign hand.

— Dr. Benjamin Gladd

Historians and the book of Revelation itself explain that Christians living in these cities faced all kinds of temptations and pressures to turn from the true Christian faith. Like many Christians in every age, they felt pressured to compromise their faith.

The New Testament writers give us a lot of practical advice about how to deal with trial and suffering in our lives. We see this, of course, in the book of Revelation in the encouragement to overcome, to be faithful in the midst of great pressure to disavow your relationship with Christ, or just to compromise your economic life, or your sexual life in relation to the lordship of Jesus. A couple of things that we see in the book of Revelation and really throughout the New Testament that are practical helps in facing suffering are, number one, fellowship with other believers, the importance of really seeing in the fellowship not only of worship but of encouragement, of also sharing economically with one another, this sense of security that comes from that being gathered together as God's people in fellowship. Another thing that we see as a resource in the book of Revelation in particular are these songs of lament where, as we see in the Old Testament in the Psalms, as we see in the voice of Jesus as he picks up the Psalms, like Psalm 22 from the cross, but also in the hymns that we see in the book of Revelation is "how long"? How long, O Lord, will the martyrs have to suffer? When, Lord, will you come and bring deliverance to your people? Lament really is about a sense of justice, and we know that that sense of justice is rooted in the character of God, because the Lord is just. We question unjust circumstances, and we long for his deliverance and for his salvation. So I see in the fellowship of believers and in the language of lament two very, very important resources, practical resources, in facing trial and suffering, and even temptation as God's people.

— Dr. Greg Perry

The churches of Asia Minor faced *many* sources of pressure to compromise their beliefs and practices. But for our purposes in this lesson, we'll focus on four problems that characterized their circumstances.

## Trade Guilds

First, pagan trade guilds pressured Christians to worship false gods. In the first century, trade guilds existed throughout Asia Minor. These were groups of laborers and

professionals that organized for economic purposes. Everyone, including Christians, needed to join these trade guilds if they hoped to do much business in their communities. This social practice presented a serious challenge to followers of Christ, because each guild had a patron deity, and members of the guild were expected to show their allegiance to that deity. Christians who refused to show allegiance to the patron deity of a guild were often excluded from business dealings with its members.

## **Jewish Communities**

A second pressure to compromise came from Jewish communities that were spread throughout Asia Minor in the first century. For the most part, religions in the Roman Empire could only be practiced in the countries of their origin. One notable exception to this law was Judaism. Jewish synagogues were in operation in most significant cities in Asia Minor. Early on, the Romans viewed Christianity as a sect of Judaism, with the result that Christianity could be legally practiced throughout the empire. But as the Jews began to disassociate themselves from Christian believers, Christianity lost its legal status in most parts of the empire, putting Christians at risk of punishment and persecution from the government. As a result, Christians felt pressure to conform to Judaism, and even to abandon their faith in Christ.

## **Roman Government**

A third pressure to compromise true Christian faith came from the Roman government, which demanded that Christians worship the emperor and the Roman gods. Because the Jewish community rejected the Christian church, the government required Christians to participate in public worship of the Roman gods. And in Domitian's day, this even included an affirmation that the emperor was a god. If Christians refused to join in this idolatry, they could be accused of atheism — a crime that carried severe consequences, and could even result in execution. In order to preserve their physical safety, many Christians felt pressured to engage in this false worship.

## **Wayward Christians**

Sadly, in addition to pressures to conform that came from outside the church, a fourth pressure actually came from wayward Christians. The Bible doesn't give us many details about the problems in the churches of Asia Minor. But the letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3 do list several specific troubles caused by people within the Christian community. For example, the immoral teachings of Balaam are referred to in Revelation 2:14. A group called the Nicolaitans is condemned in Revelation 2:6, 15. And a false prophetess named Jezebel is mentioned in Revelation 2:20.

Moreover, these wayward Christians appear to have been pressuring other Christians to join in their false practices. But not all wayward Christians joined these



heretical sects. Some simply gave up their faith and rejoined the pagan religions that surrounded them. One interesting record of this comes from Pliny the Younger, who was governor of Pontus and Bithynia from A.D. 111 to 113.

Listen to what Pliny wrote to the Roman emperor Trajan:

**Others named by the informer declared that they were Christians, but then denied it, asserting that they had been but had ceased to be... some as much as twenty-five years [ago]. They all worshipped your image and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.**

Christians in every age face pressures to compromise their loyalty to Christ in thought, word, and deed. In many areas of the world, Christianity is still an illegal religion. Faithful believers have to meet in secret, at risk of being arrested, and in some cases even killed. There is also intellectual pressure. Secular scholars, friends and family often ridicule Christianity as an ignorant religion that's contradicted by science. There can also be pressure to compromise our behavior and beliefs for the sake of succeeding in business, or to avoid unjust treatment in society. And the book of Revelation addresses these kinds of situations. Its message is that Jesus is the supreme King, and that he will eventually return to make everything right. And when he does, he'll reward everyone that has remained faithful to him.

With this understanding of the historical setting of Revelation in mind, we're ready to explore its theological background.

## THEOLOGICAL

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Broadly speaking, the book of Revelation affirms the theology of every book in the Bible that was written before it. John relied extensively on prior biblical writings, and he expected his readers to be familiar with them too.

The theological background of Revelation can be described in many ways. But in this lesson we'll focus on three of its most central concepts: first, the scriptural doctrine of eschatology or "the last days"; second, the concept of covenant; and third, the role of biblical prophets. Let's look first at the doctrine of eschatology.

## ESCHATOLOGY

In John's day, the early church was experiencing great tension because Jesus hadn't returned yet to finish his work. During his earthly ministry, Jesus had begun to bring salvation to every nation by inaugurating the final stages of God's kingdom on earth. But by the time John wrote, Jesus had been gone for half a century, and some Christians were beginning to wonder if he was coming back at all. So, one reason that John wrote was to reassure his readers that Jesus was hard at work building his kingdom, and that he would certainly return in the future to fulfill every promise the Bible had



made about him. In other words, John wrote to explain the biblical doctrine of eschatology — the Bible’s teaching about the events of the last days.

The term eschatology means “the study of the end times or the study of last things.” It derives from the New Testament Greek word *eschatos*, which usually means “last.” Traditionally, the term “eschatology” referred primarily to the Bible’s teaching about the second coming of Christ. But more recent biblical scholars have used the word “eschatology” to refer to the study of the climactic character of the entire period from Christ’s first coming to his return. This broader view of eschatology corresponds to the fact that passages like Hebrews 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:20 refer to the entire New Testament period as the last days or last times.

**Some theologians refer to the time between Christ’s first advent and second advent as the last days. They refer to the entirety of that time as the last days because in Christ’s first coming what you have is the in-breaking of the end times, and so theologians sometimes call this inaugurated eschatology or the “already, not yet.” In Christ’s first coming with his decisive victory on the cross and vindication in his resurrection, you have the down payment, or the guarantee, or the installation of the outworking of those final promises. Those final promises are not yet fully part of our experience yet, so we’re not glorified, but in the moment of Christ’s coming and decisively accomplishing his work of atonement on the cross, the outcome is certain. The outcome is guaranteed. There is no sense in which the final outcome is up for debate or up for grabs, or that it’s unclear in God’s mind. And so while there are things yet to be experienced by believers in the unfolding of God’s plan of redemption, the down payment on that final fulfillment is guaranteed from the very moment of Christ’s victory on the cross and his victory — his vindication, I should say — and his resurrection. And so that’s one of the reasons, or the primary reason that theologians can both distinguish aspects of the redemptive economy between Christ’s work in his first coming and his second coming, and also refer to that cumulatively as the last days. We’re in the last moments, the outworking of Christ’s ultimate victory as completed at the cross.**

**— Dr. Robert G. Lister**

To understand how New Testament writers understood the last days, it helps to begin with the teachings of the Old Testament. The Old Testament prophets foretold that the future Messiah or Christ would end the tyranny of foreign rule, and usher in God’s kingdom on earth.

As we read in Daniel 2:44:

**In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It**

**will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever (Daniel 2:44).**

In this verse, Daniel taught that God's kingdom would crush rival nations and rulers in order to establish God's unending rule over the entire earth. And in Daniel 7:13-14, the prophet went on to say that this kingdom would come through the work of the Son of Man, also known as the Messiah or the Christ.

Prophetic passages like those in Daniel led Jewish theologians in the first century to divide history into two great ages: this age of sin, suffering and death; and the age to come, when God would completely destroy his enemies, and ultimately bless his people.

In the centuries after Daniel, Israel continued to struggle against pagan empires and foreign rulers. And Jewish theologians increasingly longed for the coming of the messiah to end this age and usher in the age to come.

**It's clear that God is presently working with his people in the Old Testament, but he always does so in a way that looks forward to the coming of the King, the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the final priest, the final prophet, the final king. All of the Old Testament is looking forward to that particular person and event. When we get to the New Testament, we find that the writers of the New Testament are stunned by the reality that what they are facing in their lifetime is actually the very fulfillment that all of the Old Testament had anticipated. And it is not only implicit, but it is explicit in the New Testament that they have a view of the history of the world really in two parts: one of anticipation and the second of fulfillment.**

**— Dr. David B. Garner**

Jesus' himself frequently relied on this basic two-age view of history in his preaching. For example, he spoke of this age and the age to come in places like Matthew 12:32, Mark 10:29-30, and Luke 20:34-35. But Jesus also introduced a new perspective on the two ages. On the one hand, he continued to refer to the age to come as a future age. But on the other hand, he also spoke of the kingdom of God coming in his own day. In other words, he taught that in his day, the two ages of history had begun to overlap. The age to come had begun even though the present age or this age hadn't ended yet. According to Jesus, believers already live in God's kingdom, and already enjoy many of its blessings.

Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 12:28:

**If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you (Matthew 12:28).**

Jesus' victory over demonic powers proved that he had begun or inaugurated the final stage of God's kingdom on earth.

There are a number of New Testament passages that speak of the last days, and virtually all of these passages in context begin the last days already in the first century. For example, when Peter adopts the wording of Joel in Acts 2:17, he says, “In the last days God will pour out his Spirit,” he’s speaking about events that are taking place at that time on the day of Pentecost. So the early Christians understood something that sometimes modern Christians have forgotten, and that is that the kingdom is not only future, but because the King who is yet to come has already come, the future has invaded history. And that’s why you have passages in the New Testament, for example Galatians 1:4, that he’s delivered us from this present evil age; or I Corinthians 2:9, 10 where Paul says, “Eye has not seen nor ear heard, neither has it entered the human heart what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has revealed them to us by his Spirit.” Or in 2 Corinthians and Ephesians 1, he uses a term that often appears in business documents for a down payment. He says that we have received the first installment of our future inheritance by receiving the Spirit. We have received a foretaste of a future world, because we’re not just expecting a future resurrection and a future Messiah, a future king, but we’re expecting a king who has already come, who has already been raised from the dead and, therefore for us, we have a foretaste, and we need to live like a people of a future age. We need to live for the future in this present age, to let the world have a foretaste of what heaven is going to be like.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Through the earthly ministry of Christ, God was bringing the final defeat of his enemies, and the final blessings for his people. His kingdom was breaking into this evil age. It was rescuing God’s people and ensuring their future blessings. And as we just read in Matthew 12:28, this rescue began in the time of Christ. We see this same theme in passages like Luke 16:16; 17:20-21, and John 3:3. At the present time, the kingdom continues to grow, as we see in Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43, and Luke 19:11-27. And the kingdom will be completed or consummated in the future, when Christ returns, as Jesus taught in passages like Matthew 16:27-28; 24:44-51, and 25:31-46.

This two-age view of eschatology is particularly evident in the writings of the apostle Paul. On the one hand, he affirmed that this present age of sin and death still exists. For example, he referred to Satan as “the god of this age” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. And he spoke of the pagan philosopher as “the philosopher of this age” in 1 Corinthians 1:20. Moreover, Paul used the expression “the age to come” to refer to the future age when final judgments and blessings will come to the human race. We see this in places like Ephesians 2:7, and 1 Timothy 6:19. And he explicitly contrasted both ages in Ephesians 1:21.

On the other hand, Paul also taught that the age to come had already arrived in some sense. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 10:11, he wrote that the fulfillment of the ages

had come in Christ. And in Colossians 1:13-14, he said that believers have already been brought into Christ's kingdom.

The view of eschatology taught by Jesus and Paul is sometimes called "inaugurated eschatology" because it says that the age to come has begun, or been inaugurated, but that it hasn't yet come in all its fullness. Jesus inaugurated God's kingdom during his first coming, but he didn't completely do away with this age. And since that time, dimensions of both ages have existed alongside each other. As a result, believers already experience some of the blessings of the age to come. But we won't experience all its blessings until the age to come is consummated when Jesus returns.

According to Jewish eschatology, the Messiah was supposed to bring the present age of sin and death to a climactic end as he ushered in the age to come. But Jesus didn't do that, and this left many people wondering if he really was the Messiah. This is one reason the writers of the New Testament worked so hard to explain that the kingdom of God comes in stages. Yes, this change was surprising. But Jesus' powerful miracles and testimony were sufficient to prove that he was telling the truth, and that God really did intend to bring the kingdom in an unexpected way. When Jesus returns, this evil age will end entirely, and the age to come will arrive in all its fullness. But until then, dimensions of both ages will continue to exist alongside each other.

But how did this view of eschatology impact John as he wrote the book of Revelation? And why was this particular point of theology so important to him and to his audience?

During the time that John was writing the book of Revelation, the churches of Asia Minor were struggling with a perceived discrepancy in their beliefs. On the one hand, they believed that God ruled history, and that Christ had been victorious over this present evil age. Jesus had fulfilled Old Testament hopes by coming as the deliverer for all who believed in him.

But on the other hand, the churches of Asia Minor had to deal with the reality that evil was still very much at work in their world. As a result, they faced some very difficult questions like: "If salvation has come in Christ, why does the world still tempt Christians to sin?" "If Christ reigns, why doesn't he rescue us from our persecution?" And of course, "How and when will all of these trials end?" In one way or another, these questions all relate to eschatology. And they are precisely the kinds of questions that the book of Revelation answers.

John was clearly aware of the theological tensions created by the New Testament's outlook on the last days. And one of his goals for the book of Revelation was to help Christians cope with it. Throughout his book, he encouraged his readers to view this tension in light of two victories. First, he called their attention to the victory that Jesus had already won over the present age.

Through his death, resurrection and ascension, Christ had secured every true believer's inward, spiritual salvation. This initial victory is celebrated in places like Revelation 1:18, where Christ proclaimed that he had risen from the dead and would never die again, as well as in chapters 5 and 12, which speak repeatedly about the authority and power Christ received through his death and resurrection.

The second victory John highlighted was the final victory Christ will achieve when he returns — a victory that will result in the complete destruction of God's enemies

and the renewal of all creation. This final victory is in view in places like Revelation 1:7, and throughout chapters 19 and 22.

John wanted his original audience to know that Jesus Christ really had defeated the power of sin, suffering, and death, just as the Old Testament had foretold. And on this basis, John also encouraged his readers to trust that Jesus would return to complete God's judgment and salvation.

**We have to think about how the unexpected delay of God's kingdom, how it affected the outlook of the original audience, the original readers of the book of Revelation. Christ had ascended. The Gospels testify to that, the apostles were testifying to that, and there are things in the Gospels and even in the apostle Paul that might be understood as saying that Christ would come again soon, and so as those first century Christians were openly professing Christ as Lord and beginning to experience persecution, hardship, even just the normal difficulties or regular economic upheaval and displacement, they could have wondered, had the promise of Jesus to return again, had it failed? And this is how they were to respond to the situation: They were to stand firm in their faith knowing that Christ had overcome, that Christ had won the victory, and that God was sovereignly ruling the universe from that great throne scene in Revelation 4 and 5, that God was ruling on the throne and there was nothing happening outside not only of his ability to control but his willingness and his permission and his active will to control things. Because it would be by the suffering of those first century Christians and by their persevering in faith that people would be drawn to Christ the Victor by witnessing that persevering faith.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

With this understanding of eschatology in mind, we're ready to turn to a second aspect of the theological background of Revelation: the biblical concept of covenant.

## COVENANT

Although the word "covenant" only appears one time in the book of Revelation, the Old Testament concept of covenant shaped the book in some very important ways. It set the basic expectations God's people were to have regarding their lives in God's kingdom. It promised their future deliverance and blessing. And it motivated them to overcome every adversity they faced. To help us recognize the role the concept of covenant plays in the book of Revelation, it will be useful to review the way the idea developed throughout Scripture.

While each of God's covenants had its own unique features, a three-fold pattern characterized all divine covenants. First, each covenant demonstrated God's great benevolence to his people. Second, God expected loyalty from them in grateful response

to his benevolence. And third, God regulated his kingdom by establishing a just system of consequences. Specifically, those who were loyal received blessings, and those who were disloyal received curses.

In the covenant with David — mentioned in passages like 2 Samuel 7:1-17, Psalm 89 and Psalm 132 — God established David's dynasty as the conduit of God's blessings and judgments for his people. The sons of David were God's vassal kings, representing the entire kingdom before God. As in all other covenants, God showed benevolence, expected loyalty and reminded the house of David of the consequences of his blessings and curses. But later in Israel's history, David's descendants failed so badly that the entire nation of Israel was exiled under the curse of God.

But even in exile, the prophets of Israel predicted that in the last days God would renew his covenant through a righteous Son of David. The prophet Jeremiah referred to this renewal as a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31.

According to the New Testament, Christ is the great Son of David who fulfills this new covenant. Jesus Christ is king over God's kingdom on earth. And God, the great king or emperor, has made a covenant with Jesus and his church. In Jesus, God's greatest benevolence is displayed. Christ himself kept all the requirements of loyalty on our behalf. He suffered the eternal curses of the covenant when he died in our place. He rose again on the third day to share the eternal blessings of God's covenant with his people. And he is coming again to provide his people with God's ultimate blessings in the renewed creation.

God's covenant people have always included both faithful people and unfaithful people. And this will continue to be the case until Christ returns. During the days of Adam and Noah, the world's population included believers and unbelievers. The same was true of God's special nation during the days of Abraham, Moses and David. And even the New Testament churches contained a mixture of believers and unbelievers.

Some had true saving faith in Christ, but others didn't. So, when John wrote the book of Revelation for the churches in Asia Minor, he knew that only some of his original readers were true believers. The believers were anxiously waiting for God to reward their loyalty with blessings. But others within the church had begun to waver in their loyalty, and were in danger of falling under God's curses. In response to this situation, John reminded his audiences of the nature of life in covenant with God.

Between the first and second comings of Christ, we live in a period of testing, when the true condition of our hearts is being revealed. When Christ returns, those who trust fully in Christ will receive his covenant blessings. But those who don't will fall under his covenant curses.

Listen to what Jesus said to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:16:

**So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth (Revelation 3:16).**

At least some of the people in the church of Laodicea were in danger of turning from the gospel of Christ. So, John warned them that if they didn't remain faithful, they would suffer God's covenant curses.

These warnings were actually extensions of God's love for his people, because they gave John's readers the opportunity to repent. In fact, we see God's benevolence

throughout the book of Revelation. It's displayed in his love for his people, in the sacrifice of Jesus for us, in the kingdom of God, and in our hope in Christ's return. God loved us so much that he sent his Son to suffer for us, and he rose again from the dead so that we can live in his kingdom forever. And his benevolence should encourage us to remain faithful to him, even in the midst of great suffering.

With this understanding of eschatology and divine covenants in mind, we're ready to turn to a third aspect of the theological background of the book of Revelation: the role of prophets.

## PROPHETS

We'll consider the role of prophets first by comparing them to ancient covenant ambassadors; second, by looking at the potential results of their prophetic work; and third, by focusing on the way the apostle John fulfilled the role of prophet in the book of Revelation. Let's begin by focusing on biblical prophets as covenant ambassadors.

### Covenant Ambassadors

We've already seen that the Bible describes God's covenant with his people in ways that resemble ancient imperial treaties. So at this point we're ready to look at the related idea that biblical prophets like the apostle John served as imperial ambassadors or messengers of God's covenant.

In the ancient world, emperors didn't typically travel around their vast kingdoms personally — at least not on a regular basis. Instead, they appointed ambassadors to do this for them. It was the job of these ambassadors to encourage the vassals or servants of the emperor to fulfill the obligations of the treaty. The ambassadors did this largely by reminding the vassals of the rewards they would receive if they were loyal to the terms of the covenant, and warning them of the punishments they would receive if they violated these terms.

In much the same way, God commonly sent prophets both in the Old Testament and the New Testament to serve as his covenant ambassadors. He charged them to deliver specific messages or prophecies to his people. When the people were obedient, the prophets tended to encourage them by reminding them of the rewards they would receive if they continued to obey. But when the people were disobedient, the prophets generally warned them of the judgments God would bring against them if they refused to repent and change their ways.

**These prophets are fundamentally covenant lawyers. Their job is to execute Yahweh's lawsuit against his people. His people throughout their history have disobeyed. The prophets announced that the people of God have disobeyed and therefore curses are coming. But after the curses, there's always this notion of hope where the lawsuit is broken, and the Lord through his prophet offers the possibility of renewal, a**

**new covenant, or a new temple, or the remnant returning, or things like this.**

**— Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

As we said earlier in this lesson, most modern Christians associate the word “prophecy” with predictions about the future. But in the world of the Bible, the word “prophecy” is mainly applied to messages that God sent to his people in order to motivate them to faithfulness. Prophets were God’s covenant ambassadors. They reminded his people of their covenant obligations, and of the consequences of their behavior.

**Many people think that biblical prophecy is primarily for the prediction of the future, but that’s not correct. Prediction of the future is a significant part of it, but primarily, biblical prophecy is marked by the concern of the prophet for the moral nature of the people. And it’s in that context then that prediction comes. If the people will respond to God’s directions, then the future will be hopeful. If they will not respond, then the future will not be hopeful. So the purpose of biblical prophecy is to call people back to faithful living for God.**

**— Dr. John Oswalt**

When a prophecy was intended to motivate God’s people to action, it shouldn’t be seen as absolute and unchanging prediction of the future. Instead, it should be seen as an offer of blessing or a threat of curse. If the people responded positively to the prophecy, they could expect blessings. But if they refused to repent or became complacent in their obedience, they could expect to be cursed.

Listen to what God said about the nature and purpose of prophecy in Jeremiah 18:7-10:

**If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it (Jeremiah 18:7-10).**

Here, God explicitly stated that prophecies are announcements of coming disaster or good. But the recipients of that prophecy can influence the way the prophecy is fulfilled. Announcements of disaster might be reconsidered if the people repent. And announcements of blessing might be reconsidered if the people begin to act sinfully.

This may sound strange at first, but it makes perfect sense once we understand that prophets were covenant ambassadors. God’s covenant required loyalty from his people and provided consequences both for obedience and for disobedience.



Some people think the main purpose of biblical prophecy is to predict the future, and certainly that is an element of biblical prophecy. But traditionally, a lot of people have spoken of prophecy as being both forth-telling and foretelling. Foretelling would be, of course, the prediction of the future. But the forth-telling is very important when you read the prophets, because very often much of what they say is not predictive in nature. They're confronting the people with their sin, they're accusing them of having broken God's law; they're calling them back to repentance — so we could say it's hortatory. And I happen to believe that the predictive element is secondary, that what God is really trying to do in classical biblical prophecy, like Amos, Isaiah, Hosea, those kinds of books, is he's calling the people back to a proper relationship with himself. And very often the predictions are contingent; they're conditional. God is showing them what their future looks like if they don't repent. And actually, that's the last thing God wants to do is judge them. So he's warning them, if you don't repent, here's what's going to happen. But if they do repent, God may very well not bring that judgment upon them. Or in the case of a prophecy of salvation, he's showing them here's what your future will look like if you continue to obey me or if you come back. So it can be negative or positive motivation. So I think it's very important that we merge the foretelling and the forth-telling and understand that's what biblical prophecy is really all about.

— Dr. Robert Chisholm, Jr.

Now, it's important to point out that sometimes God actually did intend prophecies to give his people a glimpse of a certain future. At other times, he was so intent on bringing a prophecy to pass as stated that he miraculously ensured that his people would act in ways that brought about its unmodified fulfillment. At times like these, the prophets explicitly indicated God's strong intentions.

One way that God indicated his strong intentionality was by adding assurances to his prophecies. These might be words stating his strong intentions, symbolic prophetic actions, or even miraculous signs. Whenever this type of assurance accompanied a prophecy, it indicated that it would be harder for human beings to change the prophecy's outcome.

Sometimes, we see other prophecies confirmed by promises in places like Amos 4:2, where God swore by his holiness; Jeremiah 49:13, where he swore by himself; and Ezekiel 5:11, where God said that judgment would come as surely as he lives.

When God swore by himself, he effectively removed the possibility of human responses thwarting the outcome of the prophecy. God's promises raised the certainty of the predicted outcome to the level of the covenant itself. As surely as God can't lie, he won't change what he's sworn by himself.

The fact that God sometimes reinforced his prophecies by assurances and promises ought to comfort us, because our Christian faith is grounded in the eventual

fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Most importantly, we believe there will come a day when Christ will return to earth to judge his enemies and reward his faithful followers. We have hope that one day God will restore his creation and wipe every tear from our eyes. These prophecies have been reinforced so frequently throughout Scripture that we know they can never be revoked or reduced. One day, all these predictions about Christ's return will come true.

With this basic understanding of prophets as covenant ambassadors in mind, we're ready to look at the potential results of their prophetic work.

## Potential Results

As we've just seen, prophecies of blessing don't automatically obligate God to continue to bless his people. If at some point they turn away from him, one potential result is that God may reconsider those blessings in order to address his people's disobedience.

And in the same way, prophecies of judgment should generally be seen as warnings for those who claim to be God's people. Prophetic warnings explain what God will do if the people continue in their sinful ways. And these warnings are given ahead of time because God is merciful — he wants to give his people an opportunity to repent, and to avoid the consequences of their disobedience. In this sense, most prophecies of judgments are extensions of God's benevolence to his people. They are intended not to give people forewarning of unavoidable doom, but to motivate them to change their ways.

Scripture demonstrates at least five ways that the potential results of a prophecy might be affected by the responses of its recipients. First, sometimes God revoked a prophetic warning or offer.

For instance, listen to the words of the prophet Joel in Joel 2:12-14.

**“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing (Joel 2:12-14).**

Even though Joel had prophesied judgment on God's people, he understood that there was still hope. Heartfelt repentance might change the outcome of the prophecy.

Second, the blessing or curse that had been prophesied could also be delayed. For example, in 2 Kings 20:1-7, Isaiah prophesied that King Hezekiah would die of illness. In response to this prophecy, Hezekiah wept and prayed and asked God to remember his faithful service. So, God delayed his death by 15 years.

Third, sometimes God reduced the blessing or judgment he had announced. For instance, 2 Chronicles 12:5-12 tells the story of the prophet Shemaiah, who announced that God would allow Egypt to destroy Israel. When Rehoboam and the leaders of Israel

heard this, they humbled themselves. So, God reduced his judgment against them. Instead of being destroyed by Egypt, they would only become Egypt's subjects.

Fourth, sometimes God actually increased the fulfillment of a prophecy. One of the most memorable times God increased the fulfillment of a prophecy is found in Daniel 9:1-27. In this case, God had cursed his people by exiling them from the Promised Land for 70 years. But at the end of those 70 years, they still hadn't repented of their sin. So, God increased their exile by extending it.

And fifth, prophetic predictions can also be fulfilled in an unmodified way. For instance, Daniel 4:28, 33 records the fulfillment of a prophetic dream that was interpreted by Daniel the prophet. The dream predicted that King Nebuchadnezzar would be driven from his people and eat grass like cattle. This dream was reinforced by God's prophetic words in verses 30 and 31 a year after the dream. And immediately after God's words, the prophecy came about as predicted.

Now that we've compared the role of biblical prophets to ancient covenant ambassadors and looked at the potential results of their work, let's turn our attention to how the apostle John fulfilled the role of a prophet in the book of Revelation.

## Apostle John

It's easy to see that when John wrote the book of Revelation, he was acting as God's covenant ambassador, and that his goal was to motivate the early church to unflinching faithfulness. John constantly reminded the churches of Asia Minor about the principal dynamics that all biblical covenants share. He reminded them of God's benevolence. He stressed the requirement of loyalty. And he emphasized the consequences of blessings for faithfulness and curses for unfaithfulness.

These features appear in many ways throughout the book. But they are most clearly presented in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Each letter begins with an affirmation of the greatness and benevolence of Jesus Christ. Then it draws attention to the requirement of loyalty, and offers blessings or threatens curses.

As an example, consider the letter to the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7. It begins in Revelation 2:1 with a statement of God's benevolence, saying:

**These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands (Revelation 2:1).**

God's benevolence is seen in Revelation 2:1 in the fact that Jesus walked among the lampstands, which represent the churches addressed in the letter. He hadn't abandoned them, but was always with them.

As the letter to the church of Ephesus continues, we find the requirement of human loyalty. For instance, in verses 2-4, Jesus praised the Ephesian church for its hard work and endurance, but criticized it for losing its first love. He also approved of the Ephesians' hatred for the practices of the Nicolaitans.

After this, the letter to the church at Ephesus turns toward the consequences of the covenant. The consequence of curses for disobedience can be seen in verse 5, where

Jesus threatened to remove the church's lampstand if its people failed to repent and to regain their first love. And the consequence of blessing for obedience can be seen in verse 7, where Jesus offered to bless his obedient followers with access to the tree of life.

**The question sometimes comes up, if God's blessing is contingent on us doing something, does this sort of imply that our salvation in any way is contingent on our good works? Do we in fact have some contribution to make to the positive outcome of salvation? It's interesting that those who are in the traditional Arminian and Calvinist sides of what was once a great debate, are actually in agreement that God has made us as human beings with volition, and that even the damaging effects of the Fall on us have not robbed us of our capacity for volition and our responsibility for exercising it according to God's will and ways. Well, that means that God is constantly challenging us through commands and invitations to exercise this God-given ability. So, yes we must in many cases respond to God in the way that he has promised will bring blessing. But where we come back then and affirm that it is really ultimately all of grace is that the capacity to respond in the appropriate way ultimately does not derive from our unaided abilities but from God's higher superintending and sovereign grace so that, yes, we do and must participate in the plan whereby blessing comes to us, but we do so in absolute dependence on God's good enabling.**

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

When the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation, many churches in Asia Minor were wavering in their commitment to God's covenant. Some people within the church had even begun to doubt that Jesus would return. And others wondered how Jesus' kingdom could possibly be growing when all they personally experienced was suffering and opposition. So, throughout the book of Revelation, the apostle John served as God's prophet to these churches. He reminded them of God's benevolence. He warned his readers of the dangers of unfaithfulness. And he gave them hope for the future to encourage them to remain faithful until the Lord returned.

So far in our lesson, we've discussed the historical and theological background of the book of Revelation. So at this point, we're ready to look at its literary background. How did the book of Revelation compare to other writings of the period?

## LITERARY

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We'll explore the literary background of Revelation in two steps. First, we'll compare the book of Revelation to the genre of Old Testament prophecy. And second,

we'll compare it to the specific type of biblical prophecy known as "apocalyptic literature." Let's begin with Old Testament prophecy.

## PROPHECY

The Bible contains many different types or genres of literature: historical narrative, law, poetry, wisdom literature, epistle, prophecy, and others. Each genre has its own literary conventions and ways of communicating. Historical narrative communicates in a more straightforward fashion than poetry. Epistles or letters are even more direct, and often tell their readers how to apply biblical teachings to specific circumstances.

Differences like these are important to keep in mind as we read the Bible. After all, it's much easier to understand *what* a passage teaches if we first understand *how* it teaches. So, in order for us to make sense of the book of Revelation, one of the important things for us to do is properly identify its genre.

**It's important to identify the genre of biblical books because each literary genre has its own conventions and styles that lay claim to how it communicates its message. For instance, if I were to read a receipt from my grocer, I would read it very differently with very different expectations than I would say a letter from my daughter. Likewise, when we go into the Bible and we read biblical texts, we find that biblical texts are written in particular genres. So if I read a legal text, for instance from the book of Moses, I'll read it with certain expectations and giving a mind to the certain conventions and the rules that are placed on that genre. These would be very different from reading for instance Proverbs, which tend to be pithy wisdom sayings drawn from experiences in life or even from God's Word. I'll also read these very differently than I'll read for instance a psalm of lament in which God's people lament the suffering that they're undergoing. So when we consider a text in the Bible, we have to consider a genre so that we can understand what sort of conventions, what structures, what devices the author had in its toolbox as he was communicating his message to God's people. When we rightly understand how the text is put together, we can more clearly understand what the text is communicating to us.**

— Dr. Scott Redd

**There are different genres or different kinds of writings in Scripture. So you have narratives which normally you shouldn't allegorize. You shouldn't take them as symbols because these are true accounts of events that happened. So you can look for the moral of the story, but you're not trying to turn it into a series of symbols. David's five smooth stones don't represent different things; Goliath experienced the first of those smooth stones in a very realistic manner. But when**

**you're looking at other kinds of writings in the Bible, you have poetry where it takes what we might call poetic license — there's a lot of metaphor, a lot of imagery. Most of the prophets before the exile prophesied in poetry, so their language is rich in imagery and symbolism. The book of Revelation carries on that tradition, even though it's not primarily in poetry, it carries on the prophetic tradition of using a lot of symbolic imagery. It's explicit even in telling us that sometimes. For example, in Revelation 1:20, it explains what some of the symbols mean. So Revelation is full of symbols and we need to understand it that way because that's the way God inspired it, that's the way God intended for us to understand it as.**

**— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

The genre of the book of Revelation can be broadly identified as prophecy. In fact, the apostle John specifically called it a prophecy in Revelation 1:3. As we've seen, biblical prophecy sometimes involved predictions of the future. But more than anything else, it was a message from God to his people that was intended to motivate them to faithfulness.

We'll examine the genre of biblical prophecy in two ways. First, we'll look at its characteristics. And second, we'll consider the various types of fulfillments of prophecy found in Scripture. Let's begin with the characteristics of prophecy.

## **Characteristics**

Biblical prophecy has many different characteristics, and we don't have time to mention them all. So, we'll focus on just two of its most important features, beginning with its typical forms.

Because the book of Revelation fits within the biblical genre of prophecy, it will help for us to summarize some of the typical forms prophecy took in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, a prophecy could be a message of rebuke to God's people, or an oracle of woe or judgment on his enemies, a proclamation of blessing for obedience, a promise of vindication for those faithful to the covenant, a declaration of God's plan for redemption, a prayer or conversation between a prophet and God, and, on occasion, a prediction of future events.

One of the most common forms of Old Testament prophecy was a lawsuit, in which the vocabulary of the prophecy mirrored the legal language of the courtroom. Typically, God was presented as summoning disobedient Israel into court in order to be judged. These lawsuits usually stressed the kindness of God and threatened judgment if Israel continued to disobey. Sometimes, they even offered to reward faithfulness and repentance with blessings. Frequently, predictions of the future were set in the context of these threats of judgment and offers of blessing, indicating that the predictions were conditioned upon the people's response to the prophecy.

In many respects, John's prophecies in the book of Revelation functioned in the same ways as the prophecies of the Old Testament.

A second feature of Old Testament prophecy is that it makes frequent use of imagery to convey its meaning. The term imagery can have a wide range of meaning. But when we use it to describe prophecy, we're referring to language that describes things in ways that incite imaginative sensory experiences. Essentially, imagery highlights the ways we can imagine seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching something.

For example, in Jeremiah 18, the prophet Jeremiah used the image of a potter forming a lump of clay to explain that God has the right to shape Israel in whatever way he wants.

And in Ezekiel 37, Ezekiel used the image of a valley filled with dry bones to describe the spiritual lifelessness of God's people. Then he brought them hope by explaining that the bones came together to form living human beings again. And the book of Revelation makes frequent use of imagery too.

Listen to how John described Jesus in Revelation 1:15-16:

**His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance (Revelation 1:15-16).**

These beautiful images of Jesus highlight his great power and authority. His voice has the power of the sound of a great waterfall; he holds in his hands seven stars, symbolizing kingly authority; and his face shines brilliantly as he gives light to the world.

We find similar images throughout the book of Revelation. We read of many-headed beasts with horns and crowns, angels with trumpets and bowls, songs and cries for vengeance, the eating and tasting of scrolls, horses and riders, mountains, and even a city descending from heaven. In fact, it would be hard to find a paragraph anywhere in the book of Revelation that didn't contain some type of imagery.

**One of the complex things in the book of Revelation is that there is indeed a mixture of symbolic terms along with more literal terms. And when you see the symbolic terms, very often they're actually interpreted for us. So for instance, in chapter 1 when Jesus refers to — in the description refers to — seven lampstands and seven stars, later they actually say what the seven lampstands and the seven stars are. So then you know you're definitely dealing with symbols, which is very helpful. There's other times when things are described in ways that are surprising and are hard to conjure up in some sort of literal image. So you'll have a beast with seven heads, and then you see that later on they'll talk about the seven heads or the seven hills, and that's when you can see that as you're moving away from something that looks visually much like you would anticipate in the real world, that you're moving into something much more symbolic.**

**— Dr. David W. Chapman**



The book of Revelation draws a lot of its imagery from the Old Testament. And this means that our familiarity with Old Testament prophecy can help us recognize imagery in Revelation. And more than this, it can even help us interpret Revelation's imagery, since Revelation and the Old Testament often use the same images in the same ways.

Recognizing imagery throughout the book of Revelation doesn't mean that we have to interpret Revelation allegorically, or that we're spiritualizing its meaning. On the contrary, recognizing literary features like imagery is a part of our normal strategy of grammatical, historical interpretation. After all, if John intended to speak metaphorically, then it would be a huge mistake to interpret his words in woodenly literal ways. Responsible readings of the book of Revelation acknowledge its images, and interpret them according to normal literary conventions.

Now that we've introduced some of the important characteristics of prophecy, let's focus on the types of prophetic fulfillments we see in Scripture.

## Fulfillments

Prophetic fulfillment is a very complicated subject. But for the purposes of this lesson, we can speak of three types of prophetic fulfillment. First, prophecies may be fulfilled in a direct manner.

When most people think about prophecy being fulfilled, the first thing that comes to mind is direct fulfillment. Prophecies can be directly fulfilled when the events they predict come to pass as stated. For instance, in Jeremiah 25:8-11, Jeremiah announced that Judah would fall to the Babylonians and become a desolate wasteland for 70 years. And according to 2 Chronicles 36:15-21, this is precisely what happened.

Second, there can also be contingent fulfillments of prophecy. A contingent fulfillment occurs when the outcome of a prophecy is somehow modified in light of the way human beings respond to the prophecy. We've already seen that the outcomes of prophecies may be modified by the responses of their recipients. When this happens, we can say that the results were contingent on the responses of the people. This is what we have in mind when we speak of contingent fulfillments of prophecy.

For instance, in 2 Samuel 12:1-15, the prophet Nathan warned David that God was going to kill David because he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah. In response to this prophecy, David repented. Because he repented, God reduced the judgment on him by sparing his life. But God still took the life of David's son and brought calamity on David's family. 2 Samuel 13-19 describe in great detail the fulfillment of Nathan's prophecy on David's family.

Third, prophecies can have typological fulfillments. For the purposes of this lesson, we'll define typology as:

**The treatment of past persons, institutions or events in Scripture as foreshadows that prefigure later persons, institutions or events.**



For instance, Paul called Adam a type of Christ in Romans 5:14, because Adam's life foreshadowed Jesus' life. But where Adam sinned in the garden bringing sin and death on humanity, Jesus obeyed bringing life and justification for believers in him.

So a typological fulfillment of prophecy is one in which the things that the prophecy states directly are foreshadows of future events. For instance, in Mathew 2:15, Matthew said that when Jesus' family left Egypt, it fulfilled Hosea 11:1, which says, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

This verse in Hosea wasn't predicting the coming of the Messiah. In fact, the prophecy was looking back in history to say that God had redeemed Israel from Egypt during the Exodus. But typologically speaking, this passage was fulfilled again in Jesus' day because the Exodus was a pattern that prefigured the life of Israel's great Messiah. New Testament writers understood that some Old Testament prophecies had already been fulfilled even before they wrote their New Testament books. But they still felt free to point to greater typological fulfillments in their own day.

Having compared Revelation to the genre of prophecy, we're ready to address the sub-category of prophecy known as apocalyptic literature.

## APOCALYPTIC

We'll explore the nature of apocalyptic literature first by looking at its characteristics, and second by summarizing its historical development. Let's begin with the characteristics of biblical apocalyptic literature.

### Characteristics

Apocalyptic literature is complex, and may be summarized in various ways. In these lessons, we'll define biblical apocalyptic literature as:

**Highly symbolic literature that reports divine revelations, usually received through private disclosures, about the interactions among natural, preternatural and supernatural realities, and their impact on the past, present and future.**

This definition is rather detailed, so we should take the time to explain it. First, let's consider the fact that biblical apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic.

Broadly speaking, a symbol is a sign or other representation that points to something beyond itself. For example, words are symbols that represent things like ideas, objects, actions, attributes, and so on. National flags are symbols of countries. And the cross is a highly recognizable symbol for the Christian religion.

As just one example, listen to how Jesus explained two symbols in Revelation 1:20:

**The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches (Revelation 1:20).**

In the context of this verse, John had received a vision of Christ, in which the Lord was holding stars in his right hand and walking among lampstands. But the stars and lamps were symbolic. They represented angels and churches.

**The key to discerning legitimate symbols and interpreting them in the book of Revelation without falling into an allegorical approach that really doesn't do justice to the meaning as God intended in the Word really is threefold. First, we need to recognize that so much of the symbolism in Revelation is already given in the Old Testament Scriptures, especially in the visions of Daniel and Ezekiel and Zechariah. So God was preparing a kind of symbolic vocabulary for his people already, and John is drawing heavily on that. Secondly, we also need to pay attention to the other parts of Scripture that speak in a more, you might say, straightforward way. We interpret the visions and the symbols in the book of Revelation in the light of the historical narratives that are given to us, for example, in the Gospels, or the doctrinal sections that we find in the Epistles. And so we compare what are sometimes more difficult texts of Scripture, the visions of Revelation, with the clearer texts, the more straightforward texts. And then thirdly, we need to take account of the promise given in the very first of the seven blessings in the book of Revelation that the one who reads it aloud and those who hear it can receive, take to heart, and keep the words; they can understand it. These are not clues and codes that would have been closed to them in their first century context. We want to take seriously the fact that this was actually given to our first century brothers and sisters and not just to us now in the twenty-first century, and they could understand it, they could grasp it, even just by just hearing it read aloud and get the message and receive the blessing.**

**— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

Biblical apocalyptic literature makes frequent use of symbols. Some symbols are largely descriptive, like when an author chooses symbols that are visibly similar to what he's observed. For instance, in Daniel 7:4, Daniel recorded a vision of a beast that looked like a lion with the wings of an eagle. The lion and the wings were descriptive because they communicated the creature's actual appearance. And they were symbolic because they also communicated its nature. The symbol of the lion implied that the creature was powerful and fearsome. And the wings on the lion probably associated it with Babylon, which often portrayed winged lions in its art.

In other cases, a symbol may be devised in order to illustrate a point. For instance, in Joel 2:25, God described invading armies as locusts. The armies didn't look like locusts, but they behaved like locusts. They were an unstoppable mass that devoured everything they desired.

Still other symbols are used because they are traditional representations of things or ideas, similar to a country's flag. For instance, in Revelation 1:10-20, John received a vision of Jesus that was highly symbolic. Jesus appeared as a human being dressed in a long robe with a golden sash around his chest. His face shone like the sun. His hair was white. His eyes blazed like fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace. His voice was like rushing water. He had a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. He held seven stars in his hand. And he stood among seven lampstands.

These details recalled symbols and imagery from the Old Testament, and therefore implied something about Jesus. For instance, his white clothes and hair, and his blazing face recall the description of God in Daniel 7:9. The lampstands recalled the tabernacle and temple furnishings, indicating that Jesus was still present with his people just as God had been present with them in his special houses of worship in the Old Testament. And the stars recalled Old Testament descriptions of kings and other human leaders, as in Numbers 24:17, Isaiah 14:12, and many other places. So when Revelation speaks of stars as angels that represent churches, it's because Jesus was revealing his present spiritual reign as King over all creation. From a human perspective, Rome threatened to control the fate of the church. But the symbol revealed that Jesus held complete power and authority over the church in his hand.

Apocalyptic writings often contain images and symbols that modern readers find difficult to understand. But most of the symbols in the book of Revelation weren't confusing to John's original audience, because they were drawn from the Old Testament and from the world around them. Their purpose wasn't to confuse John's readers, but to communicate truth to them in a compelling, memorable way.

A second characteristic of biblical apocalyptic literature is that it reports divine revelations. Biblical apocalyptic literature is inspired by the Holy Spirit, just like the rest of Scripture. It's part of God's infallible, fully reliable, and authoritative Word to his people. It reports true revelations that were given to human authors either by God himself, or through his perfectly trustworthy angelic messengers. Biblical apocalyptic literature isn't speculative. It's not a human author's best guess. On the contrary, it's God's true communication to his people that reveals his intentions toward creation.

Third, the divine revelations reported in biblical apocalyptic literature tend to have been received through private disclosures. The word apocalypse itself means "uncovering" or "disclosure." So, at its heart, biblical apocalyptic literature is a work that reveals God's plan to his people, so that they'll be able to make sense of the world and not lose hope.

But unlike some other miraculous revelations, as when God appeared to the entire nation of Israel as a pillar of cloud in Exodus 13, biblical apocalyptic disclosures tended to be received by solitary individuals. Prophets received dreams. They heard voices or sounds. They saw visions. They were visited by angelic messengers. They had experiences that seemed to take them out of their bodies. Sometimes they even met God himself. But this happened in a private setting. It was then up to the prophet, as God's messenger and ambassador, to deliver the message to God's people.

The fourth characteristic of biblical apocalyptic literature we'll mention is that it deals with interactions among natural, preternatural and supernatural realities.

The word natural refers to the universe where we live, including the physical world and all its creatures. The word preternatural refers to the world beyond nature. This is the world inhabited by spirits such as angels and demons. Finally, the word supernatural means above nature, and refers specifically to God and his actions. God is the only sovereign being who is fully above and in control of the natural realm, so he is the only being that is truly supernatural.

All these realms are constantly interacting. God exerts control over the natural and preternatural realms. The angels and demons in the preternatural realm influence things that happen in the natural realm. Demons tempt us to sin. Angels guard us. And according to Scripture, angels and demons even impact international politics.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments we find glimpses into the spiritual forces that influence the history of the world. For example, in 2 Kings 6, Elisha was being pursued by the king of Aram. Eventually, the king of Aram caught up to Elisha and surrounded him, and Elisha's servant became terrified.

But listen to what happened next in 2 Kings 6:15-17:

**"Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked. "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15-17).**

Although such insights into the preternatural and supernatural realms appear here and there in various parts of the Old and New Testaments, biblical apocalyptic literature heavily concentrates on these matters. For example, portions of Joel, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah concentrate attention on the interactions between the natural, preternatural and supernatural realms. And in much the same way, the book of Revelation draws attention again and again to the invisible realms of God and of the spiritual powers and authorities that God employs for his purposes.

**Angels and demons have a great deal of effect on the things that happen around us because the world in which we live is a world that is controlled by God and is going somewhere according to the plan of God, and if we're going to be involved in that, if we're going to push forward in that, then we have to believe that these kinds of creatures actually exist. One of the most fascinating aspects of this is that often when we think about the activities of angels and demons, we think in terms of our personal lives, our individual lives. And that certainly is true. It's there in the Bible, no doubt about it. But one of the big things we have to remember is that in the Bible, demonic powers especially — and at times angelic powers as well — we learn that they have been assigned dominion or rule over the nations, and so they represent these nations in the court of God. Like Psalm 82 where it**

**says that Yahweh presides over his great assembly and the gods, little “gods,” are there with him, and these are the demons and angels and preternatural creatures who are in control of the various nations. And so in many respects, we don’t realize this, but the political arena of the world is controlled not by how many people vote for this person or vote for that person or how one monarch receives the right to the throne from his ancestors and those kinds of things. It’s not that way. In reality, behind the scenes, invisible scene, there are these demonic and angelic creatures who are actually in control of the great movements of political entities in the world.**

**— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Finally, a fifth characteristic of biblical apocalyptic literature is that it describes the impact of the natural, preternatural and supernatural realms on the past, present and future. Apocalyptic literature focuses on all aspects of history. It explains the ways that natural, preternatural and supernatural realms have impacted our world in the past, how they continue to affect us in the present, and how they’ll influence our future. And more than this, like the rest of the Bible, biblical apocalyptic literature views all of history as one grand story — the story of creation, the fall into sin, and subsequent redemption through Christ. Apocalyptic literature tends to describe the present in terms of its suffering and difficulties, and to focus on the future as the time when all our hopes will be fulfilled.

Sometimes modern Christians have a difficult time with the book of Revelation because we don’t normally think of the spiritual influences that lie behind our experiences in life. As people who are influenced by modern science, we tend to look for naturalistic explanations for the things that happen in our lives. We focus on things we can see, hear, smell, taste and touch. But the Scriptures make it clear that our senses can perceive only part of what happens around and in us.

To grasp what the book of Revelation offers us today, we have to set aside these naturalistic prejudices and follow the teaching of Scripture. What happens within us and around us is deeply influenced by spiritual powers and by God himself. What may appear to us as very natural occurrences, personal crises, troubles in the church, and even political struggles are not simply natural occurrences. They are the result of complex involvements that include God and spiritual realities.

When we accept the Bible’s outlook on these matters, Revelation can speak to us powerfully, just as it did to John’s first century audience. None of us can see the full spiritual realities that lie behind our experiences. But the book of Revelation lifts the veil on these spiritual realities to allow us to see God’s cosmic plan to bring salvation into history through Jesus Christ. He’s present now with his church by his Spirit, and he’ll return to claim final victory over all his enemies.

**The theme of the book of Revelation is: Jesus wins. Now that means ultimately we must be encouraged. It doesn’t mean that we’re not going to face trials, and the book of Revelation is a powerful reminder of how God allows judgments, and trials, and chaos, and the great**

prostitute of Babylon, and so forth, all of these things come into our lives, but ultimately the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven, and Jesus will establish his reign. God will be our God; we shall be his people forever and ever. So it couldn't be more encouraging than that.

— Dr. William Edgar

The book of Revelation does assure us that in the end God will triumph over all his enemies — a complete triumph. We should respond with joy and anticipation first of all expecting this, and with determination and commitment in the face of opposition, in the face of temptations right in this life knowing that the end will overcome all the opposition that we now face and the sufferings that we now face.

— Dr. Vern S. Poythress

The great lesson of the book of Revelation is that God will conquer all his and our enemies. That is a very encouraging message for the church. That is something that's extremely important for the church certainly in the suffering that it goes through in this age. So it's a message of great encouragement that God will bring everything to a satisfactory conclusion from his perspective, and the church will conquer at the end of time.

— Dr. Carl R. Trueman

Now that we've examined the characteristics of biblical apocalyptic literature, let's turn our attention to its historical development.

## Historical Development

Many critical scholars have thought that apocalyptic literature in the Bible came from Babylonian and Persian influences late in Israel's history, after Israel's sixth-century B.C. exile in Babylon. But newer research has shown that the main features of the apocalyptic genre began to develop early in biblical revelation as Israel interacted with the surrounding cultures of the Canaanites and other west Semitic peoples.

Many elements that became prominent in biblical apocalyptic literature also appear in the earliest books of the Old Testament. For instance, in Exodus 15, there is a highly symbolic song celebrating the fact that God drowned the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. It speaks of God shattering the Egyptians with his right hand, burning them like stubble, piling up waters with a blast of his nostrils, and causing them to be swallowed by the earth. It goes on to say that the nations will cower in fear of God, so that Israel will be

established in the Promised Land, and so that God will dwell with them there as their everlasting king.

Another example from the books of Moses is Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:17, where the rise of kingship in Israel is described with the imagery of a star.

This style of literature became progressively more developed throughout Israel's history. Job 26:12 and Psalm 89:10 speak of God slaying the serpent Rahab in a cosmic battle. And in Job 41, God proclaimed his power over Leviathan the sea monster. And the prophets continued to develop apocalyptic imagery to even greater levels in books like Joel, Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah. For instance, Daniel 7 records Daniel's dream in which a series of monstrous beasts rises out of the sea, ending when God judges and destroys the last and most terrible of them.

The period immediately following the close of the Old Testament is often called the "intertestamental period" because it was written after the Old Testament and before the New Testament. During this time, apocalyptic literature fully developed into a distinct genre, and many uninspired, extra-biblical apocalyptic writings were produced. These include *The Assumption of Moses*, *Enoch*, parts of *2 Esdras*, *The Apocalypse of Baruch*, and *The War Scroll* found in Qumran. Even though these writings aren't part of the Bible, we mention them because they help us trace the development of the apocalyptic genre.

These writings were heavily oriented toward the cosmic struggles behind the earthly experiences of their audiences. They drew heavily from imagery in Old Testament prophets, and developed much more elaborate uses of these images by mixing them together. These particular aspects of intertestamental apocalyptic literature are also found in New Testament apocalyptic writings.

Even though intertestamental apocalyptic writings have certain similarities to biblical apocalyptic writings, they also possess characteristics that distinguish them from Scripture in some important ways. For instance, many are pseudonymous, meaning that they were written under a false name to encourage people to read and accept the writing as an authentic product of the falsely named author. But this practice was dishonest, and Paul condemned it in 2 Thessalonians 2:2. Some extra-biblical apocalyptic writings also talked about past events as if they hadn't happened yet, in order to give the appearance that the writer accurately foretold the entire history of Israel. This, of course, is another form of dishonesty. And biblical apocalyptic literature never employs this tactic.

In the New Testament, the genre of apocalyptic literature continued to develop. Now, we have to remember that New Testament apocalyptic material is very different from intertestamental literature. The New Testament is entirely honest and trustworthy. At the same time, New Testament apocalyptic literature uses a style that is very similar to intertestamental apocalyptic writings.

Outside the book of Revelation, we find apocalyptic forms in places like Matthew 24. In that chapter, Jesus drew from apocalyptic visions in Daniel and Isaiah in order to explain the future events like the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and even the end of the world. For instance, in Matthew 24:29, Jesus talked about the sun and moon ceasing to give light, and the stars falling from the sky.

There may even be hints of apocalyptic style in Paul's letters. Paul often gave hope to his readers by demonstrating that Christ's death and resurrection defeated demonic powers, as in Colossians 1:15-20 and 2:13-15. He frequently talked about

spiritual warfare in ways that resembled apocalyptic writings. And in 2 Thessalonians 2, he spoke of the cosmic forces of evil that will be defeated at Christ's return.

But of course, the New Testament writing that best exemplifies the final development of biblical apocalyptic literature is the book of Revelation. Revelation is complex because it contains a concentration of apocalyptic features. But it's also deeply rooted in the rest of Scripture. And this should comfort us as we read it. The book may seem foreign to us, but the rest of Scripture can help us understand its message, as well as its application to our own lives in the modern world.

Understanding the literary background of Revelation is a huge help to us. The fact that Revelation consists primarily of apocalyptic prophecy assures us that the book of Revelation is intended to motivate us to obey God from our hearts. Its words and images aren't intended to confuse us or to present us with puzzles about an immutable future. On the contrary, Revelation is intended as an understandable, encouraging guide to a life of service to God. As we investigate the book of Revelation more deeply in other lessons, understanding its function as apocalyptic prophecy will help us grasp its message, and live according to its teachings.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've surveyed three important aspects of the background of Revelation. We've explored its historical setting focusing on its author, date of composition, and original audience. We've considered its theological context in terms of the eschatology of the New Testament, the concept of covenant, and the role of prophets. And we've described the literary background of Revelation, particularly its relationship to the genres of prophecy and apocalyptic.

The book of Revelation may seem strange to our ears today. But in its original setting, it would have been much easier to understand. The forms John used and the things he said would have been familiar to his first audience. And the better we understand their context and perspectives, the better we'll be able to understand John's message, and to apply it to our own lives. Whether we're suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel, or enjoying relative peace, the book of Revelation teaches us to remain faithful to Jesus, and to hope in the wonderful future God has planned for those who trust him.



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# The Book of Revelation

LESSON  
ONE

## The Background of Revelation Faculty Forum



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# **The Book of Revelation**

## **Lesson One: The Background of Revelation**

### **Faculty Forum**

With

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Dr. David W. Chapman  
Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.  
Dr. Brandon Crowe  
Dr. William Edgar  
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Dr. R. Todd Mangum  
Dr. John E. McKinley

Dr. Greg Perry  
Dr. Scott Redd  
Dr. Thomas Schreiner  
Dr. Glen Scorgie  
Dr. Mark Strauss  
Dr. Miles Van Pelt  
Dr. Peter Walker  
Dr. Ben Witherington III

### **Question 1:**

#### **What is the historical setting of the book of Revelation?**

Whenever we interpret any book, it's useful to know something about its historical setting. And the book of Revelation is no exception. But scholars aren't entirely agreed on the date when John wrote this book. Still, even though we can't be absolutely confident about its date, there are many things about its historical setting that we *do* know. So, what is the historical setting of the book of Revelation?

#### **Dr. Mark Strauss**

When we talk about the historical setting of the book of Revelation, the simple answer is, it's the first century. The first century is the historical context. That's very important because oftentimes people try to make the twenty-first century the historical context, and they try to read things from today's news into the book of Revelation. And we have to be cautious about that. This book would have been understandable to the people of the first century because that is its historical context. So, its context is the first century struggle between Christianity and Judaism, on the one hand, and Christianity and the Roman Empire, and particularly the context of Caesar worship in the first century. So that's critically important to understand, that first century context. Now when in the first century is another question. And there's two main dates that have been proposed for the book of Revelation. The traditional date, and probably the one held by the majority of scholars, is that it's very late in the first century, in the 90s, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian and the persecutions that the church was undergoing under the Roman Emperor Domitian. The other possibility is a significantly earlier date in the mid-60s and the persecutions under the Emperor Nero. Some have even suggested that the "666," the number of the beast in Revelation, is code language for the name Nero, and that's one of the reasons some would place the book in the context, or shortly after the reign of, the Emperor Nero. So those are the two main dates that most scholars hold to with reference to the book of Revelation.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

It's hard to be dogmatic about the precise date of the book of Revelation. Obviously, because it's the last book in the Bible, it's tempting to think it's probably the last thing that was written, but that's not necessarily the case. I guess we have to ask the question: Is it before or after A.D. 70, the great Fall of Jerusalem? And the death of the Emperor Nero in A.D. 68 is also a key event in that first century... Also, there are some allusions to the Fall of Jerusalem. It's a bit difficult to know how to interpret some passages — for example, in Revelation 11 — which talk about the city under judgment. But my hunch is that these probably are making a reference to the Fall of Jerusalem which Jesus had predicted, and that Revelation in some ways is a kind of recasting... of Jesus' prophecy about the apocalyptic discourse, and is saying, "Now, that which I have predicted? Well, now it still has application into the future, because even though Jerusalem has been destroyed, the big end of the world is still to come." And I think it's a reworking of Jesus' prophecy concerning the Fall of Jerusalem. So my hunch is that it's after 70... What's unclear, we'll say, is whether or not the people that received this are already experiencing a very strong persecution, or whether it's more a warning that they're about to. And so that affects the dating. It may be a little bit earlier, and some of the Domitianic persecution in the 90s was still to come, and therefore, is not being described after the event, it's being described before the event. So, if you ask me exactly, I go for the early 80s A.D.

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

The historical setting of the book of Revelation is that it is addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, which is on the west coast of what is now Turkey. Probably the dating is in the, certainly it's in the latter half of the first century. Some believe it's as early as the reign of Nero in the 60s. I think most scholars believe it's closer to the reign of Domitian, the Emperor Domitian, in the 90s, and we have early church tradition that dates it at that period. It's a period where there is some violent persecution of the church by Roman governmental officials in some places in the empire — not consistent yet. There is also other types of violence, lawless violence, against Christians as well. And we find reference to churches that are undergoing great persecution of a violent nature, especially in Christ's letters to Smyrna and to Philadelphia. But the church is also under pressure to conform to the society in a variety of ways. There are false doctrines that are being taught by the Nicolaitans, for example, in Ephesus and elsewhere. There is the appeal of wanting to fit in with the culture, to conform. And the references to meat offered to idols is a reference probably to participation in Roman trade guilds that would involve feasting in honor of various gods that were the patron gods of the guilds. There's just the temptation that the church of Laodicea faces to be comfortable in affluence, as well. So it's a variety of churches facing a variety of challenges to their faith — some obvious, overt violence, some far more subtle. And Christ gives his revelation to John who tells us in the first chapter that he's on the island of Patmos. We know that that was used by the Romans as kind of a prison island, especially for political prisoners. John is sharing in their suffering, then, in order to encourage the church, as well as to warn the church against the more subtle dangers of conformity with the culture.

**Question 2:****Why is it important to understand the historical setting of the book of Revelation**

**A book's historical setting includes many things, like the date when it was written, and the circumstances of its writer and original audience. In the case of Revelation, we know the apostle John wrote it to seven churches in Asia Minor during the first century. But how should details like these influence our interpretation? Why is it important to understand the historical setting of the book of Revelation?**

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

It's important to understand the historical setting in which each book of the Bible was written as far as we can determine that setting for several reasons. One is that it helps us really see the Bible as a real document written to real people in real circumstances, not simply written and tucked away and sealed for another day, but actually written to living, breathing people who struggled with the same kinds of issues we do. And when we can understand their circumstances, we can see a more direct line of application sometimes to our own lives. That's part of it. Another reason is we're able to discern the applications for those original readers. For example, the book of Revelation was written to people struggling under sometimes what was perceived as a chaotic world where maybe God wasn't in control, or a world in which the authorities or people in general were hostile to their faith. So they had real questions about, could they persevere in this kind of world? Was God in charge? And if he was, was he working for their good? And so, as an example, in the book of Revelation, we see what those early Christians received from it if we look at the historical situation instead of simply looking past it to our time... And finally, an important reason why we want to look at the historical setting is because the human authors of Scripture, as they wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they used the language, they used the literary forms, and they also, at times, used historical reference so that if we understand those things, we tend to read them in their original context rather than try to force them into our context, so we can understand how biblical writers used poetry or used imagery on their terms rather than forcing them to do it on our terms.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

One of the things I like to emphasize with my students when I teach through the book of Revelation is that the historical setting is absolutely vital to understanding the book because John the apostle is writing certainly to the church for all ages, but he's especially writing to people that he knows, who he has in mind. So when we read through Revelation 2 and 3, we get a sense of the historical setting that he has specifically in mind. And so every time you read through each of the churches in Revelation 2 or 3, you're getting a sense of who it is that he's writing to and, therefore, how we should interpret the book. We should put ourselves back in the place of people who were in that original audience, if you would. And that audience



would have been in the churches, the major urban centers of Asia Minor in the first century — urban centers that were full of pagan worship that had imagery of the worship of the pantheon of deities that were worshiped in the Roman Empire — but also the worship of the Roman emperor himself, urban centers that also had Jewish places of worship in it as well. And so, many in these early churches probably came out of Jewish worship centers and were attracted to early Christianity and, therefore, when they encountered persecution, they might have even been attracted back into early Judaism. But these were also urban centers that had a great deal of wealth, and that would attract people and perhaps lure them away from the worship of Christ. And you see all of that represented in those two chapters. It's very important to, as it were, kind of picture yourself back in those churches in the day, in those small, little house churches hearing the word of Revelation read for the first time.

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

The majority of scholars think that the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian who claimed to be a god, and that would have just exacerbated the problems in Asia Minor where, in many of the cities that are addressed in the book of Revelation, there were temples for the worship of the emperor. And of course, people worshiped many other gods. It was a setting of paganism. It was also a setting where persecution could easily arise and had arisen in some of the cities. Some of the other cities, however, were not experiencing persecution. Some of the other cities actually were compromising with the same world system that was killing their brothers and sisters elsewhere. And I think that gives a lesson to us today because today, in different parts of the world, the church is experiencing different things. Some places the church is suffering; some places the church is compromising with the values of a world... that are inimical with values of the kingdom of God. And I think we who are not suffering so much have a lot that we can learn from our brothers and sisters who are.

**Question 3:****What is the main message of the book of Revelation?**

Everyone admits that the book of Revelation can be difficult to understand. And it's easy for modern readers to get lost in its imagery. But we can still benefit from reading it. After all, even though Revelation's details can be hard to understand, its central ideas are rather clear. What is the main message of the book of Revelation?

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

I think the main message of the book of Revelation could be summed up in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians where he talks about the importance of our walking by faith and not by sight. The whole point of the book of Revelation is to help the church to see, in a sense, behind the surface of everyday occurrences, of everyday events, to recognize that though there are very obviously visibly strong and formidable enemies of the church, that Christ has already defeated them. In fact, paradox is a key element

in the book of Revelation. Things are not what they seem. In Revelation 5 we read about Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah who has conquered, and then what John sees when he looks to see this Lion, this conquering Lion, is a Lamb standing as though slain. It is by his death that Christ has redeemed people from all the peoples of the world. By the same token, in Revelation 12, John is told in the vision that Satan, the Dragon, the Accuser, has been cast out of heaven, and the accuser of the brothers has been defeated by the brothers because they have not loved their lives even to the point of death. In other words, the martyrs have conquered the Dragon. Their death looked like defeat, but it was really victory. And so the point of the book of Revelation is that we are to live by what Christ has shown us through the eyes of John by the Word of God — Christ is called the Word of God there, as he is in John's gospel — what Christ has shown us of the realities, and in that light, then, we should endure persecution with courage, with hope. And we need to remain pure from the defilements that the surrounding pagan culture would try to insert into our lives.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

The book of Revelation is a very complicated book, 22 chapters that people find very difficult to understand. But the main message of it could be summarized firstly, that God is in control. So, it's written to be a real encouragement to people who are struggling, perhaps suffering for their faith, and need to lift up their eyes and believe that God really is in control, that behind human history is not total chaos, but God, the sovereign Lord, is there. That's probably the first and overriding message. But second is the whole theme of Jesus Christ, who shares in the sovereignty of God and who himself is the one who is to be worshiped and adored. So, it's very strong on its doctrine of how we are to worship Christ, the Lamb who is seated on the throne. And so there's not just a vision of God being in control, but that Jesus is the Lord and that Jesus is in control. Jesus is Lord. Beyond that, I think there's the understanding that then just Jesus is going to take human history somewhere beautiful, somewhere strong, and it's going to work out okay for those who believe in him. So I think the baseline of Revelation is one of encouragement: God's in control, Jesus is Lord, and this same Jesus is taking human history to a place where it's going to be worth getting to.

**Dr. Glen Scorgie**

One of the most recognizable characteristics of the entire book of Revelation is this amazing imagery, but the central image of the book of Revelation appears to be the Lamb upon the throne, and not just any lamb, but a lamb with a great wound... And it's a marvelous symbol of Christ in his redemptive sufferings: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But now we see the Lamb upon the throne, a symbol of victory, authority, triumph, vindication. And so we have in John's vision in the Revelation, a revelation of the way things really are, where the one who has been weak is now strong, the one who has been humiliated is now exalted. And this great reversal of fortunes is a — not only the narrative of the life of Christ in his descent and ascent — but it is a paradigm of the experience of believers as well. They too will experience a measure of suffering, as the first century readers well knew, but the message was that in Christ, this will lead to victory for you, as well. The hideousness

of the images of evil in the book of Revelation are an acknowledgment that the opposition to the work of God and to the security of the believers is serious and considerable. But that notwithstanding, the Lamb triumphs in the end. So that the Christians can know that through Christ, greater is he that is in them than he that is in the world. And there's an image of the saints having their robes dipped in blood. Now, this is a symbol of, in a sense, their appropriation of the substitutionary forgiveness achieved through Christ. But maybe, just maybe, it is also a symbol of their willingness to participate in the paradigm of costly suffering in order to one day wear the robes of heavenly senators, the vindicated triumphant ones who share in the glory of the wounded Lamb upon the throne.

**Dr. Michael J. Glodo**

I would say that the main message of the book of Revelation is that Christ has overcome, he has overcome death and he has overcome the power of the world, the Devil, and that he now reigns with the Father, and, as it relates to us, that we will share in his victory if we trust in him, if we adhere to him by faith, if we persevere to the end by believing in his victory.

**Mr. Bradley T. Johnson**

Well I suppose that scholars would differ on what they consider the main message of the book of Revelation to be, but I think it's fair to say that at the book's center is the idea that God is in charge and he represents ultimate authority. It's not Rome; it's not religious authorities; it's nothing in this world. And I think that the message that seems to be coming to John is really twofold, and it comes in the form of a warning, and the warning is to be righteous. Those who are righteous will find eternal reward, and the troubles of this day will not be lasting. The other side of that equation is those who are unjust and who fail to repent by acknowledging God's sovereignty will be eternally condemned. So the work of the Lord is both terrifying and exciting depending on one's response to that warning.

### **Question 4:** **What is Eschatology?**

**Every biblical book addresses many different areas of theology. But some books contribute more to our understanding of certain theological topics than they do to others. When it comes to the book of Revelation, theologians tend to focus on something called “eschatology.” What is eschatology?**

**Dr. Benjamin Gladd**

Simply, “the study of last things.” Now it gets tricky when one starts to apply that to the Bible. In the Old Testament we have a number of texts that talk about what will happen in the latter days, or in the end of days — we have synonymous expressions — and typically that involves the conquering, the Messiah coming and conquering the pagan nations, the conversion of the nations joining Israel, peace going out.

Preceding that, immediately preceding that restoration in the latter days there will be an antagonist. Daniel talks about this man of lawlessness who will come. He will spread false teaching. He will deceive Israel and deceive the nations. And so all of that will happen in the latter days. Now the New Testament makes this remarkable insight that the latter days have begun. It's the last hour. There has been resurrection. And when we move to the book of Revelation we see this all over the place. In fact, in chapter 1, John claims to be a partaker of the tribulation in the kingdom. So both at the end-time tribulation and the end-time kingdom, he is participating in. And so we see that throughout the book of Revelation, not only does it concern about the very last things before the new heavens and new earth, it also concerns things that have begun from the first century to today. It has all been set in motion.

### **Dr. Robert G. Lister**

Eschatology, in the simplest definition of the word, is the study of the end times or the study of the last things. And so, when we use the term in its simple sense, that's, all that it involves is the study of the end times. We can apply eschatology in a couple of other particular senses. We can think of it in an individual or a personal way, and when we do that, we're asking questions like: What happens to individuals, be they a believer or an unbeliever, following their death in this life, provided that that death takes place prior to the return of Christ? What about the intermediate state? Is there a separation of body and soul? What does the resurrection to judgment look like for individuals? On what basis does that judgment take place? And then, an individual's reward in heaven or judgment in hell, what might that look like? Individual eschatology is what we're talking about there. We might also think of cosmic or global eschatology, and there we're thinking on a broader level, not just what do the end times look like for individuals and what are the implications for them, but what are God's global purposes in the culmination of his plan of redemption for this earth? And there we would include broader discussions of things like the millennium in Revelation 20 — some competing interpretations on that. What is God's plan for the new heavens and the new earth? Is it primarily spiritual? Is it primarily physical? Is it a combination of the two? What does the eternal state look like when God has assigned final judgment to believers and unbelievers, the resurrection of the just and the unjust? So we can kind of talk about it in those three components: the broad definition on the one hand, the application to individuals on the other hand, and then finally the cosmic implications of eschatology as well.

### **Question 5:**

#### **What genres does the book of Revelation employ?**

**One thing that can complicate our reading of Revelation is the fact that it contains different literary genres. Put simply, a genre is a type or category, like narrative, poetry, wisdom, law, and so on. And each genre has its own conventions — its own way of communicating. So, in order to interpret the book of Revelation responsibly,**

**we need to recognize the genres it uses, and to read each one according to its own conventions. What genres does the book of Revelation employ?**

**Dr. James M. Hamilton**

Revelation employs at least three genres. The very first word of the book in Greek is apocalypse or “*apokalupsis*,” so this book, John is identifying it as a “revelation” or perhaps an “unveiling.” So number one, it’s an apocalypse which is, it’s as though the veil is being pulled back and people are being allowed to see things as they really are. Number two, it’s a prophecy. Revelation 1:3: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy.” So I think we can say that Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy. And some have distinguished between an apocalypse — being concerned with the events of the very end of history, the consummation of all things, and perhaps heavenly realities — and then a prophecy dealing with the actual outworking of history. And then thirdly, Revelation employs features of an epistle. So around verse 4, John begins to say, “John, to the seven churches,” and then he addresses those seven churches. There’s a blessing much like the format of Paul’s letters. So if you compare Revelation 1:4-8 or so, the opening there is very similar to the opening of some of Paul’s letters. And then it concludes, the whole book concludes with a grace that is very similar to the way that Paul concludes his letters. So I think we can say that Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter. And there was probably a letter carrier who would have delivered this writing to these churches and then read it aloud in Christian worship.

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

One of the most obvious genres in the book of Revelation is the genre of letters. You have letters to the seven churches which some have compared to imperial edicts and so on, but official kinds of letters. But the rest of the book of Revelation is a genre that’s much less familiar to us — to many of us in the twenty-first century — and it’s a mixture of what we could call prophecy and apocalyptic. It has features that very much resemble the language of the Old Testament prophets. Pretty much everything could be accounted for on that basis alone. But some of the features that are most distinctive and repeated in the book of Revelation are also those features that often appear in Jewish apocalypses, a certain kind of Jewish literature that emphasizes heavenly revelations and so on. With regard to even those elements, those elements appear in some of the earlier biblical prophets, Ezekiel, Daniel, and so forth. But because they’re so unfamiliar to us — to many of us at least in most of our cultures in the twenty-first century — it’s valuable to immerse ourselves in the language of the Old Testament prophets to get a better understanding of the book of Revelation.

**Dr. Brandon Crowe**

The book of Revelation is unique in a number of ways, and one of those ways is how it takes three different genres and combines them into a single book. Revelation employs prophecy, apocalyptic, and the form of a letter for John to make his point. As an apocalyptic book, Revelation concerns visions that are given to John that deal with the divine transcendent reality and how that reality is relevant for our world today. It gives a divine perspective on the world and shows us something of where history is

going. As a prophetic book, John writes with the very authority of God himself, meaning the words that John writes are true. They are absolutely true in the way that God is himself truth. And the categories of apocalyptic and prophetic are very closely united in Revelation as they are, for example, in a book like Daniel in the Old Testament. But thirdly, Revelation is communicated in the form of a circular letter. This is a letter that was sent around to more than one church, and as a letter, Revelation was relevant for churches even in the first century. And it's important to remember that it was a letter, that Revelation is not only about what might happen thousands of years in the future, but Revelation, as it was originally, was given, was written to specific churches in the first century. And whatever else John might be doing, his message of Revelation is relevant for those first century churches. And so in some senses, Revelation is unique in being a prophetic apocalypse that was sent around to churches in the form of a circular letter. It combines all three of those genres.

### **Question 6:**

#### **How similar is the book of Revelation to Old Testament prophetic literature?**

**When John wrote the book of Revelation, he drew heavily from the Old Testament prophets, and quoted them frequently. And of course, the same God inspired both Old Testament prophecy and the book of Revelation. Because of these types of connections, we should expect to see similarities between Revelation and Old Testament prophecy. But do we? How similar is the book of Revelation to Old Testament prophetic literature?**

#### **Dr. Brandon Crowe**

To understand the book of Revelation, we need to understand that it is a book of prophecy, and the book of Revelation 1:3 identifies it as a book of prophecy. And as a book of prophecy, it has a number of similarities to Old Testament prophets. It mirrors, for example, some of what... happens in Ezekiel. Some think that the sequence of the visions in Ezekiel had a very formative influence on the way that John had organized Revelation. We also see John having something like a prophetic commission like what happens to Ezekiel. We see further that Ezekiel is called to write by the Spirit, and John is said to write at the leading of the Spirit, and that there's a divine authority that lies behind what he writes in Revelation. And so we see, just as the true prophets from the Old Testament are actually speaking the very words of God, we see the same thing in Revelation where, as John writes, he's writing the very words of God. Revelation is also much like the book of Daniel, which is also an apocalyptic prophecy type of book, which we find in Revelation. Revelation 1 begins with John saying, these are the things that must soon take place and these had been shown to him, and we find something very similar in Daniel 2 where the things that will happen in the latter days are going to be shown to them. So we see those similarities as well. Beyond this, the book of Isaiah is quoted a number

of times in Revelation. And in fact, we can point to the way that John often takes Old Testament books, Old Testament wording, Old Testament images, and weaves them into his prophecy to demonstrate his continuity with the prophets that have come before. Some even say that John is writing the climax of biblical prophecy. If you look, for example, in Revelation 18 and 19 and the downfall of Babylon, it's been argued that he's actually taking all of the Old Testament statements about the downfall of Babylon from the prophets and weaving those into that account to demonstrate how his prophecy of the downfall of Babylon stands in continuity with what has come before.

**Dr. Miles Van Pelt**

The book of Revelation is not unique in the entire biblical canon in terms of the type of literature that we find there. There are actually several books in the Old Testament that correspond to the same literary type of genre. One of the ones I'm thinking of right now is apocalyptic literature... Now, apocalyptic literature we often think of in the book of Revelation as that literature where you get wild and outrageous animals and things being described, for example, dragons and beasts with multiple heads, horns and eyes. Well, that type of language is not unique to the book of Revelation. We find that in the book of Daniel. We find apocalyptic literature in Ezekiel, in Zechariah, even a little bit in Isaiah. So the book of Revelation has many, kind of, literary antecedents in Old Testament prophetic literature. And what is the purpose of Old Testament prophetic literature at the apocalyptic level, or even the book of Revelation? One thing that's helpful to think about is that the coming of apocalyptic literature appears to focus around a particular community at a particular time, and that's usually God's people in exile. And so if you think of Ezekiel who was cast into exile in Babylon and received apocalyptic visions, Daniel who went into exile to Babylon: apocalyptic visions, John in exile on Patmos: apocalyptic visions. And the purpose of these apocalyptic visions, they were not to confuse people, which we normally think today, but actually to comfort and encourage God's people in this way: number one, that God is in control, and number two, that God wins. And those two really big themes kind of frame how apocalyptic literature, or what it embodies in terms of its content and when it is coming to God's people in terms of their timing. So there are antecedents in the Old Testament for the apocalyptic literature that we normally think of describes the vast majority of the book of Revelation.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

The emphasis in the book of Revelation is on its role or identity as a prophetic word, a book of prophecy. And so what we see is a great deal of similarities with the ways in which the prophets would represent God's covenant in terms of the things they would see — their visions — to call people back to covenant faithfulness and repentance. And so the emphasis in the opening part of the book of Revelation is on a call to repent and to overcome. And that's consistent with what we see in the prophets where the warnings are, "unless you repent, you'll suffer this discipline." And we also see in the book of Revelation the recurrence of seven words of blessing, and that's also very common to prophetic literature, where you have the promise of blessing in terms of coming back to the covenant. And so we see this through John. Jesus brings

this word of blessing that he promises to those who will repent and those who will overcome, this great invitation to the wedding feast of the Lamb. We also see common imagery. So, whether it's imagery from the plagues and the Exodus and the experience of the deliverance of God's people from the Exodus, and of course, the identification of Jesus as the Passover Lamb that is consistent with that imagery, and Moses as a prophet. Or where we see the heavenly council and one like the Son of Man like we see in relation to Daniel 7 in chapters 4 and 5, and the gathering of the heavenly council there, or whether it's the New Jerusalem that's consistent with what we see in the book of Ezekiel, or whether it's these figures like the two witnesses or what we see with the lampstands — imagery that really comes from the book of Zechariah — where again these things represent God's leaders like the king and the priest, and God's people in relation to the nations, and God's call for them to be faithful in the midst of the nations and his dealings with the nations. So these things are very consistent with what we see in the imagery and in the function of the books of prophecy in the Old Testament.

### **Question 7:**

#### **How is apocalyptic literature similar to and different from typical biblical prophecy?**

**The author of the book of Revelation wrote in both the prophetic and apocalyptic genres. These two genres have many similarities, but they also have significant differences. How is apocalyptic literature similar to and different from typical biblical prophecy?**

#### **Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.**

In apocalyptic literature, we have more of a vision of the distant future with a succession of kingdoms and what God is going to be doing in the future; whereas, classical prophecy tends to be a little more immediate. Or if it talks about the distant future, it's maybe a little more vague. The book of Revelation talks about the future and uses a lot of symbolism — there are angelic visitations — those are characteristics of apocalyptic literature. So it's really kind of a big picture, long range sort of thing. And because of the large amount of symbolism, it really does differ from classical prophecy.

#### **Dr. Scott Redd**

Well, apocalyptic literature is similar to biblical prophecy in the sense that it does tell something about the future. It anticipates God's work in the world and the surety, or the confidence that God's people can have, that he will continue to be involved in the goings-ons of their life and the life of the world around them. But when you compare apocalyptic literature to, for instance, to typical biblical prophecy, you find that there are also some very significant differences. Biblical prophecy is typically involved in the genre of prayers or speeches, for instance. Biblical prophecy is often prayers to God, lamenting for sin, repenting for sin, or prayers of praise, or prayers of



thanksgiving to the Lord. So they often show up in a sort of poetic style and involve the vivid and metaphorical imagery that we find in poetry. Sometimes biblical prophecy is also taken up in speeches, speeches to God's people, either declaring the threat of judgment or declaring a hope in blessing and salvation in the future. Again, like all biblical prophecies, the most significant aspect of the prophecy is that it's calling God's people to faithfulness and repentance. However, when we turn to apocalyptic literature, we find a very different mode of communication. We see the prophet, instead, taken up in the Spirit often, into sort of a spiritual realm where they watch a drama played out before them. Now, like biblical prophecy, the drama involves concerns about the future, sometimes the near future and sometimes the very distant future. But as the prophet watches this drama played out, he reports to us on what he sees... In apocalyptic visions, the prophet will often have an angelic tour guide who is explaining to him the events that he sees around him. The prophet can ask questions to the angel, and the angel will often respond or give other kinds of clarification to what the prophet is seeing in front of him. Now, the drama that is played out in a visionary apocalypse is one which is very figurative, it's very vivid in its imagery, but it tends to draw large lines and broad strokes about future events. They're always involving cosmic conflict, battle between light and darkness, battle between God and his enemies. And we see these great broad strokes being drawn out throughout the apocalyptic vision, often using very vivid and very exciting imagery... So you see the apocalyptic genre is really a vision report, reporting on a drama that's played out in the future of great cosmic conflict between God and his enemies. Biblical prophecy, on the other hand, typically involves poetry, things like prayers and speeches. And yet both call God's people to be both comforted and consoled by the promise of God's deliverance and his reign in the future, but also to be called back to faithfulness by the opportunity of participating in God's kingdom and the desire to be on the side of the divine King who has the victory.

### **Question 8:**

#### **What are some distinctive characteristics of apocalyptic literature?**

**Apocalyptic literature was well known during the time that John wrote Revelation. And the book of Revelation contains many of the characteristics common to this genre. What are some distinctive characteristics of apocalyptic literature?**

#### **Dr. Ben Witherington III**

The book of Revelation is a piece of apocalyptic prophecy, not just any kind of prophecy, but apocalyptic prophecy, which is to say, visionary prophecy. If you don't get the genre signals right then you don't understand the sort of universe of discourse out of which this book is operating. Apocalyptic prophecy is visionary prophecy, and the thing that characterizes that is that the prophet is not just going to say what he heard from God, a late word from God, he's going to relate what he saw in a vision. That's why he's called a seer. A seer is someone who sees something. Well, here's the problem for the prophet who's a visionary; he's got to describe what he sees, and

the problem when you see the *mysterium tremendum* is there's not enough words in anybody's vocabulary to describe God or heaven or all of those kinds of things. So what happens in visionary prophecy is that he must say, "It's like... It's like... It's like... It's like..." "And I saw a throne and it was like..." "And he was shaped like a human being..." "... and it had a color like x and y." This is the language of metaphor and analogy. If you don't understand that this is metaphorical language, it's poetic language, it's visionary language, you're right off the bat going to make a horrible mistake about the way you interpret this material. I mean, you may actually go around looking for beasts with seven heads and twenty-three horns and then be terribly disappointed that they're not at the San Diego zoo. Our author is not describing literally something, he's describing something analogically and saying, "It's like this," and that's the way an analogy works. It's a comparison of two unlike things that in some particular way are alike. The genre of apocalyptic prophecy is such that it can even be distinguished from ordinary prophecy as well and if you don't understand what kind of literature you are dealing with, you're already heading down the road to misinterpreting the book of Revelation.

**Dr. Mark Strauss**

Apocalyptic literature is not like any kind of literature we have today, and so sometimes when modern readers approach the book of Revelation, for example, they're surprised and they're trying to figure out what's going on. So it's important to talk about some of the characteristics of apocalyptic... ancient Jewish apocalyptic literature. Fundamentally, apocalyptic literature is really crisis literature. And by that we mean it arose in the context when God's people were under severe pressure, even pressure of potential extermination. And the message then that comes through in apocalyptic literature is that no matter what crises you're facing, no matter what enemies you're facing, God is the sovereign Lord of the universe. He is in charge of human history, and he will intervene to accomplish his salvation and to bring you through this impossible or difficult time. So that's fundamental to apocalyptic literature. Then, of course, we see characteristics like symbolic images, and sometimes, you know, we see beasts and dragons and locusts and these coming out of the pit, and these kinds of things, so lots of symbolic literature. Revelation through angelic creatures, angelic mediators, these kinds of things are characteristic of apocalyptic literature. But fundamentally, apocalyptic literature is meant to send a message to God's people that the crises that they're facing, the challenges they're facing, they can persevere through it because God is ultimately going to save and deliver them.

**Dr. William Edgar**

Apocalyptic literature shows up in many places in the ancient world, and of course it is in the Bible as well. You can always recognize it because it's not linear; it's not straight history; it's laden with images. Not that these images are unrelated to history. They often are used to predict what the future is going to be: a statue with different parts in the book of Daniel, which predicts succeeding empires. Or the book of the Revelation is replete with such apocalyptic imagery, the four horsemen, for example, or the bowls pouring out judgment. And in addition to these darker things, the bright

things such as the New Jerusalem descending out of heaven. So apocalyptic literature is characterized by a sort of mosaic way of appearing. And... you're glad the whole Bible isn't apocalyptic, because we'd have trouble understanding it probably. We'd spend most of our time interpreting it. So we have other parts of the Bible which are more linear, and they work together in a perfect harmony. I think one of the reasons for that is that God is not just teaching us either points of doctrine or elements of history in an isolated fashion, but he's presenting his self, his person, his covenant presence, and we relate to that as entire people. Images are important parts of who we are as we respond, as are words, and as is linear history. So apocalyptic literature in the context of the whole is quite wonderful.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

Well, apocalyptic literature is unveiling the realities of heaven for those of us on earth. So one of the things that you'll see is very often that the individual who is seeing the vision of heaven is taken up into heaven. You can think of Isaiah and his vision of God and the "Holy, Holy, Holy." The same, of course, happens with John in the book of Revelation. He's taken up into heaven and he begins to see visions, and the visions often include symbols and metaphorical imagery that then later has to be interpreted. So that's one of the key elements of apocalyptic imagery. They often speak to the situation of God's people on earth at that time, but there can also be a future element or something that's unveiling some heavenly reality that we need to know in order to live our lives now in the hope of the future. In addition, I would say that apocalyptic imagery, the genre, has sometimes been defined, I think too broadly by scholars. And by that I don't mean just evangelical scholars but across the spectrum, so that you have an attempt to define the book of Revelation as an apocalyptic genre alongside not just books such as parts of Ezekiel or Daniel that are clearly apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament, but also across intertestamental Jewish works such as 1 Enoch, and in doing so it becomes a bit circular because they know they want to include all of this literature in the genre of apocalyptic, and especially fit Revelation in, and so then you come up with a definition that fits all of that, even if 1 Enoch sounds very different from Revelation, while Revelation sounds, frankly, very much like parts of Isaiah or Ezekiel or Daniel, which I think John the apostle is intentionally wanting to echo as he's writing through the book of Revelation.

**Dr. Benjamin Gladd**

Yes. Apocalyptic literature has a number of characteristics. In recent years, that's been sharpened by scholars. The first characteristic is that it takes place typically in a narrative framework. There is a story that is told. Within that story, within that narrative, we have an angel or some type of heavenly being communicating content. So you have a narrative framework, you have a heavenly being, and part of this content that is being delivered to a human — for example Daniel — is a transcendent reality. So there's a spatial dimension — heavenlies, throne room visions, that sort of thing, angels. There's also a temporal dimension as well — latter days, eschatology, end of days, cataclysmic events. So it all takes place in a narrative, communicated by

a celestial being such as an angel to a human that's delivered. The content is vertical and horizontal, to put it like that.

**Mr. Bradley T. Johnson**

In terms of the attributes or the qualities of apocalyptic literature, I think that there's probably a fair amount of diversity of views within scholarship today. But I think there's also a center to that that probably is helpfully conveyed by the work of Dr. John J. Collins in his book *The Apocalyptic Imagination* and what he identifies as something of a center or a thread to the commonalities among various pieces of apocalyptic literature... he defines this genre in this way:

Revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.

Well, there's some technical jargon in that, but what we observe is that, number one, apocalyptic is revelatory. It shows us something that we wouldn't have seen otherwise, and it's given within a narrative framework, which means there's something of a story form to it in terms of a series of events and dialogue and those types of things. One of the key components to apocalyptic literature is the disclosure or the revealing of this reality or this vision to a human recipient or human being by means by some sort of a divine mediator. So an angel of the Lord might be that exact mediator that comes and invites the human being onto this otherworldly tour where a different place and a different time are experienced. The different time is typically in the future. How will it end? Well, we're going to take a look at that. And a different place, the new age, or the way things will be on that day. Now, in addition to that, I think that one of Collins' main contributions in his work is the development of something of a schematic of apocalyptic. And so what he does is he lays out a variety of works that are classically considered to be a part of this genre, and then he identifies a list of attributes that in varying ways and varying degrees can be associated with these different works. For instance, he notes that, for example, with an ancient work entitled 2 Enoch there are elements of cosmogony, elements of judgment and the destruction of the wicked, and elements of judgment and the destruction of the world, along with a transformation of the cosmic reality as we know it. So, there is a short list of attributes of apocalyptic. By contrast, if we go to another kind of a work, for example the book of Daniel from the Old Testament, which has some apocalyptic material in it, we notice that there's a recollection of the past. So there's a certain historicity to that. There's also potentially a retrospective look at prior events and casting those prophetically. There's also an emphasis on persecution and a certain degree of upheaval that's happening in the *eschaton*, or in the final age. Now what's interesting about this particular schematic is that not all works exhibit all the same attributes. And in fact, it's possible for one work to have very little affinity with or relationship to another work but still be considered as part of the same genre of literature. By contrast, he highlights one particular attribute, that

being the judgment and/or the destruction of the wicked as being common to all forms of apocalyptic. So that would be a red thread that's woven through all of it.

### **Question 9:**

#### **Why does the Bible use so many images and metaphors?**

**The book of Revelation consists largely of prophecy and apocalyptic literature. And that means that it contains many images and metaphors. But many readers find imagery and metaphor hard to understand. So, if the Bible is intended to reveal God's truth to his people, why has God made it so hard to interpret? Why does the Bible use so many images and metaphors?**

#### **Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

Some people wonder, when the Bible uses so much imagery and metaphor, doesn't it just make it harder to understand? Well, I guess the first question is, "What does God mean when he uses it?" and if it makes it harder or easier, that's secondary. If God intends us to interpret symbols and metaphors, then that's what we have to do. But I think the answer to the question is: well, it depends. Is it harder for us to interpret metaphors and symbols? Well, often for Western people, people from Western cultures, it is harder, because we're not accustomed to those forms of communicating, but for the vast majority of the world, non-Western people, it's a perfectly natural, in fact sometimes preferable way of speaking and communicating. It's often said that children understand the book of Revelation better than grownups do, which is sort of a reminder of what C.S. Lewis played out in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When the children got to a certain age, they were no longer allowed to go back to Narnia. They had grown up, and they had outgrown the kinds of demands on the imagination that going to Narnia required. And in Lewis' presentation, that's not a good thing. He, in fact, commends to us a more mystical and open-ended view of the world, rather than a sort of reductionistic, precise, and formulaic view of the world. And so, to answer the question, although God hasn't said this is why he uses poetry and symbols, I think we can derive pretty clearly that God uses symbols, he uses imagery, he uses metaphors, to give us a greater sense of the transcendence. Metaphors introduce tension into ideas or concepts that cause us to open our eyes wider. And also they appeal to the whole person more, to the emotions as well as the intellect. We can identify with metaphorical language because they connect concepts to sensory experience, whether it's sight, sound, smell and so forth. And so I don't see how we could possibly know the Lord apart from whatever he would prefer to do. To the contrary, I don't see how we can possibly know the Lord apart from symbol, metaphor, imagery.

#### **Dr. R. Todd Mangum**

For us, the imagery and metaphor can make it more difficult. For the original audience, it probably made it more vivid. So there's a cultural, historical distance between us and them that, yeah, like any kind of ancient literature, means we have to

translate it, we have to bring over the analogies into more contemporary parlance. In the book of Revelation there may be an additional element. Besides Revelation drawing from Old Testament imageries — it's often missed — but most, and maybe even all, maybe we just haven't figured them all out, but most of these imageries of the visions of Revelation look like they're actually throwbacks to or hearkenings back to Old Testament revelation or prophecy or prophetic imagery with which God's people at the time would have been familiar. The other thing that may be going on in the book of Revelation is that John is writing from Patmos in exile. He's essentially in prison. Like prison today, when you write letters, your mail is being read by the authorities. It's possible that part of what John is up to — the Holy Spirit through John is up to — is sending messages to God's people that would have been very clear but in such a clouded, riddled way that the authorities who put him in exile wouldn't have gotten it, wouldn't have gotten the punch lines, wouldn't have gotten the jokes, much like Uncle Remus' fables were actually designed to communicate to African-American people living under oppression of how to operate, how to navigate a world in which the authorities are always watching, in which you are disenfranchised, vulnerable, unempowered and thus subject to the abuse and the oppression of the authorities and here are some stories to give you wisdom and encouragement to persevere in an environment like that. The book of Revelation may work very much like that as well.

**Dr. John E. McKinley**

The Bible uses a lot of metaphor and imagery, and this does make it harder to understand, but it also makes it applicable to people in different times and different places. If everything was spelled out in crystal detail about chronological fulfillments, then it might not apply to people who live later times or other cultures where these events might not take place. So there's a kind of fuzziness around the edges of these messages, and that makes them applicable to people in different times and places. And there's also a definiteness that makes them — everybody — have a sense of readiness that, "I'm not sure when this is being fulfilled; it could be fulfilled in our time." And most generations of Christians have thought these events could be fulfilled in our time. We need to be ready to meet the Lord. So God has accomplished giving us assurance and certainty that history is in his hands, and he has a definite plan for making things work his way and winning in the end. And yet, there is an indefiniteness, a fuzziness through the metaphor and imagery, that allows every generation of Christians all around the world to say, "We're not sure when this is. It might apply to us; it might not." And so it remains applicable for us.

**Question 10:**

**How can we draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy?**

**Biblical prophecies, like those in the book of Revelation, typically addressed issues that were most relevant to their original audiences. And that sometimes makes it**

**hard to know how to apply them to modern life. Still, Scripture assures us that biblical prophecy continues to apply to God's people in every age. So, how can we draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy?**

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum**

Alright, I want to talk about how to draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy, but I want to talk a little bit first about how not to draw practical modern applications from biblical prophecy and let that serve as a backdrop to some more viable and helpful approaches. It's very common, sells a lot of books, very popular sometimes, to look at biblical prophecy as though what God has done has provided a crystal ball so that modern, contemporary, suburban American Christians can get a peek at what the future has to hold in case they're curious — you know, “Just thought you might be interested in what's going to happen 100 years or 1,000 years from now, so that you could see what's going to happen.” And probably just as bad, if not worse, is approaching prophecy as though it's designed to, newspaper in hand, try to identify who these prophetically foreseen characters are. “Ooh, I think this one's the antichrist.” “You know I never liked this political candidate anyway. I think he's sinisterly, actually the antichrist.” Or that preacher that I disagree with, “I think that's the false prophet,” and try to identify specific figures with specific imageries and what not. That's probably unhelpful, wrongheaded. It's been going on a long time. Martin Luther thought as early as the mid-sixteenth century that the pope at the time was the antichrist. I mean, so that's been going on for a long time, but no one's been right yet. And we've had enough misses on that that we probably ought to learn the lesson that that is not the most helpful way to approach prophecy. Rather, biblical prophecy is given to God's people, generally anyway, as a set of warnings or a set of promised blessings in reward of faithfulness. So we're under some of the same obligations that God's people have always been under to obey, to be faithful, to persevere under trial, to persevere to the end, to not succumb to temptation, to not be mistaken into thinking that God's people are going to lose in the end, and to not succumb to the temptation to think that this is all there is so I might as well get all the joy and pleasure I can get out of this life; I might as well just cave to the forces of evil in this life. Biblical prophecy comes along and says, “No, persevere.” The price may be high. The cost may be heavy. The persecution may be great. You're not the first ones to suffer so, you're not the first ones to be called to rise above temptations and persevere. You're part of a long line of believers that have been called to just such cost, just such perseverance. And biblical prophecy can be applied in such a way as to continue to encourage God's people to be faithful and to continue to warn God's people of what the disciplinary price will be for disobedience.

**Rev. Valery Babynin (translation)**

When many people hear the word “prophecy,” they think of an image of something mystical and secret that they have to see, that will tell the future for them, and so on. And of course, in the history of mankind there have been many false prophets who uttered certain prophecies concerning the future. But when we speak about biblical prophecies, we have to understand that they have to do with the revelation of the Almighty. It is his word going out from his mouth, we may say, and reaching man,

because biblical prophecy is the word that he sends to man. And the prophet Isaiah says that — relaying to us the word of Yahweh — “my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” And when we speak about biblical prophecies, when we think about biblical prophecies, we should have this reverential, longing attitude because the word that goes out from God’s mouth, it changes reality; it guides reality; it directs reality. And when we hear biblical prophecies, reading the Holy Scripture with faith, we have to understand that we are taking part in the process of changing reality according to God’s plan. So when, for example, we read God’s word spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness,” it concerns not only Israel; it concerns not only individuals who lived at that time; it concerns the whole of [God’s] church. And that is why the practical meaning of these words, read by a man living in our time, is of extraordinary importance because I embrace this as revelation, which has gone out from God’s mouth, and that is why biblical prophecy is bread and comfort and support in life. It is something that I can really rely on, that really is the truth.

**Dr. Mark Gignilliat**

There’s a verse in Isaiah 40, I think it’s verse 8 that says, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever.” And this is the way which I frame my understanding of the prophets, that the prophetic word of the Lord, it’s alive, it’s not locked in Israel’s ancient Near Eastern past, but it’s a fresh word; it’s an alive word. And I think this is a real issue within evangelical hermeneutics, or biblical interpretation today, where one begins to engage the material, and the first thing that’s talked about is the problem of distance, that the real problem with engaging the Bible is that it’s so culturally “other” than where we are today. And in a sense that’s true, and we have to fill in those gaps. But that’s never the way the history of the church has described the Bible. Herman Bavinck, for example, describes the Bible as the eternal youthful word of the Lord. It’s young. I mean, it’s alive, it’s fresh. And whatever gaps we may have between the ancient world of biblical prophecy and the modern world in the life of the church, that gap is filled by the promised presence of Christ in his Spirit. So, the prophets didn’t just speak to Israel’s past, but the prophets continue to speak today, and we need to listen to the word in which they have. And it can be cryptic. I mean, Martin Luther said, the prophets have a queer way of talking, rambling on from one subject matter to another. I mean, the prophets yield their fruit with a lot of patience, but they do continue to speak into our world as they expose us for who we are and as they reveal the God who has redeemed us. And I think you see this dynamic in the New Testament as well. Just quick examples of this are: Jesus with these men on the road to Emmaus, where he says, he begins to tell them about himself, and he does it from the Law and the Prophets, and he speaks of himself from the Old Testament. Paul says something similar in Romans 15 where he said, these things were written for our instruction. So he had a very immediate sense of how the Old Testament continued to exert pressure, a revelatory pressure on the church as it listens for God’s Word in our midst. So, the prophets continue to exert a very immediate and dynamic voice in the life of the church, and they need to be listened to.



**Question 11:****Why is perseverance and overcoming sin important in the Christian life?**

The original audience of the book of Revelation faced profound persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. Many were tortured, and some even died for their beliefs. But John exhorted them to persevere, and to remain pure to the end. Why is perseverance and overcoming sin important in the Christian life?

**Dr. Thomas Schreiner**

When I think of perseverance and overcoming sin, I think of the book of Revelation, for example. That's fundamentally, the purpose of the book of Revelation, is to call upon the saints to persevere and to overcome to obtain life eternal. Now we have to be careful with that. That might sound initially like works-righteousness. But Revelation is calling upon believers to trust in Jesus, and that trust manifests itself in perseverance. So it isn't works righteousness actually, it's a manifestation of faith. Perseverance is rooted in trusting God. Are the believers in Rome and other parts of the Greco-Roman world, are they going to trust in the Roman Empire, in the comforts of this world? Or are they going to put their trust in Jesus? Perseverance is required to obtain that final blessing. We have in chapters 2 and 3 in the letters to the churches, we have again and again a call to persevere to obtain eternal life, to obtain the tree of life again and again. So I think it's a practical call to believers to give themselves entirely to Jesus. If one is not persevering, it's a sign that they are trusting in something else, in someone else. It's ultimately a sign that they don't truly belong to God. I think it's interesting and instructive that the New Testament has many admonitions to persevere. I take it that that means that all of us as Christians need those admonitions. We ought not to think I don't need such an admonition because I'm already a Christian. God uses those calls to persevere as means by which we do persevere and trust in God until the end.

**Rev. Valery Babynin (translation)**

When we speak about Christian perseverance against sin we have to understand that this question addresses, first of all, understanding human essence, understanding human nature, because sin is not just a deficiency; sin is not just a mistake. Sin is a rebellious nature that compels every man to struggle with God, to oppose his commandments, to oppose his will. Sin distorts our thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. Sin distorts our intentions. And Paul says that everyone inherits Adam's sinful nature. So that's why, for Christians, it's a very important question. Even when we turn to God, this old nature is preserved in us. It's preserved in us, and it prevents happy and joyful relationship with the Lord. The apostle John says that, "If we claim to be without sin ... the truth is not in us." That is, people converted to Christ, people who have come to Christ, regrettably continue to suffer under the burden of sin, and it remains a problem in the church. It, we may say, is the biggest problem because, as a

pastor, I have to deal with this every day, both inside me and in my relations with other people. And when we think about the truth of perseverance against sin, we come again to the truth of grace and God's predestination, because his preordinations for his church consist in the fact that he changes our nature when a new man is born, created after God in holiness and truth. And this man is able to oppose sin, able to overcome sin, able to find the true good. In other words, the truth of perseverance points at the nature of man and at the unchangeable, immutable promises of God, which are fulfilled in the life of Christians born again of the Spirit.

### **Question 12:**

### **How should we treat Christians who interpret the book of Revelation differently than we do?**

The book of Revelation includes many metaphors, symbols, and other figurative language, and this can make it hard to interpret. So, it's not surprising that Christians often disagree over its meaning. Sadly, this has led to some bitter battles within the church. How important is it for us to defend our own interpretations of John's work? And how should we treat Christians who interpret the book of Revelation differently than we do?

#### **Dr. Simon Kistemaker**

There are a number of ways of interpreting the book of Revelation. You've heard about amillennialism, premillennialism, postmillennialism, dispensationalism. There you have all the views and interpretations of the book of Revelation. My approach is we are not here to debate and to be angry. We are here to show light and to show the Lord Jesus in all his love and kindness. And therefore I say there are different views, but we have to treat one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ.

#### **Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

There are so many different interpretations of the book of Revelation, the question easily becomes, how do we relate to and how do we agree or disagree with those who share different views? Well, one, we need to relativize the different issues. While we may disagree with some people who hold to the full and final authority of the Scriptures and believe the book of Revelation is the very word of God, we share in common with them that view: This is God's very word. And so we need to appreciate that we share that in common. Secondly, we need to appreciate what each major interpretive approach brings to the table. Not everyone is right in their disagreements. There are many things where only one option is the right option because they're contradictory, but as far as general approach, different traditions bring certain values to their interpretation that we all need to honor and respect and desire. Some people who look at the book of Revelation as a complete historical prediction, they often emphasize being ready and being prepared and being watchful. Now, those people, like me for instance, who see this as a representative of history for all time between the first and second coming, people like me often don't emphasize preparedness,

don't emphasize the discontinuity, the radical difference that the second coming makes. And so I learn from people who share different views of the book of Revelation that they have emphases that sometimes I neglect or underemphasize. Likewise, somebody who sees the book as primarily predictive future, they can neglect the fact that Christ is on the throne, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit are reigning in the present and there is nothing that is going to separate us from the love of God, that the kingdom is present as Jesus taught in the Gospels. It's present as well as future. So even though we disagree of major approaches, we can appreciate the things that cause people to have those major approaches. And then finally, where there are real differences, we need to with civility and Christian charity talk through the particulars and in the end agree to disagree if we must and still appreciate and love and care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

**Dr. R. Todd Mangum**

Well, the book of Revelation, at least since it was adopted into the Canon has proven notoriously difficult to interpret. The early church fathers had good, solid, church tradition evidence that the book of Revelation was written by the apostle John, but because they didn't understand what it meant, they were so puzzled by the meaning of its visions, it almost didn't get into the Canon. Now of course, by God's providence they're discovering what's canonical, not determining, so understanding that... But there was some resistance, or at least some puzzlement, some hesitation, to adopt the book of Revelation into the recognized canon of God's inspired Word because of puzzlement over what it meant. John Calvin wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible but specifically does not write a commentary on the book of Revelation because, as brilliant an interpreter and skilled an interpreter as John Calvin was, he confessed, "I can't make heads or tails out of what most of it means." So with that kind of background, we probably should approach the book of Revelation with a certain level of humility, with a certain recognition that there are puzzling elements there. It's highly inappropriate for anyone to come to the book of Revelation, declare themselves wise. I mean, I know that there's a couple of phrases in Revelation that say, "Let him who is wise recognize," but let's also remember that it's a very dangerous thing to declare oneself wise in one's own eyes. So don't be too quick to identify yourself as the one that's wise that can interpret Revelation. So, it may be wisest for us all to approach the book of Revelation recognizing that it's God's inspired Word, but there are elements in it that will likely remain puzzling until Jesus comes back. We know in hindsight that no one saw the prophecies regarding the Messiah, and the Messiah's first coming, being fulfilled the way they were fulfilled. Some interpreters recognized, well, there are two sets of descriptions: whether he's going to be suffering or whether he's going to be victorious. But they didn't know. Some thought, well, maybe it depends on whether we're obedient or disobedient as to which one he'll be. But no one saw one Messiah, two comings. No one saw a Messiah coming as God-man who would rise from the dead and fulfill the other ones in the second coming or something. Well, it makes perfect sense in hindsight, most of them, but nobody saw it coming in foresight exactly the way it was fulfilled. It's likely to be the case, regarding the prophecies of Christ's second coming and the time period between now and the second coming, that they'll make perfect

sense in hindsight, but none of us will be able to have a batting average of 1,000 when it comes to interpreting them in foresight. There's one other element on that. One of the unfortunate byproducts of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the early twentieth century was that the premillennialist stream among the early fundamentalists believed that one of the fundamentals should be considered the second coming of Christ by which they assumed a second coming in which a 1,000-year earthly kingdom would be set up such that they mistook those who did not affirm a premillennial return but did affirm a bodily return, mistook them as liberals, those who denied authoritative teaching of Scripture and whatnot. We Bible-believing, evangelical Christians are notorious for drawing lines, well-meaningly drawing lines, at the wrong place. Well, here was one place where that happened. There is a line of demarcation, but it's bodily return of Christ, not necessarily premillennial return... Recognizing that, biblical prophecy and its interpretation is an area where we should really just allow more latitude to one another, have good robust discussions, disagreements, arguments, but with the understanding that the authority of Scripture isn't at stake.

**The book of Revelation can be difficult for modern readers to understand. But John's purpose wasn't to confuse or exasperate us. He wrote Revelation to encourage and support us, especially when we face challenges like persecution. And when we understand Revelation's historical context and imagery, we're better prepared to grasp its meaning and to benefit from its message.**

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# The Book of Revelation

LESSON  
TWO

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT



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# The Book of Revelation

## Lesson Two

### Structure and Content

#### INTRODUCTION

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A friend of mine once told me about his visit to a tapestry shop outside of Cairo, Egypt. They had rooms full of people weaving carpets together. My friend was captivated by the way these thin strands of fabric could be woven with thousands of similar strands to make the complex patterns of the tapestries. The beauty of the strands came to life when they were incorporated into the tapestry. And the book of Revelation is a little like a tapestry. It's full of tiny prophecies that draw much of their meaning from the other prophecies around them. And its message is most clear when we read the book as a whole, and see the big picture it's drawing for us.

This is the second lesson in our series on *The Book of Revelation*, and we have titled it "Structure and Content." In this lesson, we'll explore John's book by considering its literary composition and how its various parts fit together.

We'll begin our exploration of the structure and content of Revelation by looking briefly at John's purpose for writing. Next, we'll explore the details of the book of Revelation itself. And finally we'll survey some common strategies for its modern application. Let's begin by looking at John's purpose.

#### PURPOSE

---

John's purpose for writing Revelation was almost as complex as the book itself, so we can't explore all its details in this lesson. But we can still summarize his central purposes in this way: John wrote the book of Revelation to encourage suffering Christians to remain faithful until Jesus returns.

As we indicated in our first lesson in this series, John's persecuted readers were experiencing numerous temptations to compromise their faith. So, John wrote to assure the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, and the rest of the world that Christ knew their suffering and would see them through it. Revelation guaranteed that Jesus was already in control of their glorious future, and that he would reward all his faithful followers.

In line with his role as God's prophet, John's purpose was expressed in two complementary messages from Jesus to the churches of Asia Minor. First, John delivered offers of blessings for everyone that was loyal to Jesus. And second, he conveyed threats of curses against all who were disloyal. We'll explore both these types of messages, beginning with offers of blessing.

## OFFERS OF BLESSING

Listen to the encouragement John relayed to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:9-10:

**I know your afflictions and your poverty — yet you are rich! ... Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:9-10).**

Far from promising protection from all suffering, John said the church in Smyrna was “about to suffer.” But at the same time, he assured them that if they remained faithful to Christ, Jesus would give them “the crown of life.” Their suffering and possible death would only be temporary, but their blessings would last forever.

This encouragement was important because it oriented John’s original audience to the visions that followed. It taught them to read the visions with an eye toward the blessings Jesus will give his faithful followers when he returns. For instance, Revelation 20:4 speaks of the blessing of reigning with Christ.

And listen to how Revelation 21:3-4 describes the final blessings believers will receive:

**And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4).**

This vision of the future should have motivated John’s readers to be faithful to God, so that they’d obtain these wonderful blessings.

**You have some very key moments when blessing is promised to God’s people in the book of Revelation. You can think for instance of Revelation 2 and 3 and the promises to those who overcome that are then iterated at the very end of the book to those who overcome. And that reminds us that what the promises of blessing are intending to do in part for us as God’s people is to encourage us to persevere during times of trial and persecution, persevere in terms of clinging to Jesus and always aligning ourselves with his purposes, but also being very careful to live out the lifestyle of those who are known by the name of the Lord so that we are a holy people unto the Lord.**

— Dr. David W. Chapman

**The purpose of the offers of blessing that we repeatedly encounter in the Revelation, it's almost as though they're part of the apocalyptic nature of the book because they're assuring these people that though their reality, though what they actually see with their eyes indicates that they are cursed; they're suffering, they're insignificant, they're at odds with Rome, they're ostracized by the culture. Everything seems to be going against them. But the true story, if we could pull the veil back so to speak, the true story is that if they will hold fast to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, they will experience God's blessing.**

**— Dr. James M. Hamilton**

Besides offering blessings to Jesus' faithful followers, John also expressed his purpose in threats of curses against those who were disloyal to Christ.

### **THREATS OF CURSES**

As just one example, listen to Jesus' threat against the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:16:

**Because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth (Revelation 3:16).**

These words strongly exhorted John's readers to repent of their sins and to live in eager submission to Jesus. The threat of being spit out of Christ's mouth vividly warned that flagrant rebellion against Jesus would lead to divine curses.

These kinds of threats were included so that John's original audience would read the visions that followed with an awareness of God's curses. As an author, John highlighted these curses many times in order to exhort both false and true believers to repent of their sins.

For example, in a number of places John's visions described the punishments that fall on those who worship the beast. These idolaters are crushed in God's winepress in Revelation 14. They're tormented with disease in chapter 16. And they're burned in the lake of fire in chapters 19–21. These visions were genuine threats against false believers in the churches of Asia Minor. But they also would have encouraged true believers to avoid the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that led to God's judgment.

**The warnings of judgment in the book of Revelation really have two purposes. One the one hand, for believers who are standing fast, who are enduring suffering, they are a reminder and a promise that justice delayed is not really justice denied, that the day is coming when those who have made Christians' lives miserable, or taken Christians' lives, will be brought to justice. On the other hand, there are churches in**

the first century as there are today that are very tempted by the appeal of the surrounding culture. The harlot Babylon in the vision that is given to John in Revelation 17 is beautifully dressed; she looks attractive in one sense. Now she has in the goblet in her hand the blood of the saints, so even there we know how ruthless she is as a representative of the appeal of luxury founded on brutality, but we might be tempted. And we see in chapters 2 and 3 some of the churches that John first brought this book to were tempted by the allure of the culture. And so that's a sober warning to believers not to be led astray by the appeal of the culture and the desire of sensual pleasure.

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The message of Revelation really is that this world is a stage on which a great spiritual battle is taking place, and our actions with regard to that battle are significant, and God has a purpose and plan in this world, and we are to live our lives in line with his purpose and plan. And so those who oppose God's purposes will pay the price; they will face judgment from him. We as believers have a responsibility to be faithful, and so throughout the book of Revelation the message that occurs again and again is: hold fast, persevere, persevere to the end, because God is going to win, and God is the sovereign Lord, even though along the way it might seem like things are going in the other direction. And so the fact that God is going to judge evil and reward good calls us to respond in faithfulness to his message, in faithfulness to his purpose and his plan.

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

Without a doubt, many details of the book of Revelation are hard to understand. But its main ideas are still fairly clear. John's purpose was to encourage his readers to be faithful to Christ even when they were suffering. The offers of God's blessings should have encouraged them to be loyal to Jesus and active in good works. And he threatened them with God's curses in order to drive them to repentance. In one or both of these ways, every image, symbol and scenario in Revelation encourages faithfulness. And if we keep this purpose in mind, it'll help us understand what the book of Revelation meant for early Christians, and what it means to us modern readers too.

Now that we've explored the purpose of the Book of Revelation, let's turn our attention to its details.

## DETAILS

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The book of Revelation begins with a short introduction in 1:1–8. Following this, the body of Revelation consists of four central visions:

- Vision of Christ in 1:9–3:22
- Vision about coming events in 4:1–16:21
- Vision describing the punishment of the Great Prostitute in 17:1–21:8
- Vision of the bride, the wife of the Lamb in Revelation 21:9–22:5.

After the four central visions, the book ends with a conclusion in 22:6–21.

The four large visions in the body of Revelation are each introduced with a statement that John was “in the Spirit.” John consistently used this language to mark the beginning of new divisions in the main body of his book.

**When we go to interpret this phrase that John uses four times in Revelation, “At once I was in the Spirit,” — something like this — the easy part to observe is that it happens these four times, and each time it happens, it’s at a turning point in the book of Revelation. And so I think this allows us to break down the book of Revelation into these, broadly speaking, these parts where you’ve got Jesus and the letters at the beginning, and then you’ve got the throne and the judgments in the middle, and then at the end you’ve got the harlot and then the king and then the bride. And that’s really the whole book of Revelation.**

**— Dr. James M. Hamilton**

In Revelation 1:10, John wrote:

**On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet (Revelation 1:10).**

In Revelation 4:2, he reported:

**At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it (Revelation 4:2).**

In Revelation 17:3, he said:

**Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert (Revelation 17:3).**

And in Revelation 21:10, he wrote:

**He carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (Revelation 21:10).**

**That reference to being caught up in the Spirit is a reference to some sort of experience that John as a prophet is given in which he is brought into a visionary state to receive these symbolic visions. The background is actually in the prophecy of Ezekiel in the Old Testament where at a couple of points Ezekiel speaks of the Spirit taking him to a place and showing him things that he would not otherwise be able to see. It's an experience that I think we don't fully understand. Maybe even the prophets didn't understand. Paul talks in 2 Corinthians 12 about being caught up to the third heaven, and whether it was in the body or out of the body, he wasn't sure. I'm not sure that they really understood it, but it was evident and clear that God was placing them in a position, in a state, where they could receive visionary revelation quite out of the ordinary and that they could then bring that word to us through inscripturating, putting it down in the Bible in the words that the Spirit gave them to describe these visions and these experiences.**

**— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

We'll explore each major section of the book of Revelation, beginning with the introduction in Revelation 1:1-8.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The introduction begins with a prologue in Revelation 1:1-3 that stresses the book's divine authority. It originated from God the Father, was given to Jesus Christ, and was made known through an angel. And as Christ's prophet, John was an authoritative ambassador that relayed Jesus' message to his churches.

Verses 4 and 5 contain a greeting, in which John identified himself and his audience. Specifically, he wrote to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, located in Asia Minor. John also included a greeting: from God the Father, who was described as him who is, who was, and who is to come; from the Holy Spirit, whose fullness or completeness is symbolized as the seven spirits before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, whom John calls the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

In verses 5–8, John offered praise to God, and this praise revealed some of his central concerns for his audience. John praised God for his sovereignty, convinced that God was working all of history for his own glorious purposes. He praised God for redemption in Jesus Christ, because Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension were the basis for every hope John mentioned in his book. And finally, he praised God for the promise that Christ would come again, the great future event when everything God has planned and promised will be fulfilled.

Christians can respond to our future hope of full redemption in a spirit of hope. Hope is the confident anticipation of a positive future. And the remarkable, practical nature of hope is that it makes us buoyant, it makes us persevering, it makes us resilient, and it gives us in the present a kind of anticipative joy in the confidence that what is promised will become a reality. It buoys us up further by the sense of assured inevitability of the outcome for which we labor now, in which, in the natural might be a little shaky or uncertain from our limited perspective.

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

The final redemption that we are going to receive through Jesus is so unbelievably beautiful and glorious that our response has to be a sort of total response of our entire being to what God has done and promises to do for us in Jesus Christ. That's what I understand 1 John 3 to be saying when John says, "We're now the children of God, but it does not yet appear to us what we shall be, but we know this, when he is revealed, we shall be like him. So anyone who has this hope in him purifies himself as he is pure." If the goal of God's redemption is to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ, if the goal of God's redemption in our lives is to bring us into a perfect union with him, a perfect relationship of loving trust and obedience, if the goal of God's redemption is to fill us with his love and his Spirit so that forever we are not just enjoying heaven, but forever heaven is living in us, then our response now can be only one thing: Lord make me as much like Jesus in this life as a human being can possibly be. I don't know what that looks like; I don't know how it works, but Lord, make me into all that you can make out of me. I give you my all; I give you my life. I surrender all that I am to you. I don't want to live for anything else, anything less than your perfect and complete redemption at work in my life now.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

After the introduction, we find the vision of Christ and its application to the seven churches in Revelation 1:9–3:22.

## VISION OF CHRIST

The vision of Christ begins with a description of Christ and concludes with Christ's letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. We'll look at each of these sections separately, beginning with John's description of Christ in Revelation 1:9-20.



## Description of Christ

Before describing Jesus, John expressed his unity with his readers by identifying himself as their companion in: suffering, Christ's kingdom, and patient endurance.

Suffering has always been a reality for believers. But John insisted that in the New Testament era, our suffering has special significance. Christ suffered as he stood against sin. And because believers are united to Jesus, we suffer too. Even so, whenever we suffer, we have the consolation that God is present with us, and that he sovereignly rules over our situation. In *every* circumstance — even martyrdom — we're obtaining victory over evil and death through the power of Christ.

John also indicated that he received this vision while he was "in the Spirit." This probably indicates that John was in a state of spiritual ecstasy, even though he wasn't physically moved to a new location. This is one of the ways God revealed himself to the prophets in the Old Testament, too, as we can see in passages like Ezekiel 3:12.

Finally, John concluded the preface by saying that a voice from heaven commissioned him to write visionary reports to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

John's actual description of Jesus begins in Revelation 1:12. Jesus appeared as the "son of man" walking among the seven lampstands. These symbolized the churches who brought the light of God in Christ to the world still under the tyranny of darkness. The lampstands also would have reminded John's readers of the furnishings in the Old Testament tabernacle and in the temple and of the fact that Jesus is now in the heavenly tabernacle before the throne of God. Already in 1:4, John drew a symbolic connection between the seven churches of Asia Minor and the seven lights of the lampstand before God. In the tabernacle and later in the temple, God manifested his glorious presence among his people. And just as God once dwelled among his people Israel, Christ now dwells among his church.

Jesus was also dressed in a robe and sash, resembling the high priest in the Jewish temple. His eyes were like flames of fire and feet were like burnished bronze. His voice was powerful, like the rush of many waters, and a double-edged sword came out of his mouth. And his face shone so brightly with his glory that he was like the sun itself. This appearance showed that Jesus was majestic, glorious, and powerful.

**When we read Revelation 1, one of the most striking things about that chapter is the vision we see there of Jesus Christ. The first thing we ought to say is, clearly, this is a symbolic picture of who Jesus is. This is not a picture that is to be drawn or taken literally. But we remember that John wrote this book, which is a letter, a prophesy, and also apocalyptic literature, he wrote this book to suffering believers who were, some of them, giving their lives for Jesus Christ and for the gospel. And they were all living under that threat of losing their lives for the gospel. In chapter 1, we have this glorious picture of Jesus Christ as the Son of Man, and we have various descriptions of Jesus there. He is wearing a priestly robe. He is the means by which we enter into God's presence. John pictures him as having white hair,**

white as snow, which is quite interesting because he is drawing there on Daniel 7, and the person with the white hair in Daniel 7 is Yahweh. Yet John applies that to Jesus, showing that Jesus is equal with Yahweh, that he is fully divine. In this picture we have Jesus having a sharp two-edged sword in his mouth, which is obviously not literal, but it emphasizes the power of his word that can cut and destroy his enemies so that the church can take comfort in Christ. We're told there his face shines with glory, that he is the glorious Lord. Jesus says to John, "He holds the keys of death and Hades." This is what the church was facing. They were facing possible death, and so they were worried, naturally, about their future. And John emphasizes, doesn't he, that Jesus is sovereign, that he is the resurrected one, he is the living one, he is the first and the last, he has conquered death, they need not fear. Does it look as if Nero or Domitian, whoever you think the emperor was at the time — that's debated — but whoever the Roman emperor was, does it look like that emperor was in control, or the political authorities were in control? They're not in control. Jesus reigns, Jesus rules. Everyone will have to reckon with him. So Revelation is fundamentally a book of comfort for the suffering church, a call to persevere, a call to trust that Jesus is the Sovereign, the glorious Lord. He's walking in the midst of the lampstands. They should be comforted and strengthened and continue to hope and to trust in him.

— Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner

Now that we've examined John's description of Christ, let's look at Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3.

## Letters to the Seven Churches

Christ addressed letters to seven churches located in Asia Minor, which is the western portion of modern Turkey. He arranged the letters in the order a person delivering them might travel. He wrote first to the coastal city of Ephesus, then to Smyrna to the north, then to Pergamum even further north. Next, he looked in a southeastern direction addressing letters to Thyatira, then Sardis, then Philadelphia, then Laodicea. These letters record the words Jesus spoke in his heavenly courtroom, and were designed to help the churches understand and respond to the visions that followed.

In general terms, these letters all follow the same basic pattern, with only slight variations in order. This pattern contains many elements that resemble Old Testament prophecies and reminds us that John was serving as Jesus' prophet to these churches.

First, each letter starts with an address to the angel of each church. Some interpreters have taken this as a reference to human messengers representing each church. But in this context of a heavenly vision, it's more likely that these were actual angels that Christ assigned to each local congregation. Second, there's a description of Christ drawn

from his appearance in Revelation 1, emphasizing a characteristic of Jesus that's relevant to the letter. Third, there is a claim of knowledge, indicating that Christ knows these churches and the details of their lives. Fourth, there is an evaluation of the church, consisting of commendations and often including rebukes. Fifth, there is a mixture of offers of blessing and threats of curse appropriate to Christ's evaluation of the church. Sixth, there is the promise that all who overcome will inherit eternal blessings. Seventh, each letter has an exhortation to obey Christ.

The similarities between the letters in Revelation 2 and 3 alert us to the main ideas in this section. Christ was addressing these churches as their rightful king. He was aware of their present circumstances and had the authority to evaluate them. He offered blessings and he threatened curses to encourage their faithfulness. And he reminded them that eternal salvation was only for those who overcame trials and temptations. Not surprisingly, these themes also play a major role throughout the main body of the book of Revelation.

**Jesus in the seven letters to the seven churches is wanting the church, the individual Christians, to show faithfulness to him, to be obedient, and regardless what is happening by way of opposition — and there is plenty of that — they remain faithful. Now notice, there are seven churches. True, two of them were faithful, and I'm referring to the church in Smyrna and the church in Philadelphia, and Jesus has nothing but praise for these two. Now the others, Ephesus and Pergamum and Thyatira and Sardis receive praise, but also condemnation. And then you have one more, number seven, and that it is the church of Laodicea, and there is not a word of praise for the church in Laodicea because it was self-sufficient.**

— Dr. Simon J. Kistemaker

We'll look briefly at each of these letters, beginning with the letter to Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7.

***Ephesus.*** In this letter, John introduced Jesus as the one who holds seven stars in his right hand as he walks among the seven golden lampstands. This description emphasized the light of Christ's glory and power.

As their king, Jesus gave a mixed evaluation of the church in Ephesus. They had commendable zeal for sound doctrine, and didn't tolerate wicked behavior. They were specifically said to have hated the practices of the Nicolaitans, a very early heretical group that may have mixed Christian faith with pagan eroticism.

But the Ephesian church also received a strong criticism. In Revelation 2:4 Jesus told them that they had forsaken their first love; they had lost their enthusiasm and zeal for Christ and his kingdom. So, Christ warned them that if they didn't repent and return to their earlier enthusiasm, he would remove their lampstand — their symbol of honor in heaven. In other words, they would be disciplined and perhaps even disbanded.

**Smyrna.** The letter to the church at Smyrna appears in Revelation 2:8-11. It opens with a description of Jesus as “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” This description identified Jesus as the one who created all things, and as the focal point of creation’s final destiny.

This is one of only two letters that doesn’t include a rebuke for wrongdoing. It focuses entirely on sympathy and understanding for the church in Smyrna, which faced serious persecution, probably because of unbelieving Jews.

We can see in Acts and in the other New Testament books that right away the claim that Jesus is the Messiah begins to divide synagogues, for example. And Paul is a great example of someone who’s put out of the synagogue. For example in Ephesus he goes and teaches in a school hall, or we began to see Christians who are meeting in households instead of in synagogue gatherings. One of the things that puts a lot of pressure on that relationship early on is of course the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, but also the influx of Gentiles. We began to see that those who are preaching Christianity are preaching Jesus as the Lord over all the nations. And we began to see Gentiles responding. And so the various sensibilities about the food laws, about circumcision began to add more pressure. And we see these sort of disputes break out like at Galatia, over whether or not these Gentiles are to keep the Law. The other thing that is putting a lot of pressure on this relationship is the way that both of them are relating to Rome and Rome’s power. We know of course, for example, that the Temple is destroyed in A.D. 70. And even before that, that’s because of Jewish revolution against Caesar, and so in the wake of that we see Jews trying to reestablish their identity. And they began to discuss that, and what that should look like. And that adds further to the separation between Christians and Jews.

— Dr. Greg Perry

Despite the problems the Jews in Smyrna created for the church, Jesus exhorted his followers to faithfulness, and encouraged them to trust him because he had overcome death.

**Pergamum.** Next, Christ addressed the church in Pergamum in Revelation 2:12-17. In this letter, John introduced Christ as the one who “has the sharp, double-edged sword.” Jesus’ words are razor-sharp, able to judge between right and wrong. And this was directly relevant because his evaluation of the church was both positive and negative.

Listen to what Jesus said in Revelation 2:13-14:

**You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city — where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you (Revelation 2:13-14).**

Jesus followed his commendation with a rebuke: the church had failed to reject the Nicolaitans, as well as teachings that were associated with Balaam. These false teachers led many into pagan revelry and immorality. And Christ warned that he would discipline the church if they didn't repent.

***Thyatira.*** The letter to the church in Thyatira appears in Revelation 2:18-29. Here, John described Jesus as a purifying fire, with eyes like blazing fire and feet like burnished bronze. This description relates directly to the letter's content, because the church at Thyatira needed to be refined and purified.

In Revelation 2:19-20, Jesus had this to say:

**I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants (Revelation 2:19-20).**

Unlike the church in Ephesus, the Thyatirans hadn't lost their first love for Christ. Instead, their love had actually increased. But they tolerated the false teaching of a particular woman, whom Jesus pejoratively called "Jezebel."

Just like the infamous Queen Jezebel who appears in 1 and 2 Kings, this woman seduced people into sexual immorality and idolatry — two closely related practices among pagans in Asia Minor. Jesus warned this church to reject these false teachings and to remain faithful to him.

**I think love and zeal need to be, have to be, coupled with strong doctrine if it's going to endure, and if it's going to be Christ-like. I think some people have an emotional gift for love and for zeal, but that emotional gift without a strong understanding of what God has told us in these sixty-six canonical books I think can very easily go way out of whack. On the other hand, I think there are some people that have an emotional gift for study, and they want to understand, and they want to know what this doctrine has to say, and they definitely lack love. Actually they can become pharisaical if they're not careful. They can know all the right things, but without that component of love, of passion, of zeal both for God and man, they're definitely missing the boat.**

**— Dr. Matt Friedman**

**It's important for us to reflect on the question of why our zeal and love for Jesus Christ needs to be combined with, shall we say, sound, biblically grounded doctrine. Indeed, this is an essential and very dynamic combination, when you get the passion of the heart combined with the clarity of truth in the head. Immediately to my mind comes a**

reflection of the apostle Paul on some of his fellow Jews who had rejected Christ, who were very passionate in their pursuit of the goals of the Jewish faith, and the apostle says, “For I confess that they have a zeal, but it is not according to knowledge.” In other words, the passion was admirable, but it was misdirected because it was not informed, and tethered, and stimulated by a clear grasp of the truth. It’s almost as though our zeal is the fuel in the tank of our car, and the doctrines are the steering wheel. If you are not headed in the right direction, the accelerator pedal actually becomes a dangerous instrument. And so we need to have that zeal channeled according to the truth, and then it becomes a very potent force for good.

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

**Sardis.** The letter to the church at Sardis follows next, in Revelation 3:1-6. Here, John alluded to the seven manifestations of the Spirit and seven stars in Jesus’ hand to remind the church at Sardis that Jesus had all power and authority. John drew attention to the authority of Jesus because his evaluation of this church was so severe.

As we read in Revelation 3:1-3:

**You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God... [I]f you do not wake up, I will come like a thief (Revelation 3:1-3).**

The city of Sardis had a reputation as a strong fortress, but on two occasions it had been captured by surprise. And Jesus warned that he would do something similar to the church in Sardis if they failed to repent. He would come as a thief, attacking them by surprise. But for those who remained faithful to him, Christ promised purity, vindication, and reward.

**Philadelphia.** Jesus’ letter to the church in Philadelphia appears in Revelation 3:7-13. In this letter, John introduced Jesus as the one who holds the key of David, meaning that Jesus can open the doors of David’s kingdom to admit those he wishes, and lock the doors to keep others out. Jesus’ words to this church were positive, but they also included an implicit warning.

In Revelation 3:8, he gave them this assurance:

**I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name (Revelation 3:8).**

Christ had set before this church an open door, giving them an unobstructed opportunity to grow and develop spiritually. If they would take advantage of this open door, Christ would make their enemies bow down at their feet, and the Philadelphian believers would inherit the New Jerusalem. And God’s name would be written on them,



meaning that they would be his forever. But by implication, if they didn't take advantage of this opportunity, they wouldn't receive these blessings.

**Laodicea.** Next, we find Jesus' letter to the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-22. In this letter, John described Jesus as the one whose words are the ultimate Amen, that is, Jesus is the ultimate trustworthy authority. John also described Jesus as the faithful and true witness, and the ruler of God's creation. This description was designed to make the Laodicean believers pay attention, because their evaluation would be very negative.

Listen to what Jesus said in Revelation 3:15-16:

**I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth (Revelation 3:15-16).**

Laodicea was a wealthy city located between the cities of Colossae and Hierapolis. Both Colossae and Hierapolis were well known for having special water supplies. Colossae had cool waters from mountain springs; Hierapolis had hot springs. Both of these waters were thought to have healing powers. But the water in Laodicea was lukewarm, without any healing powers. Jesus drew from these physical realities to make a spiritual point: the Laodicean church was wealthy, but their wealth had taken away their spiritual strength. This church needed to repent, or Jesus would reject them.

**I think Revelation 2 and 3 are absolutely key to the letter of the book of Revelation because they give us in many ways the application points for the church, the characteristics that the churches are asked to manifest. And one special one is found in the refrain at the end of each of the messages to the church, which is to overcome — “to the church who overcomes.” “To those who overcome,” it says. And that reminds us of the need to persevere. But there's other overarching themes as well, so one of the words that you'll encounter as you're reading through those two chapters a number of times is to repent, for those churches who are falling short of what the Lord is calling them to, they are to repent. Should it be that they've lost their first love, should it be that they've been following the teachings of a sectarian group or really a heretical group within the church, they're called to repent from that as well. And so the Lord is calling them back to himself in that moment. But he's also calling those who do love him to continue and those who are persevering to continue in that as well, and to stay true to the faith, but to stay true especially to the worship of the Lord.**

**— Dr. David W. Chapman**

Now that we've explored the vision of Christ, let's turn to John's vision of coming events, recorded in Revelation 4:1–16:21.

## COMING EVENTS

According to Revelation 4:1-2, this vision takes place at the heavenly throne and reveals coming events that were still in the future in John's day. It addresses all of the churches together, and primarily focuses on the future as a great struggle between the forces of good and evil. This vision was designed to encourage John's original audience to remain faithful throughout their struggles against sin and Satan, because God's future victory was certain.

The first thing we should note about John's vision of coming events is that it consists of four series of smaller visions: the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven histories, and the seven bowls. Some interpreters believe that these series should be read chronologically, as if they portrayed consecutive stages of history. But John never indicated that this was the case.

For one thing, the temporal markers that link these series together — phrases like “after this” — refer to the order in which he was shown the visions, not to the order of the events revealed in the visions.

For another, there appear to be a number of unique historical events in these visions that are mentioned in more than one series. For this reason, our lesson will adopt an interpretive perspective that has sometimes been called “recapitulation.”

Generally speaking, recapitulation happens when a later passage restates or repeats an earlier passage. As it applies to the book of Revelation, this term specifically refers to the idea that each series of visions describes the entire time period between the first and second comings of Christ, but with its own distinct details and emphases.

Recapitulation is actually very common in biblical prophecy. Old Testament prophets frequently used this technique, describing the same series of events in different passages. Sometimes the recapitulation used very similar imagery, as in Jeremiah 30 and 31, where Jeremiah prophesied about the restoration of Israel. At other times, recapitulation used different imagery to describe the same events, as in Isaiah 9 and 11, where Isaiah talked about the coming of the Messiah.

We see the same thing in the lawsuits God brought against Israel in Hosea 9–14. And there are many more examples, too. So, when John used this technique in the book of Revelation, he was using a well-known, traditional, biblical strategy to convey his message.

There are a number of clues in the visions themselves that strongly suggest that John was describing the same sequence of events from different perspectives. For example, John's visions refer to what we would call the final judgment three different times.

In Revelation 6:12-17, which is part of the vision of the seven seals, the sun turns black, the moon turns blood-red, the stars fall to the earth, and everyone on the earth hides from God's judgment. In Revelation 11:15, which is part of the vision of the seven trumpets, loud voices declare, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever!” In Revelation 15:1, which is part of the vision of the seven bowls, we're told that when the seven bowls are poured, God's wrath will be finished.

Each of these passages describes events that are associated with the return of



Christ and God's final judgment on the earth. But each series of visions also includes other details that seem to precede the final judgment. For this reason, it seems best to read each series of visions as a distinct description of the entire history of God's kingdom prior to Christ's return.

Even though recapitulation is a widespread view among Evangelicals, it's important to recognize that some don't interpret the book of Revelation this way. So, in this lesson, we won't tie our interpretations too closely to the perspective of recapitulation. Even so, we should recognize that most Christian teachers believe it makes the best sense of the literary structure of John's vision of coming events, as well as of the content of those visions.

As we've seen, John's vision of coming events divides into four major sections: the visions of the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven symbolic histories, and the seven bowls. We'll explore each series of visions, beginning with the seven seals in Revelation 4:1–8:1.

## Seven Seals

The vision of the seven seals consists of two main parts, beginning with a description of God's heavenly throne room in Revelation 4 and 5. This section shows us an important scroll with seven seals, and sets the stage for the opening of those seals in chapters 6–8.

Revelation 4:1:11 describes a scene in God's heavenly throne room, and resembles similar visions in Ezekiel 1, Isaiah 6, and other Old Testament passages. God was sitting on his throne, and was being worshiped by heavenly creatures — including four that John described in some detail. Each of the four was covered with eyes and had six wings. But they had different overall appearances: one resembled a lion, another an ox, another a man, and another an eagle. They probably represented all the creatures of the earth giving praise to God.

John's vision also showed twenty-four elders surrounding God's throne, probably numbered according to the twelve tribes of Old Testament Israel and the twelve New Testament apostles. These elders symbolized the people of God throughout history. Whenever the four creatures praised God, the elders bowed down, acknowledging his majesty and authority, and promised him their submission, obedience, and reverence. Beyond the elders was a myriad of angels that extended the praise of God outward, and also praised the Lamb of God.

This scene also contains many images from the Old Testament descriptions of the tabernacle and temple: lamps were blazing before the throne; incense depicted the prayers of God's people; there was a glass sea, more perfect than the bronze one in the Old Testament; and there were songs of praise like those offered by Levitical singers. This symbolism indicated that John was given a view of God's heavenly throne room, from which he rules over the entire universe and renders his judgments. And this told John's readers that the vision dealt with matters of great importance.

The heavenly vision continued in Revelation 5:1-14. God held a scroll in his right hand, representing his plan for the destiny of the world. But none of the members of his court could open the scroll. In other words, none of them could accomplish his plan. Then

one of the elders told John that the Lion of the tribe of Judah would open the seven seals and read the scroll.

The reference to the Lion of the tribe of Judah is drawn from Genesis 49:9-10, where we read these words:

**You are a lion's cub, O Judah ... The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his (Genesis 49:9-10).**

This prophecy indicated that Judah would rule over the tribes of Israel, and eventually produce a king that would rule the entire world.

But when John looked, he was surprised to find that the Lion of Judah was actually a lamb, looking as if it had been slain. Of course, the Lamb was Christ. He is the descendant of Judah, the King of Israel. And he became the Passover Lamb who gave himself as an atoning sacrifice, just as we read in John 1:29. Jesus' ability to open the scroll indicated that he was the one through whom God would accomplish all his plans for the world.

**When you look at Revelation 5, there is this great image of Jesus as lion and lamb. Now where does that imagery come from? Well the first thing we should note about that is the prophetic background of that image, that it's a prophetic image that John is giving us about Jesus. And as we look to the Old Testament background, we find that those are very rich themes. The lion, for example, should be associated with the tribe of Judah from Genesis 49 where it is prophesied that Judah will be a lion's cub and that a scepter will never depart from Judah, that he will rule over all his brothers. And it's a victorious symbol, it's a very mighty symbol, that of the lion. Where does the lamb come from? Well, we might look to the Passover lamb in the Old Testament that is slain for the people and for forgiveness of sins. And we could also relate that to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the one who is pierced and led like lamb to the slaughter. And so John has taken these two images in creating for us a multi-perspectival image on who Jesus is. He's the Lion and the Lamb. He is a slain lamb, yes, but that slain lamb is one that overcomes, is one that is victorious. And we see that in Revelation 5 where he has seven horns. So the image of the lamb is not of a weak, destroyed, never-to-rise-again lamb, but it is of the conquering Lamb, the Lamb who is the Lion of Judah, and there was an association of these ideas with messianic hopes in Judaism. And John is showing us how these images, the realities of these images, are fulfilled in Jesus.**

— Dr. Brandon Crowe

**Genesis 49 speaks of a lion in the tribe of Judah, and this was developed in Jewish expectation, Fourth Ezra and elsewhere, referring to the conquering, warlike lion. And so John hears about this Lion from the Tribe of Judah who has overcome. But when he turns, what he sees is the antithesis of a powerful, conquering lion. He sees a lamb, and not just a lamb which was considered the most powerless of creatures, but a slain lamb. And this brings us back to the heart of the gospel that we have throughout the New Testament, and that is that Jesus overcomes, particularly not by expressing power in the traditional sense, but Jesus overcomes by the cross, by dying. God's power is made perfect in weakness. God's glory is revealed. His triumph is revealed in Jesus' suffering.**

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

The second part of the vision of the seven seals is the opening of the seals themselves in Revelation 6:1–8:1. It presents the opening of six seals, followed by an interlude, and then the opening of the seventh seal.

The first four seals released the well-known four horsemen of the Apocalypse that brought calamities on the world. The imagery of the four horsemen is drawn from Zechariah 6, where horses of the same colors are said to be the four spirits of heaven. When the first seal was opened, a rider on a white horse brought conquest to the nations. The second seal brought a rider on a fiery red horse, representing slaughter.

War is the most obvious form of slaughter, but the picture is broad enough to encompass other forms of human killing, too. The third seal produced a rider on a black horse that represented famine. And the fourth seal brought a rider named Death, who rode a pale horse and represented death by sword, famine, plagues and wild beasts. As terrible as these calamities were, only a fourth of the earth was affected. Most escaped this part of God's judgment.

When the fifth seal was opened, John saw a vision of Christian martyrs in heaven. These saints had been slain because they had remained faithful to God and his Word. They cried out for God to punish their murderers, but were told that God wouldn't bring all his justice to bear just yet. They would need to be patient, until the number of those who were to be martyred was complete.

When the sixth seal was opened, the entire earth experienced God's judgment. There was an earthquake; the sun turned black; the moon turned blood red; the stars fell to earth; the sky retreated; and every mountain and island was removed. This description recalls Old Testament prophecies about political upheaval, like the ones we find in Isaiah 34:1-4 and Joel 2:10-11. It was a way of saying that God was bringing final judgment that would destroy the present evil world.

**One day humans will be held accountable and have no excuse before God. Those who fear God will respect him even more. But those who treat these things like a joke will face the future judgment. They won't even have the chance to pray. Their only hope will be to have the hills and mountains fall on them to avoid the coming wrath of God. This**

**warning of judgment is one that God prepared specifically for the chosen people, so that they will live out devout lives in fear of God, and pray for the power to live in holy ways that please him.**

**— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation**

Between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals, there is an interlude in Revelation 7. This interlude describes the church in ways that highlight God's protection of his people. First, John heard an announcement that 12,000 people from each of the twelve tribes of Israel — 144,000 people in total — had been sealed by God as his special people. Although this 144,000 has been understood in different ways, the text of Revelation says that John heard an announcement of 144,000, but when he turned and looked, he saw something quite different.

Listen to how John described them in Revelation 7:9:

**There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).**

You'll recall that something similar happened in Revelation 5. John heard an announcement about a lion, then looked and saw a lamb. Well, something similar happened here. He heard an announcement about 144,000 Jews, then looked and saw an even larger crowd consisting of Jews and Gentiles together. In both cases, John heard words drawn from symbolism in the Old Testament — the lion and the tribes of Israel. But when he turned to look, what appeared was much greater than what had been announced. The symbolism of the lion was fulfilled in Christ, and the symbolism of the tribes was fulfilled in a great multitude of believers from every nation.

After the interlude, the opening of the seventh seal is recorded in Revelation 8:1. But instead of a grand, climactic ending, there was simply silence. Creation stood in awe. The silence created dramatic tension for those who first read John's visions. What was this mysterious final stage of history? The answer to this question remained to be seen in the visions that followed.

Now that we've explored the seven seals, let's turn our attention to the second series of visions regarding coming events: the seven trumpets in Revelation 8:2–11:19.

## **Seven Trumpets**

The vision of the seven trumpets consists of a series of angels blowing trumpets. Each time a trumpet is blown, another judgment falls on the earth. It's important to see that the vision of seven trumpets is structured in a similarly to the vision of the seven seals. The vision presents six trumpets, followed by an interlude, and then the seventh trumpet. These trumpets recall the trumpets in Old Testament prophetic passages like Hosea 5:8, Joel 2:1, Amos 2:2 and Zechariah 9:14. They're trumpets that sound when

God comes with his angelic armies, calling the heavenly host to war against God's enemies.

The first four trumpet blasts in Revelation 8:2-13 signaled judgments through the angelic armies on the four major regions of creation. When the first trumpet was sounded, hail and fire mixed with blood was hurled on dry land. The second trumpet sounded and something like a huge mountain was thrown into the sea. The third trumpet sounded and a blazing star was thrown into fresh water sources, making them bitter and undrinkable. And with the sounding of the fourth trumpet, the sky was damaged; a third of the day and a third of the night were without light. But as bad as these judgments were, only a third of each region was destroyed. At the end of this section, though, an eagle warned that even worse judgments were coming.

The fifth trumpet blast is recorded in Revelation 9:1-12. It set in motion an army of unnatural locusts. John described these locusts as horses prepared for battle, having crowns of gold, human faces, women's hair, lions' teeth, and tails like scorpions. But their power was limited. They could only wreak havoc on the earth for five months, and they were only permitted to attack the wicked.

The sixth blast of a trumpet is recorded in Revelation 9:13-21. It released four angels from the Euphrates River, who proceeded to destroy a third of humanity.

These first six trumpets are followed by a two-part interlude in Revelation 10:1-11:14. In a scenario that resembled God's revelation of judgment to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 2:9-3:9, John received a little scroll containing prophetic messages, and he was told to eat it. The scroll tasted as sweet as honey, probably representing the good news that God's plans for the world would be consummated without delay. But the scroll also turned his stomach sour, probably indicating that suffering would attend the consummation of God's plans.

The second part of the interlude records John's vision of two witnesses who died for the sake of the gospel. They performed miracles, called people to repentance, and warned of coming judgment. But then they were slain by God's enemies.

John's vision of the two witnesses highlighted the most fundamental conflict in history: the conflict between Jesus Christ and his enemies. The two witnesses were supremely powerful, but their opponents were extremely hostile and they murdered the witnesses. This stark contrast highlights the reality that there is no middle ground in the conflict between Jesus and his enemies. Every human being is either for Jesus or against Jesus.

After the interlude, the seventh angel sounded the seventh trumpet in Revelation 11:15-19, closing this vision series.

Revelation 11:15 records this proclamation in heaven at the sounding of the seventh trumpet:

**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15).**

The seventh trumpet introduces the worship that will take place in God's throne room when his victory over all the kingdoms of earth is secure and when he renders his final judgment on all creation. Christ will return to renew the earth; his glory will be fully revealed; and God's reign will be fully manifested throughout all creation.

The third series of visions dealing with coming events is the seven symbolic histories in Revelation 12:1–14:20.

## Seven Histories

Structurally, the vision of the seven symbolic histories mirrors the visions of the seals and trumpets: the first six histories are grouped together, followed by an interlude, and then the seventh symbolic history. But while the visions of the seals and trumpets focused on divine judgments, the seven histories portrayed the spiritual conflict between Satan and the people of God. The histories in this series revolve around key symbolic characters: the woman, the dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, the 144,000 believers, the angelic messengers, and the Son of Man.

The first symbolic character is a pregnant woman clothed in the sun. Her history is found in Revelation 12:1-17, and resembles the birth of Jesus and Herod's attempt to kill him. The woman, who represents faithful Israel, gave birth to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Her child was taken into heaven, which may refer to Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven. But the woman remained on earth and was persecuted by a great dragon. God protected her so that the dragon couldn't defeat her, but she still suffered because of the conflict. This symbolic history represents the fact that Jesus descended from God's faithful people, and that true believers continue to suffer because of Satan and his kingdom. John's original audience would have understood that this conflict was at the root of their problems, and would have drawn encouragement from God's protection and care for the woman. At the same time, they would have understood their need to persevere, since the struggles wouldn't end any time soon.

The next symbolic history revolves around a huge red dragon, and appears in Revelation 12:3-17. This history is presented simultaneously with the woman's history, but is identified in Revelation 12:3 as a separate sign. The dragon is described as enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns on his heads. And in verse 9 he is identified as Satan himself. In John's vision, the dragon's tail swept a third of the stars from sky and flung them to the earth. This action may represent angels falling to become demons, or simply political upheaval as in Isaiah 34:4 and Mark 13:25. The dragon attacked the woman and her child, highlighting the intense struggle between Satan and God's people.

In the dragon's history, there was also a war in heaven, in which Michael and the angels fought the dragon. Michael threw Satan and his angels down to the earth. Once cast to earth, Satan pursued the woman to persecute her. But God protected her, so Satan turned to attacking her offspring — believers who obey Christ and keep the testimony of Christ. This symbolic history would have helped John's readers understand that they were being persecuted because of Satan's hatred of God, and in the course of a spiritual war. Even so, Satan was already defeated, and the church would suffer persecution only until the dragon's limited time on earth was done.

The third symbolic history revolves around the beast from the sea, and is found in Revelation 13:1-10. This beast had the characteristics of a lion, a bear, and a leopard, similar to the beasts in Daniel 7 that represented idolatrous kingdoms. This suggests that the beast from the sea symbolizes all the political powers that oppose the kingdom of

Jesus Christ. John also wrote that the beast had a horrible scar from a prior wound that should have been fatal.

The dragon gave the beast from the sea power and authority over all the kingdoms of the earth, and all the inhabitants of the earth worshiped the beast. He was even given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. John's readers probably would have associated this beast with the Roman emperor or Empire, as well as with emperor worship. They would have seen the need to resist the beast, and to remain faithful to Christ.

The fourth symbolic history centers on a second beast — one that rises from the earth. This history is found in Revelation 13:11-18. The beast from the earth had two horns like a lamb, but spoke like a dragon. It served the beast from the sea, and performed miraculous signs in order to make the world worship that other beast. It also forced people to receive the sign of the beast on their right hand or forehead. Together, both beasts attempted to conquer the entire world.

John's readers would likely have connected this second beast with the Roman civic cult that coerced emperor worship, threatening to kill those who refused to worship the emperor. Like the history of the beast from the sea, this one would have exhorted them to resist idolatry and to be faithful to Jesus.

The fifth symbolic history deals with 144,000 believers that belong to God, and appears in Revelation 14:1-5. Based on the fact that God's name is sealed on their foreheads, they appear to be the same group mentioned in Revelation 7:1-8. The seal of God's name on their foreheads contrasts with the mark the beast on the foreheads of those that obey the beast of the earth. In John's vision, these 144,000 believers stood with the Lamb on Mount Zion praising God.

This symbolic history assured John's readers that true believers will ultimately escape the dragon and the beasts and receive God's blessing. Despite intense persecution, faithful believers will be found pure and blameless.

The sixth symbolic history is a vision of three angelic messengers, found in Revelation 14:6-11. In John's vision, the first angel proclaimed the eternal gospel, calling all people to fear God and worship him. The second angel announced the Fall of Babylon the Great, the capital city of those who oppose the kingdom of Jesus Christ. And the third angel declared the final judgment of everyone that followed and worshiped the beast. These messengers communicated that Christ's gospel will triumph over every opposing kingdom, and that when Jesus returns his enemies will be eternally condemned.

John's description of these angelic messengers should have encouraged his readers that, even though it sometimes looks like the church is being defeated, Christ's kingdom will eventually conquer his adversaries. And if any of John's readers were considering worshiping the emperor in order to avoid persecution, this history would have warned them to resist that temptation.

After the angelic messengers, John included a short interlude in Revelation 14:12-13. In this interlude, John exhorted God's people to persevere — to resist the idolatrous culture around them. And voices from heaven proclaimed that those who remained faithful would ultimately receive God's blessing and rest.

The last symbolic history describes one "like a son of man," who sits on a white cloud and comes to reap his harvest. His history is found in Revelation 14:14-20. The phrase "like a son of man" is also used in Revelation 1:13, where it specifically refers to

Jesus. And it's clear from the actions and context of Revelation 14 that this son of man is also Christ. The imagery in this history is drawn from Daniel 7:13, where one "like a son of man" comes on the clouds in order to enter God's heavenly court.

In the first history of this series, the history of the woman, Jesus was pictured as a child that was taken up into heaven. But at the culmination of these histories, Jesus was pictured as the Son of Man reaping his harvest of faithful followers as one would harvest grain. Then a second reaper — this one an angel — harvested the remaining inhabitants of the world and crushed out their blood in the winepress of God's wrath. This vision declared the ultimate future victory of Jesus. It showed that history is moving toward a grand climax, where those who are faithful to Jesus will be vindicated, but those who aren't will be destroyed.

John's original readers should have found this encouraging. They would have recognized that their suffering wasn't worth comparing to wrath God would pour out on his enemies. And they would have drawn hope and confidence from the fact that they would eventually be vindicated and blessed.

**We often feel the tension of addressing ourselves to the issue how a loving God can send people to hell including his enemies. And I think one of the reasons that we struggle with that sometimes is because we have abstracted the attribute of God's love — which is a true attribute — we've abstracted it from his character, we abstracted it from the narrative of Scripture, and we overly sentimentalize it. We want to be careful not to dichotomize what is the holistic reality of God's character. And if we take our understanding of God's love in conjunction with our understanding of his holiness, we realize that though hell is a sobering reality and final judgment is a sobering reality, God is absolutely right and just to judge the unrepentant in hell, and in fact, if he didn't, we wouldn't say that he was good. If God did not esteem the proper worship of the one true God the way that he does in Scripture, we wouldn't say that he was good if he looked askance at sin and treated it as though it were no big deal. So the love of God is a critical attribute to understand. We just don't want to abstract it and isolate it from the rest of what we know about the character of God as revealed in Scripture.**

**— Dr. Robert G. Lister**

From the vision series of the symbolic histories, John's original readers should have been reminded that Christ had already defeated Satan on the cross. And since Satan had failed to defeat Christ in his first coming, believers could have every confidence that Satan would fail this time too. Eventually, Christ would return and destroy Satan and his beasts. And in the meantime, believers suffered persecution only as a result of their defeated enemy's dying gasps.

Now that we've surveyed the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven symbolic histories, let's turn to the fourth series of visions about coming events: the seven bowls of God's wrath in Revelation 15 and 16.



## Seven Bowls

The vision of the seven bowls presents seven angels that pour out seven golden bowls of God's wrath against the wicked. This vision follows the same structure as the visions of the seals, trumpets and histories: six bowls are followed by an interlude, and then the seventh bowl is poured out.

And there are also other parallels worth noting. For instance, like the first four trumpets, the first four bowls devastated the four major regions of the world: dry land, sea, fresh water, and sky. But while the judgments of the trumpets affected only a third of the earth, the bowls affected the entire world.

The first bowl inflicted a plague of painful sores on all those who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his name. The second bowl turned the sea to blood. The third bowl turned the fresh water of the rivers and springs to blood. And the fourth bowl created scorching heat from the sun. Despite these devastating plagues, the people cursed God and refused to repent.

The fifth bowl was poured out on the throne of the beast. From Revelation 13, it seems clear that this beast is the beast from the sea, whose rule was supported by the beast from the earth. This bowl plunged the beast's kingdom into darkness, but its followers still cursed God and refused to repent. When the sixth bowl was poured out, it dried up the Euphrates River, clearing a path for the kings from the East to invade God's Promised Land.

According to Revelation 16:16, a decisive battle between the kings of the east and God's people would be fought at Armageddon or the Mount of Megiddo. In ancient Israel, Megiddo was a key city along a major trade route between the kingdoms of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Huge armies could assemble in the neighboring Jezreel Valley, or as it's sometimes called, the Plain of Esdraelon. And God's people had previously achieved military victories in Megiddo. So, it was a fitting symbol to describe the climactic battle between God's servants and his enemies.

Next, John's vision paused for an interlude in Revelation 16:15, where we read this announcement:

**Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed (Revelation 16:15).**

Recalling his letter to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3, Christ exhorted his followers to remain vigilant and faithful at all times.

After the interlude, the seventh bowl triggered the final destruction of the wicked. Thunder and lightning rained down. An earthquake shattered the cities of the nations. Islands sank. Mountains crumbled. And giant hailstones crushed humanity. This was the end of the age — the destruction of the present world that will take place when Christ returns.

The series of seven bowls completed John's vision of coming events. The seals, trumpets, histories and bowls all demonstrated God's commitment to intervene in history to ensure the safety and blessing of his people. In John's day, the Roman Empire seemed invulnerable to the churches of Asia Minor. And many modern enemies of the church can

seem equally powerful. But God is determined to destroy his enemies and our enemies. And this should encourage every Christian in every age to remain faithful to Christ, even when we face severe opposition and oppression.

Now that we've examined John's first and second visions, let's turn to his vision of the punishment of the great prostitute in Revelation 17:1–21:8.

## **GREAT PROSTITUTE**

This vision takes place in the desert. According to Revelation 17:1, this entire vision focuses on the punishment of the great prostitute, including the return of Christ, a final battle in which the forces of evil are completely defeated, the reign of those who are loyal to Christ, and the final renewal of the heavens and the earth. John designed this section to draw his audience's attention to the final blessings for those who were faithful to Christ, and to the ultimate curses that would fall on those who weren't. This twofold focus should have inspired his readers to seek God's blessings and to avoid his judgment.

There are two smaller series of visions within the vision of the punishment of the great prostitute. The first deals with God's judgment on Babylon, and the second focuses on the reign of the saints. We'll look at both series, beginning with the judgment of Babylon in Revelation 17:1–19:21.

### **Judgment on Babylon**

Like John's visions of the seals, trumpets, histories and bowls, his visions dealing with the judgment of Babylon also recapitulate church history.

In Revelation 17:1-6, the city of Babylon is presented as a prostitute. She's dressed in alluring clothes, and she glitters with gold, precious stones, and pearls. Her appearance and prostitution are symbolic of all the illicit pleasures that seduce God's people away from true worship and faithful living. But significantly, she appears in the desert, implying that she can't deliver on her offers of luxury and pleasure. And to confirm this fact, she holds a cup filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.

The prostitute also sits on a scarlet beast that has seven heads and ten horns. This is the beast from the sea described in Revelation 13. It's covered with blasphemous names, symbolizing its own wickedness and the idolatry of those who follow it.

The significance of the imagery of the prostitute and beast is then revealed in the rest of the series. Like the earlier series of the seals, trumpets, histories and bowls, the structure of this series presents six messages of judgment and lament, followed by an interlude. But instead of a seventh message describing the final fight between Christ and his enemies, this series ends with a vision of the battle itself.

The first message, found in Revelation 17:7-18, interprets the details of the vision of the prostitute and the beast. We can summarize this message by saying that God will completely destroy everyone and everything that opposes him.

The second message, in Revelation 18:1-3, declares the utter defeat of Babylon and all the nations, kings and merchants she has seduced.

The third message, recorded in Revelation 18:4-8, calls God's people to reject Babylon, and to separate themselves from her immorality.

And the fourth message, reported in Revelation 18:9-20, contains three laments of kings, merchants and sailors who had worshiped the beast and profited from the luxury of Babylon. Sadly, these laments didn't inspire repentance and faith in Christ. Instead, the kings, merchants and sailors looked back longingly to the earlier time of Babylon's prosperity.

In each of these messages, Babylon represents every nation and organization that opposes Christ's rule. The messages encourage Christ's followers by proclaiming that the Lord will destroy all his enemies, and that the wicked will mourn the loss of their sinful enjoyments. But the messages also warn the church not to commit these same sins, so that we don't fall under the same judgment.

**I think idolatry and immorality are attractive to unbelievers but very attractive to believers as well. It's very simple. It's the forbidden fruit. It's what I want. Maybe it's there's something that I'm not supposed to have, but there's something built inside of us that says take it anyway. But I think more to the point, just frequently this stuff feels good, immorality feels good. It quenches something in the moment, but that's the point. Something that quenches in the moment doesn't necessarily have the lasting, noble, holy value that something ought to have, and that's why we've got to walk in faith to say, "What the Bible calls idolatry, what the Bible calls immorality, I'm going to go ahead and live with those definitions. Even though in the moment it might not feel good, I know it has some lasting value to it." And again, it shows us the way that God wants us to live.**

**— Dr. Matt Friedeman**

The fifth message in the judgment on Babylon appears in Revelation 18:21-24, and pronounces the complete and permanent destruction of Babylon.

The sixth message in this series is recorded in Revelation in 19:1-8, and contains the exuberant praise of God's people in heaven. In response to the judgment against Babylon, God's faithful people praise him. And their praise continues as they recognize that the judgment against Babylon has cleared the way for the wedding between the Lamb, who is Christ, as his bride, the church.

Next, an interlude interrupts the messages in Revelation 19:9-10. In this interlude, John is commanded to write down a blessing for all those who participate in the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Lastly, this vision series concludes with the final battle between God and his enemies, reported in Revelation 19:11-21. Christ appears as the divine warrior and wages war against all the enemies of God. These enemies are led by the beast and the false prophet, which are, respectively, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth from

Revelation 13. And there is no contest; the beast and the false prophet are defeated forever. Listen to how Revelation 19:20 describes their downfall:

**The beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf... The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Revelation 19:20).**

The final battle concludes all the wars God has waged on behalf of his people, and completes the victory Christ won on the cross.

Now that we've explored the judgment on Babylon, let's examine the series dealing with the reign of the saints in Revelation 20:1–21:8.

## Reign of Saints

This series on the reign of the saints includes three parts, beginning with the thousand year reign of the saints, commonly called the millennium, in Revelation 20:1–10.

***Thousand Year Reign.*** In this section, John saw an angel descend from heaven and bind the great dragon, who is Satan. John saw that for the next thousand years, Satan would remain bound while the faithful Christian martyrs would come to life and reign with Christ. John also saw that after the thousand years, Satan would be released to gather the nations for the final battle against God, as described in Revelation 19. At the end of this battle, all God's enemies will have been permanently destroyed. Even Satan himself will be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur forever.

Most interpreters recognize that, like the rest of John's apocalyptic prophecy, Revelation 20 is highly symbolic. And believers interpret its symbols in a wide variety of ways. In fact, in the entire book of Revelation, it would be hard to find a more debated passage than this one.

Broadly speaking, there are four major schools of interpretation for this passage. Each one is named in part after its understanding of the millennium or thousand years mentioned throughout this passage. These four schools of interpretation are: historic premillennialism, dispensational premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism.

Historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism are both premillennial systems, meaning that they believe Jesus will return before the millennium starts. By contrast, postmillennialism and amillennialism are both postmillennial systems, meaning that they believe that Jesus will return after the millennium ends. Let's look at each of these systems in a bit more detail.

Historic premillennialism is called "historic" because it's the premillennial view that has been held by different groups and theologians throughout church history. It teaches that after Jesus returns, Satan will be bound and Jesus will usher in the millennium — a thousand-year period of earthly peace and prosperity. Believers will receive resurrected bodies at the beginning of the millennium. Unbelievers won't receive

resurrected bodies. They'll live longer lives than they do now but they will still die. When the millennium ends, Satan's rebellion will take place, followed by the final judgment. And then God's eternal reign over the new heavens and new earth will begin. This view understands Revelation 20 to follow chronologically after chapter 19.

Dispensational premillennialism began to be taught in the 1830s. There are variations within this view, especially with regard to the timing of the final events before the millennium. But in general, Dispensational premillennialism teaches that when Jesus returns, he will restore the nation of Israel and visibly reign over the nations from his throne in Jerusalem. Near the end of the millennium, Satan will instigate a rebellion, but God will completely defeat Satan and his armies. Afterwards, the last judgment will take place, and then God's eternal reign over the new heavens and new earth will begin. Like historic premillennialism, this view understands Revelation 20 to follow chronologically after chapter 19.

In contrast with historic and dispensational premillennialism, postmillennialism teaches that Jesus will return after the millennium. The millennium itself is thought to be either the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ, or the last thousand years before his return. In either case, during the millennium Jesus rules from heaven through his earthly church. And his kingdom progressively expands to cover and improve the entire earth.

Amillennialism literally means "no millennium." It takes its name from the fact that it denies that the millennium is a literal thousand years. It teaches that the millennium consists of Jesus' reign over the earth, from his throne in heaven and through his church; and that Jesus will return at the end of the millennium.

Amillennialism is distinct from postmillennialism in a variety of ways. For one thing, all forms of amillennialism affirm that the millennium is the entire period between the first and second comings of Christ. For another, amillennialism doesn't *insist* that the millennial reign of Jesus and the saints will constantly expand the kingdom and improve the world. From an amillennial perspective, Christians will experience both the blessings of the kingdom of God and great tribulation on earth until final victory is achieved at Christ's return.

**There is a common, ecumenical — that is, worldwide — Christian view on certain things happening toward the end of time. And we can find those cardinal doctrines, the elements of it, in the Apostles' Creed. For example, the Apostles' Creed says that Jesus ascended into heaven, and from heaven he will return to judge the quick and the dead, or the living and the dead. So we all believe that there's going to be a final judgment, and Jesus is going to return and he's going to be involved in that, both of the living and the dead. And of course, now, we have differences over the details of how that will work out, but we all agree that that's the case. And then later on in the Apostles' Creed it says we believe in "the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body." Now this is an element of ecumenical orthodox Christianity that many Christians don't even understand anymore, that we believe that there is going to be a general physical resurrection of the body. That is to say, people are not going to exist as spirits forever; they're**

going to receive their bodies again. In fact, Christians will receive glorified bodies much like Jesus had in his resurrection. So this is another teaching that should be held by all Christians even though we disagree with each other over details. So we believe in “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.” And that is to say that once there is this judgment, resurrection of the body, we also believe that there is going to be a new world, a new day, everlasting life that will go on and on and on, and according to the Bible, this is not going to be something that we do up in heaven floating around in clouds but rather on what the Bible calls “the new heavens and the new earth.” So when Jesus comes back, he will reign over the earth and we will reign with him. These are elements of our outlooks on the end times or eschatology that all Christians of every variety ought to be able to affirm.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

We agree that there is going to be a ruling and a reigning of the Lord Jesus Christ through his gospel in some way, whether it involves his personal presence immediately or eventually — that’s a question we’re not clear on — but we know that he is going to rule, he is going to reign, and it will be a manifestation of the power of the gospel. We know that he will judge and there will be a judgment of the sheep and the goats and there will be some who will be cast into eternal punishment because they do not have forgiveness of sin through him, and there will be others who will be called to enter into the glory that is prepared for them from before the foundation of the world. We know those things are true. We all agree on those things. We know that heaven is going to be a place where indwelleth righteousness and Christ himself will reign, and we will glory in him, and there will be no doubt as to the power and wonder of Jesus Christ. All of us agree on that. And we could go on with other truths about these last things, this eschatology as we call it from the word eschaton. And the number of things that we agree on because of the clarity of Revelation is really quite astounding. And I think that we need to be careful not to focus so much on those areas in which we disagree, although, we need to carry on fraternal discussion about it, but we don’t need to give the impression that the Bible is unclear and we really can’t understand things because there are such a large number of tremendously important truths upon which we all agree when we come to discuss those matters.

— Dr. Thomas J. Nettles

It’s important for followers of Christ to recognize that evangelical believers don’t

always agree, and that the question of the millennium has historically been an area of controversy. But regardless of which millennial interpretation we take, all evangelical Christians can agree that Christ will return and achieve final victory over evil, that Satan will ultimately be defeated, and that God's people will live forever under Christ's reign in a restored creation. We all share these same convictions. And as a result, we can all find great comfort and encouragement in the Bible's teachings about the millennium.

The second part of the series on the reign of the saints deals with the last judgment on God's enemies, in Revelation 20:11-15.

***Last Judgment on God's Enemies.*** In this part of his vision, John witnessed God rendering final judgment on all humanity, based on their works. This judgment included everyone who had ever lived. Believers, whose names were written in the book of life, were spared God's terrible wrath. But the rest of humanity was condemned for their sins. This aspect of the last judgment completely removed the presence and effects of sin in the world, making way for the new heavens and the new earth.

Finally, the third part of the series on the reign of the saints focuses on the last judgment for God's people, in Revelation 21:1-8.

***Last Judgment for God's People.*** John saw that the last judgment for God's people would be a great blessing. The heavens and earth would be remade, and a New Jerusalem would descend from heaven as the capital city of the new earth. This symbolism points to the fact that in the new heavens and new earth, God will dwell among his people. God did this in the past in the Garden of Eden, in the tabernacle, and in the temple. And now he dwells with us in Christ. But in the new heavens and new earth, our fellowship with God will be even greater, because he'll manifest his glory among us, and we'll live in his physical presence forever.

**What I love to emphasize here is the fact that we have a new heaven and a new earth, that when the Lord does come again and does bring everything to a close, we're going to not only have a new earth, but even heaven itself is going to be touched by a newness.**

— Dr. William Ury

Having surveyed John's vision of the punishment of the prostitute, let's move to his vision of the wife of the Lamb. This vision is recorded in Revelation 21:9–22:5.

## **WIFE OF LAMB**

In his fourth vision, John was lifted onto a high mountain. According to Revelation 21:9, this vision concerned the bride, the wife of the Lamb, which was the New Jerusalem. This vision described the never-ending beauty, peace, health, prosperity and enjoyment that will exist after the world has been cleansed from the influence and presence of all God's enemies. And when John's original audience read about it, they would have been encouraged to pursue God's blessings by living according to its ideals, and looking forward to the fullness of salvation that will come when Christ returns.

**One of the scenes that we see concluding the book of Revelation is the emergence of the new city, the New Jerusalem, which comes to this earth. So it comes to this terrestrial plane. And we also notice that one of the key images of this new reality is the tree of life, which is a clear reference back to the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1. So in one sense, creation begins in a garden, but in another sense it's going to end in a city; but it seems to be connected some significant way. The image that I have come up with that seems to comport quite well with my reading of Revelation is this world minus the evil, and if offered that proposition, I think that'd be a fairly attractive alternative, to live in a world where there is no weeping, where there is no death, where there is no pain, where there is no suffering, where there is no separation in some way between us and our creating God.**

**— Mr. Bradley T. Johnson**

The New Jerusalem is described in Revelation 21:9-27. It was prepared in heaven, and then brought to the new earth. The city was shaped as a perfect cube. In the Old Testament, the Most Holy Places in the tabernacle and the temple were also cubes. Correspondingly, just as God manifested his holy presence in the Most Holy Places, he'll reveal his glory to his people in the New Jerusalem.

Both the dimensions and descriptions of the New Jerusalem frequently mention the number twelve. In the Old Testament, this number is associated with the twelve tribes of Israel, representing God's people in that age. And in the New Testament, the number twelve is associated with the twelve apostles, representing God's people in the current age. This suggests that in the New Jerusalem, God's people are present in all their diversity and distinctive cultures.

Within the New Jerusalem, the river of life flowed from God's throne through the middle of the city. It nourished the tree of life, whose leaves brought healing to all the nations. This symbolized the fact that in the new earth, the curse of sin will be eradicated from creation. The entire world will be fully renewed and healed from all the conflicts with sin that have plagued fallen human throughout our history.

Finally, John saw that the New Jerusalem shone with the glory of God. The jewels and precious stones of the city reflected his richness, beauty and splendor. And beyond this, God's splendor filled the city, so that it didn't need other sources of light — including a sun or moon.

**The question is, “Will the current heavens and earth be destroyed in order to make room for the new heaven and earth promised in Revelation 21?” Some people think so. I would describe it rather as a radical transformation — with underlying the radical. So it's in some ways as if it's a destruction, but the pattern is the pattern of Christ's own resurrection body. His resurrection body was transfigured in comparison with what it was before he died, but he still had the nail prints in his hands. That's the pattern for our resurrection, and it's**



**also the pattern for the entire universe if you read Romans 8 beginning with verse 18.**

**— Dr. Vern S. Poythress**

**Certainly the new heavens and the new earth will be radically different than this heavens and earth that we're a part of now in that the curse will be removed, the effects of the Fall won't be here anymore, but I do think most Christians tend to have an overly spiritualized view of heaven that doesn't include a very real and physical new heavens and new earth where God doesn't start from scratch, but he does make new what he's already made. He restores what's been lost tragically in the Fall. And so there will be a lot of continuity between what we have now and what is true in the new heavens and the new earth even though it will be wonderfully renewed.**

**— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Now that we've examined John's introduction to Revelation and his series of heavenly visions, let's turn to the book's conclusion in Revelation 22:6-21.

## **CONCLUSION**

John concluded the book of Revelation by emphasizing the fundamental messages that had been repeated throughout his visions. He emphasized that the visions he received were trustworthy, because they had been delivered by the Lord's angel. He exhorted his readers to persevere in good works, in order to receive great blessings in the new heavens and new earth. And John also reminded his readers that the consummation of God's kingdom and the final judgment are still in the future. So for now, Christians should faithfully persevere, and sinners should take the opportunity to repent.

Revelation is a timeless message from God to his people. Regardless of our perspective on the timings and fulfillments of John's visions, all Christians should agree that the book of Revelation is as relevant today as it was when John wrote it. Our circumstance may be different, but our God hasn't changed. And the values and perspectives John taught are still binding on us today. We can be encouraged by God's goodness in the past, present, and future. We can be confident in his love for us and his control over history. And we can respond to him in faith now and for the rest of our lives.

Having discussed the purpose and details of the book of Revelation, we're ready to address our third major topic: strategies for the application of Revelation.

## APPLICATION

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Our discussion of the modern application of Revelation will divide into two parts. First, we'll describe and critique four common strategies for applying the book of Revelation. And second, we'll suggest an integrated strategy that makes use of elements from all four common strategies. Let's look first at the four common strategies for applying Revelation.

### COMMON STRATEGIES

The first thing we should say is that each of these four strategies has something very useful to offer, but none of them is entirely sufficient on its own. The situation is reminiscent of the old story of the blind men and the elephant, where each blind man describes the part of the elephant he is touching, but none sees the whole elephant. This story exists in different versions in different cultures. One man might touch the elephant's leg and believe the elephant is like a pillar. One might touch its ear and believe the elephant is like a hand fan. One might touch its tail and think the elephant is like a rope. One might touch its trunk and conclude that the elephant is like a waterspout. And so on. All of them are correct insofar as their assessment goes, but none sees the whole elephant.

In a similar way, there are many popular but insufficient strategies for interpreting the book of Revelation. Each strategy examines the symbols in Revelation and decodes them according to its own perspective. But because these perspectives are so limited, each view misses the big picture and full meaning that the visions of Revelation present.

The four common strategies for application that we'll survey in this lesson can be referred to as preterism, futurism, historicism, and idealism. Each differs in how it interprets the period of time the book of Revelation covers, and the manner in which its visions are fulfilled. We'll consider all four views individually, beginning with preterism.

### Preterism

The word "preterite" refers to things that happened in the past. Accordingly, the strategy of preterism says that most of the prophecies in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in the distant past.

One form of preterism says that Revelation was written prior to the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and that most of its prophecies were fulfilled by that time. Another form suggests that these visions were fulfilled in the Fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century A.D.

Preterism provides a helpful focus on John's original audience. It sees the importance of the detailed knowledge of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. It reminds us of the real persecution those churches experienced. And it makes thematic connections between chapters 2 and 3 and the rest of the book. Preterism rightfully insists that John wasn't merely writing for future generations, and that Christ's concern for and

encouragement of John's original audience should inform our modern application of the book. And most forms of preterism rightly understand that the final chapters of Revelation speak about Christ's future return.

We can draw many useful applications from this approach to Revelation. For instance, it can still teach us about God's character, and the way he rewards righteousness and punishes evil. It can help us understand how to respond to crises in our world, and even give us hope in Christ's future return.

But despite these valuable insights, preterism doesn't provide a complete perspective on Revelation. For one thing, it often wrongly assumes that apocalyptic literature is written exclusively about its own time, rather than about the distant future. But the truth is that numerous apocalyptic passages in the Scriptures refer to distant future events, including Daniel 7–12, Matthew 24, and 2 Thessalonians 1 and 2.

Similarly, preterism is too narrow in its interpretation of temporal statements like "the time is near" in Revelation 1:1-3, and again at the end of Revelation in 22:10. Preterism insists that statements like these don't refer to the whole period of time between the first and second comings of Christ — even though that time lies "just before" the final judgment. Moreover, preterism doesn't normally acknowledge that this timeline might be modified by historical contingencies. As a result, it tends to ignore distant future fulfillments and to look for fulfillments only in the context of the original audience.

By the nature of its interpretation of Revelation, preterism has little to say about the development of God's kingdom since the first century. It doesn't prepare Christians throughout history for the ways most of the prophecies of Revelation might be fulfilled in their own lifetimes. It doesn't even create an expectation of continued martyrdom and continual opposition. In these and other ways, preterism doesn't give us the full range of application the book of Revelation has to offer.

With this understanding of preterism in mind, let's turn to futurism.

## **Futurism**

Futurism is the view that the visions in Revelation won't begin to be fulfilled until the final crisis immediately preceding the second coming of Christ.

Like preterism, futurism has insights to share. It correctly says that Revelation looks forward, above all, to the great event of Jesus Christ's return. We see this central concern in passages like Revelation 22:20.

Futurism also rightly looks for a future day of final judgment, and the eventual restoration of all creation that is confirmed in other parts of Scripture, such as Romans 8:19-25.

These interpretations can be applied in many useful ways. They give us hope in Christ's future return, judgment, and renewal of the creation. And they encourage Christians in all periods of history to watch for this time.

But despite these valuable contributions, futurism overlooks the ways the book of Revelation spoke to its original audience. In fact, it tends to downplay applications by generations other than the last generation before Christ returns — even though John mentioned seven ancient churches by name, and addressed each of them specifically. It

would be difficult for the seven churches mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 to believe that this book wasn't written with their situation in mind. In this way, futurism tends to make the book of Revelation appear largely irrelevant to most audiences throughout history.

Now that we've examined preterism and futurism, let's look at the third common strategy for application, which we've called historicism.

## Historicism

Historicism assumes that the visions of Revelation offer a chronological outline of the course of church history from the first century until the second coming.

Historicism typically says that: Revelation 2–12 relate to events in the first few centuries; chapters 13–17 relate to the Protestant Reformation; and chapters 18–22 relate to the events surrounding the second coming.

Historicism offers several valuable insights. It correctly sees that Revelation begins with the situation of the seven churches. It also correctly associates the ending scenes of Revelation with the second coming. And it rightly notices that Revelation moves toward a climax — that a drama develops as we read through the book.

Historicism recognizes that the book of Revelation is intended for the church in all ages. It encourages us to persevere until Jesus returns, and to affirm that at that time he'll renew the heavens and the earth. And it reminds us that God's in control of history, and that his plan can't fail to come to completion.

But historicism is problematic in other ways. For one thing, it assumes that all the prophecies in Revelation are strictly chronological. It fills in the gaps between the early church, the Reformation, and return of Christ by stretching a time line from the first century to the last, and correlating the visions in between with events of world history.

But as we saw earlier in this lesson, the structure of the book of Revelation isn't strictly chronological. This can give Christians a false sense of where they are in redemptive history, sometimes inclining them to inappropriate pessimism, and sometimes to inappropriate optimism. It can even produce a sense that we can't deviate from the timeline perceived in Revelation, as if our own actions are incapable of moving God to pity or anger, and incapable of changing the apparent course of history.

A second problem with historicism is its dependence on the Protestant Reformation as a key point in the history of Christ's worldwide church. Historicism tends to ignore the global Church, often limiting John's prophecies to events within Western Christianity — and sometimes even more narrowly to events within European Christianity. This orientation wrongly downplays the role of the church in other parts of the world. And this can be very discouraging. It can cause believers to think that their actions are insignificant, and take away an important motive for pursuing the continual growth of God's kingdom throughout the entire world.

Having looked at preterism, futurism and historicism, let's turn our attention to the fourth common strategy for application: idealism.

## Idealism

Instead of claiming that Revelation depicts events from one time period or another, idealism holds that the scenes in Revelation depict general patterns of spiritual war, not specific events or chronologies.

Like the other common strategies, idealism provides some valuable insight. It acknowledges the thematic arrangement of some prophecies in the book of Revelation. And it highlights the fact that Satan's methods are fundamentally consistent throughout history, making them rather predictable.

Idealism also tends to recognize the general New Testament pattern of inaugurated eschatology that we discussed earlier in this series. And it emphasizes the application of Revelation to our modern situation by generalizing beyond the particular circumstances of the first century and the final crisis. These insights increase our ability to read and to use Revelation as John intended. They help us focus on God's character, and on the nature of his dealings with the world. They prepare us to live for him in all periods of history, and to hope in Christ's eventual return.

But idealism also has shortcomings. Perhaps the most obvious is that it fails to identify any of the symbols of Revelation with historical events. At the very least, John's original audience needed his apocalypse to help them uncover the meaning of events that were taking place in their time. And the book of Revelation was explicitly designed to provide this kind of insight, claiming several times that God was revealing to John a way of understanding what "must soon take place." We see this in the beginning of the book, in Revelation 1:1, as well as near the end in 22:6. As we read in Revelation 22:6.

**The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place (Revelation 22:6).**

Verses like this should make it clear that the book of Revelation is directly concerned with many real events that take place in the natural world. But idealism discourages us from drawing this type of legitimate application from these passages.

Now that we've looked at four common strategies for interpreting and applying the book of Revelation to modern life, we're ready to suggest an integrated strategy.

## INTEGRATED STRATEGY

Our integrated strategy begins by recognizing that preterism, futurism, historicism and idealism all make useful contributions to our understanding of the modern impact of Revelation. So, rather than completely disregard these strategies, our integrated strategy combines the valuable insights of each of these views, while at the same time avoiding their shortcomings.

We agree with preterism that the prophecies of Revelation were relevant to the seven churches of Asia Minor that first received the book. But we also agree with futurism that some of Revelation's prophecies spoke about the events surrounding

Christ's return and the final judgment. And we agree with historicism that God controls all of history, moving it towards a climax in Christ's return. And we agree with idealism that the satanic forces of evil symbolized in the book of Revelation still tempt us to compromise our faith.

We might summarize the integrated strategy of application as consisting of two parts or steps. First, we use every available means to discern principles and truths in the book of Revelation. Those might be truths about God's character, truths about his interaction with the world, truths about our obligations before him, truths about the course of history, or anything else John taught in the book of Revelation. And second, we look for parallels between the circumstances of John's original audience and the circumstances of our own lives. And those parallels guide our application.

The first step of discerning principles and truths in Revelation can be very complex, since the book teaches so many ideas. So, it will be helpful for us to mention on some of the more important themes John emphasized. These themes are easy to apply to modern life in relevant ways.

For example, we can look at the fact that Christ's life, death, resurrection, and heavenly reign have made him worthy of all worship.

We can also focus on the idea that Christ's complete victory over evil is certain, and that his kingdom will never end. We can stand against the satanic forces at work in this world that try to trick us into worshipping them, knowing that they enslave and curse their followers rather than bless them. And we can remember that those who are faithful to Christ in this life will receive glorious rewards in the next life.

We can be motivated to persevere under hardship, knowing that the persecution we endure pales in comparison to the God's wrath against his enemies. We can take comfort in the fact that God's faithful people will be protected from his terrible judgment. And we can draw hope from the knowledge that one day the curse of sin will be eradicated from this world, and God will dwell with his people in perfect peace and righteousness. And in the meantime, we can be confident that God will bless the continued witness of the church, and that he'll use it bring more people to faith in him.

The second step of finding similarities between John's original audience and today's audience can also be complex, since there are so many details to consider. So, it can help to have a responsible strategy for making these connections.

**There are interesting similarities between the Roman Empire and the modern world, which allow us to apply the lessons of Revelation to modern life. The most significant, I think, is that you have a situation in the first century where there is a hostile government force, if you like, that is opposed to the church. The church is a deviant sect within wider society that is routinely oppressed by the government. That, I think, is something that is the common experience of many Christians in the world today and will become increasingly common even in the West in the next century. So the lesson of the book of Revelation, that the promise of Matthew 16:18 that the church will prevail, that the church is the meaning of history ultimately — that lesson of the book of Revelation is something that will be increasingly relevant to a**

**church that sees itself marginalized and pushed to the outskirts of society.**

**— Dr. Carl R. Trueman**

**I think even though we're removed now by two millennia from the world of the book of Revelation and its initial writing there really are some similarities between the Roman Empire of that day and this present era, among them the fact that in both cases there is life going on in a very, very diverse population, there are internal stresses and amazing polarities between the very rich and the very poor, the privileged, the less so, the marginalized. There's tremendous movements — even though there are static elements — tremendous movement within the first century, people on the move, travelers, traders, people voluntarily sometimes out of desperation winding up in very different places from their place of birth, so there a lot of social dimensions and linguistic dimensions that I think speak to us.**

**— Dr. James D. Smith III**

Besides the multitude of smaller similarities we can find between ourselves and John's original audience, there are at least three prominent similarities that can help guide our application.

First, the same God that ruled creation in the first century still rules the world today. He still controls history. He still protects his people. He still answers prayer. And he still deserves our loyalty, thanks and praise.

Second, the same fallen, sinful world that troubled the churches in Asia Minor continues to trouble Christians today. We still face spiritual forces of evil. We still suffer hardship caused by events in nature. We still fight against disease and hunger.

And third, human beings are still the same, too. We're still sinners that need redemption, healing, and a restored relationship with God. Similarities like these make the book of Revelation just as relevant today as it was in the first century.

In many different ways, the book of Revelation gives hope to all Christians in every age. Its messages are timeless, always relevant, and just as powerful for us as they were for the seven churches in Asia Minor. Revelation can encourage us to remain faithful to Christ in every circumstance. And it can give us hope for the future. No matter how bad our lives sometimes look, we really are on the winning side. And this hope can sustain us, because we know that one day Christ will return to bless us as the heirs and rulers of his perfect, permanent new creation.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we've examined the purpose of the book of Revelation in terms of its offers of blessings and threats of curses; we've surveyed the details of its content; and we've considered its modern application by looking at some common strategies, and a more integrated strategy for application.

Throughout this lesson, we've seen that Revelation assures us of God's final victory, encourages our perseverance, and increases our longing for Christ's return. Our future blessing is certain. And it can give us comfort and determination when we're tempted or even persecuted. God never intended this book to divide Christians over our theological differences. He intended it to encourage every believer in every age to live in faithful obedience to him, and to hope in the glorious return of our Savior, Jesus Christ.



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# The Book of Revelation

LESSON  
TWO

## Structure and Content Faculty Forum



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# The Book of Revelation

## Lesson Two: Structure and Content

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. David W. Chapman  
Rev. Larry D. Cockerill  
Dr. Steve Cowan  
Dr. Dan Doriani  
Dr. William Edgar  
Dr. Matt Friedeman  
Dr. Benjamin Gladd  
Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Dr. James M. Hamilton  
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Dr. Robert MacEwen  
Dr. John E. McKinley  
Dr. Thomas J. Nettles  
Dr. Greg Perry

Dr. Vern Poythress  
Dr. Scott Redd  
Dr. Thomas Schreiner  
Dr. Glen Scorgie  
Dr. James D. Smith III  
Dr. Mark Strauss  
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

### Question 1:

#### Why doesn't the book of Revelation use plainer language?

When we look at a biblical book's purpose and structure, we're basically asking, why did the author write this and how did he communicate his message? In the book of Revelation, John encouraged his readers to remain faithful until Christ's return. But if John wanted to encourage the churches, why doesn't the book of Revelation use plainer language?

#### Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner

When we first read the book of Revelation, we are struck by the strangeness of the book. I remember when I first read it when I was 17 or so, I got the picture from the book that Jesus was glorious, that God was in control, but there were many parts of the book that were quite foreign to me. But I think the first thing we should say is that when John wrote the book, the genre of the book, which is mainly apocalyptic, was not foreign to his readers. There were other apocalyptic books out there. We see some apocalyptic in the Old Testament — Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah. We see some apocalyptic literature in some Jewish intertestamental literature like 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra. So I think it's helpful for us to realize this book was not totally strange to people who first read it. They could understand it and grasp it. But then we step back and say, well, why was it written this way at all? I mean, what's the purpose of it? Why not just write it as an epistle? And I think one of the answers is apocalyptic literature appeals to the imagination. The Bible speaks to us, of course, propositionally, but it speaks to us in different ways. We have gospels. We have psalms. We have poetry. We have proverbs. And Revelation appeals to the imagination at another level. Apocalyptic literature speaks to us here in terms of the end of the world, God's cosmic purposes. I think it's fitting that God would clothe this in a kind of literature that speaks symbolically, in big pictures of things, strong contrasts between good and evil painted in strong colors: the dragon versus the woman and Satan versus God. And of course, the people of God are portrayed as a woman fleeing from the dragon in the wilderness. All these pictures, I think, help us

to appropriate at a different level, in terms of our imagination and our whole being, what God is accomplishing and will accomplish for his people.

### **Question 2:**

### **Are there other parts of the New Testament that could be considered “apocalyptic”?**

**The book of Revelation is the most obvious example of apocalyptic literature in the New Testament. No other book contains as much imagery or prophecy concerning the distant future. So, does Revelation stand alone in this genre, or are there other parts of the New Testament that could be considered “apocalyptic”?**

#### **Dr. Mark Strauss**

While the book of Revelation is the primary example of apocalyptic literature in the New Testament, there are other passages that have similar characteristics and that could be identified as apocalyptic in nature. The most famous and most significant is Jesus’s, what we call his Olivet Discourse, his discourse on the Mount of Olives in Mark 13, also Matthew 24 and 25. The same sermon appears in Luke 21. And in that sermon, Jesus describes the destruction of Jerusalem but also the coming of the Son of Man, the abomination of desolation — an image that comes from the book of Daniel, which itself has apocalyptic features and is sort of the foundation of apocalyptic literature. So that passage which describes, certainly, end times picture — some of the same kind of symbolic cosmic language that we find in apocalyptic — occurs in the Olivet Discourse. There’s a few other passages as well in the New Testament. In 2 Thessalonians, for example, Paul talks about the man of lawlessness who will set himself up in the temple — images taken again from the book of Daniel that have features of apocalyptic literature. So there’s a number of places, particularly when writers are talking about sort of the consummation of history, the conclusion of history, God’s final salvation, that we see apocalyptic elements coming through.

#### **Dr. Craig S. Keener**

Whether there are other parts of the New Testament that could be considered apocalyptic depends on how you define apocalyptic. According to the narrowest definition, it’s a kind of visionary literature that gives you revelations of heaven and sometimes historical sequences and so on. By that narrow definition, perhaps nothing else qualifies. But if we’re talking about apocalyptic thought and apocalyptic imagery about the end time and using prophetic symbolism, yes, Jesus’ discourse about the end time in Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21 could be in that category, and 2 Thessalonians 2, and so forth.

#### **Dr. Greg Perry**

I think we do have other parts of the New Testament that indicate apocalyptic visions. And one thinks especially of Jesus’ teaching on the Mount of Olives at the end of the Gospels in Mark 13 or Matthew 24 and 25, where Jesus himself is sort of the

mediating prophetic figure who's using symbols from the Old Testament that represent God's salvation and judgment in relation to his people and the nations who are coming against, or will come against Jerusalem as he forecasts and as he talks about in terms of the call to repent, and to recognize him as the Messiah. There are other parts of the New Testament that we see where this is also the case, and we see particularly in the warnings of 2 Peter and Jude against false prophets, because in those two letters of the New Testament, there's a great deal of concern about false prophets who are basically saying that no judgment is coming. And so Peter and Jude pick up on apocalyptic symbols and the words of the prophets to talk about the coming judgment and salvation and the need to repent. And so the symbolism is there as well in parts of those letters also. So those are a couple of places in the Gospels and in these late letters of the New Testament where apocalyptic is used as well.

### **Question 3:**

**Are there books in the Bible besides Revelation where recapitulation is used?**

**Sometimes books retell the same story from a different angle or perspective. Scholars call this "recapitulation." We see this often in the book of Revelation. But, are there other books in the Bible besides Revelation where recapitulation is used?**

#### **Dr. Scott Redd**

The literary device of recapitulation, that is, telling a story or an event more than once in order to highlight different aspects of that story or event, is used elsewhere in Scripture than just in the book of Revelation. For instance, right there in Genesis 1 and 2 we see the story of creation retold in two different ways... In the first case you see you see this conflict between the Lord and chaos, and the story ends with the creation of humanity and then God's rest. But then in Genesis 2, you see the story retold again, this time focusing on humanity — the creation of Adam and Eve — and this story finds its ultimate ending in the creation of Eve and her beauty. So we see here two different stories of the creation account, each highlighting different aspects: first the overall picture of creation and then secondly the under-king, or Adam, and Eve and their creation in the Garden... So you really don't have two different creation accounts as some would say, but you actually have the same creation account told in two different ways. The first time, articulating these large cosmic-size events between God and chaos and death of the sea, and then secondly you see God's creation of Adam made in his own image and Adam's wife Eve. And so it highlights a different aspect of creation, drawing attention this time to the first humans.

#### **Dr. Robert MacEwen**

In the book of Acts you have the story of Paul's conversion on the Damascus road, and then it's told again two times with Paul narrating his experience. You also have a lot of recapitulation in the story of the conversion of the centurion Cornelius which I think starts in Acts 10, you know, where Cornelius has a vision, and later he will



repeat that vision. Peter has a vision. Later he will repeat that vision maybe a few more times, and when the whole thing is over, Peter goes back to Jerusalem and is confronted by his fellow Jewish Christians, and then Peter explains the whole story again. So that's another example that comes to mind.

**Dr. William Edgar**

I think there are books in the Bible besides the book of Revelation where recapitulation is used. There's a lot of different types of recapitulation. You can think of the two accounts of creation — Genesis 1, Genesis 2 — and in the entire book of Genesis that's a given structure: first a summary statement and then a detailed account of something within the summary statement, the so-called “toledoth passages.” And then you could find at the end of many books a recapitulation of what was said. The book of Samuel ends with a retelling of exactly what had been going on. You also have the Psalms, which use a poetic device called parallelism. So, often the Psalm does not begin with A and end in Z. It goes AB, AB, BC, BC, and it repeats. I think the reason for that is emphasis maybe, as well as encouragement. And also, the Bible, a lot of it, is not just a bland linear book, not a scientific text. It's a book of revelation, which relates the person of God and not just information to his readers. And recapitulation is a great way to do that.

**Question 4:**

**What did John mean when he said that he was “in the Spirit”?**

**John introduced the four main visions in Revelation with a statement indicating he was “in the Spirit.” While this phrase is not uncommon in the New Testament, John's use of it in the book of Revelation is unique. So, what did John mean when he said that he was “in the Spirit”?**

**Dr. Vern Poythress**

It says, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day,” referring to John. What does that mean? We know from other passages of the Bible that every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This is not merely that, but it is a special work of the Holy Spirit empowering John, giving him the visions that he saw. So this is the work of the Spirit in inspiring the book of Revelation.

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

When John speaks of being caught up in the Spirit... he speaks of being caught places in the Spirit, or being in the Spirit on the Lord's day in Revelation 1:10 — in these passages he evokes the language of Ezekiel, where in Ezekiel, in visions of God, Ezekiel was caught up in the Spirit at different times. So it means that John was in such an inspired state that he was receiving direct revelation from God at these points.

**Dr. Benjamin Gladd**

When John describes himself as being taken up in the Spirit that most likely goes back to a pattern in the Old Testament. Specifically, we see this in Ezekiel and in Daniel, and then even in Second Temple Judaism, or early Judaism, where you have prophets who enter into a type of trance where they receive revelation. It's difficult for us to figure out what exactly was this trance-like state... It's some type of a vision that the Spirit is giving to him and that is being communicated through the angel. To figure out what exactly that looked like is quite difficult, but it is indeed patterned after the Old Testament. Again, the book of Revelation falls in line with Old Testament prophecy, and John falls in line with the Old Testament prophets. And so, just as they were carried up with the Spirit, so was John.

**Question 5:****Why did John describe Jesus as both a lion and a lamb in Revelation 5?**

**On a number of occasions in the book of Revelation, John used vivid imagery to describe what he was seeing while he was “in the Spirit.” For instance, in Revelation 5, he used the contrasting images of a lion and a lamb to describe Jesus. But why did John use these images? Why did John describe Jesus as both a lion and a lamb in Revelation 5?**

**Dr. Thomas J. Nettles**

In Revelation 5 we have a very interesting presentation of Jesus Christ. As John is involved in a vision, he is weeping because he has found that no one is worthy to open this book that contains the future and ideas of judgment and divine sovereignty, and who is worthy to do this. And someone tells him to stop weeping and to look and behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Now this symbol of a lion is one in which we have great strength, and one that has judgment, one who can come and have power and authority over all of his foes... But he looks and what does he see? He sees a lamb as if he had been slain. Well this tells us many things, among those that it does give us an understanding that the book of Revelation has very vivid imagery in it. We don't actually think Jesus is a lion and he's going to appear that way, or he is a lamb, but these carry within them certain mental images and certain historic presentations of both meekness and mildness on the one hand and power and authority on the other. And what John is seeing in this revelation and what he's trying to communicate to us is that the authority that Jesus has in his present condition as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the one who will subdue all of his enemies, this has been gained by his sacrifice... He is the Lamb that has been slain. He is the one who fulfills all the sacrifices. Every sin that we could imagine, even our unknown sins have been taken care of by this Lamb that was slain. Therefore, he is worthy, not only as one who has authority as Creator and one who is omnipotent, but he is worthy as one who has endured the wrath of God for sin. He has done that, and he has risen from the dead, and now he is seated as the one who has the authority to redeem and to draw people to himself as the king over that people, and he has the authority to judge all nations.

It's a very vivid image. Jonathan Edwards has a sermon on that passage of Scripture entitled "The Excellency of Jesus Christ," and the basic doctrine, he says, is there is a great diversity of excellencies in Jesus Christ, and it's a marvelous presentation of how Christ has gained the right to rule by being the one that was humiliated and submitted himself to the Father's wrath for the purpose of redeeming his people.

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

John used both the lion and the lamb imagery in Revelation 5 as he was showing us Christ in all his glory in order to emphasize really the way in which Christ has won the decisive victory for us. The lion imagery comes from the Old Testament. It comes from the promise that Judah would be the tribe in which the great conquering Lion, the true King would come. And it surely is a picture of power and strength... And that emphasizes the victory of Christ. But then, from what John hears, we're very surprised at what John sees, because he sees a Lamb who has been slain. Clearly this Lamb is the Lion because the heavenly chorus praises the Lamb who has been slain as "worthy to open the scroll." So the Lamb's death, violent death, is the Lion's victory because, by being slain, the Lamb has redeemed people from every tribe and nation and tongue under the earth and made us to be a kingdom of priests to God our Father. It really shows us in a very vivid way the point that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 1 when Paul says that the cross is the power of God. It looks like foolishness and weakness, but it is the power and the wisdom of God for the salvation of his people.

**Dr. Mark Strauss**

Revelation 5 is an amazing passage, because in many ways it sort of sums up the whole message of Revelation. John is shown a scroll, and no one is worthy to open this scroll. And so John is weeping because he knows the scroll holds the secret to God's future, the secret to the world's future in that regard. And suddenly an angel announces that, wait, there is one who is worthy. It is the Lion, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. And that's a picture from Genesis 49... Instead he sees a lamb, a symbol of sacrifice, a symbol of suffering. And there's a beautiful picture of who Jesus is, because Jesus is the conquering King, he is the Messiah, he is the Lord of all, yet he accomplishes salvation by suffering and dying as the sacrificial lamb. So the lion who is the lamb is the beautiful picture of who Jesus Christ is as Lord, as sovereign, as king. But how he accomplishes that salvation is by suffering and dying as a sacrificial lamb to pay for our sins. So, a powerful picture of who Jesus is and how he accomplished our salvation.

**Question 6:**  
**Is Satan a real creature?**

**John's use of symbolic imagery to depict places and characters in Revelation is sometimes a two-edged sword. While it highlights certain attributes of the characters and events, it can also be seen as mere imagery. On two separate**

occasions John depicted Satan as being “a great dragon” and the “ancient serpent.” This has caused some readers to wonder how we should view Satan. Was John just using imagery to get his point across? Or is Satan a real creature?

**Dr. Simon J. Kistemaker**

Satan is a real creature. God created him. See, Jesus is uncreated and therefore is much, much higher than Satan. In fact, if you go through the passages which speak about Jesus being the Creator — John 1 and then Hebrews 1:2, and in Colossians 3 — you find that Jesus is the Creator. So, he is the creator of the angel world. And the angel world is millions of millions of creatures. Satan is one of them. Now we would like to have a lot more information about Satan. What happened? All we know is that Satan at one time said, enough is enough and I want to be in charge, not just a messenger, but I am going to rule. And then he took one-third of the angel world with him... Now, is Satan a creature? Oh yes he is. A fallen creature.

**Dr. Glen Scorgie**

Anyone who enters into and embraces the supernaturalist worldview of the Christian faith must ask themselves whether Satan is a real creature. Or perhaps, alternatively, a mythic, and now obsolete personification of what are, in fact, simply impersonal forces of evil, principalities, powers in the world today. Now, the first disclaimer is that in affirming that Satan is a real creature, we are not endorsing many of the very superstitious and imaginative caricatures of Satan in Western literature and thought. The second thing, I think, as an important disclaimer is that in affirming the existence of Satan as a real creature we are not suggesting that all evil and all pain and all suffering is a direct consequence of Satan's activity. The human condition is afflicted by many faces of evil, of which Satan is just one, and our own sinful nature is a very large other. But having said that, we come back to affirm that Satan is a real creature on this basis: that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in his earthly ministry appears to operate on the assumption that Satan is, in fact, not mythic but real, and addresses him in those terms.

**Dr. Mark Strauss**

Satan in Scripture... means “the adversary,” and Satan shows up in the book of Job as the adversary. And then certainly in the New Testament Satan appears again and again to tempt Jesus. Jesus refers to Satan falling from heaven. So I think from Jesus' perspective, Satan is a real being, is an adversary of God and therefore an adversary of God's people, an opponent of Jesus, the tempter and tester of Jesus... Then we come to learn later in the biblical testimony that he was the serpent in the Garden and that he was the tempter of Eve and the one who in that sense provoked the fall of humanity. That is only learned progressively as we read through the testimony of Scripture... The origin of Satan and in terms of his fall, are not explicitly or clearly set out in Scripture. But I think that the real existence of Satan as a person in opposition to God who will be ultimately be destroyed, cast into the lake of fire at the end of Revelation, is pretty much a clear teaching of Scripture.

### Question 7:

#### **What are some of the millennial views that Christians have held throughout history?**

**In Revelation 20:1-6, we read of a millennium — a thousand year period — during which the dragon, or Satan, is bound, and faithful Christian martyrs reign with Christ. From the time of the early church up to today, these verses have given rise to several different schools of thought. What are some of the millennial views that Christians have held throughout history?**

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

I think sometimes we Christians who come from particular traditions, we tend to assume that everybody has always held our view. And I think it's instructive to see what some of the different views have been of Revelation, for example, with reference to the millennium, the thousand-year period in Revelation 20. You have many of the earliest church fathers, Justin Martyr and Papias seem to have believed in a future thousand-year period after the tribulation. They believed that Christians either were in the tribulation or were about to go through it. Some later church fathers believed that Christians were in the millennium. Especially from the time of Constantine onward, Christians believed they were in the millennium. Eusebius talks about how they found some premillennialists who were in error, but unlike other heretics, they were able to be talked out of their erroneous views. And Augustine was a very strong amillennialist, and that view predominated through the middle... usually through the middle ages. Luther, Calvin, and many others, also were amillennial. Then you had some other people who were premillennial again, Isaac Newton for one. In the eighteenth century we already have a number of postmillennialists, Jonathan Edwards and the first Great Awakening — postmillennialism was already coming to the fore. It became even more dominant in the nineteenth century, Charles Finney and others associated with the second Great Awakening. So, in American evangelicalism, postmillennialism was a very prominent view in that period... They believed that we would advance the kingdom of God on earth and things would get better, and so we would prepare the throne for Jesus, and then he would come back. And then around 1830 something arose called dispensational premillennialism, which said that there would be a future thousand years. Jesus would come back before that, but he would also come back seven years before that to take the church out, which had never been taught before that period in church history. And today we actually have a variety of views among scholars, probably amillennial and premillennial, or non-dispensational... well, some dispensational scholars too, but you have a variety of views today, and I think what that tells us most is we can't just say, well, everybody has always held our view. We need to really... we need to recognize that there are Christians that God has used who hold different views than our view.

**Dr. Thomas J. Nettles**

Interpretation of the Bible is a quite challenging task, and I think this is one reason that when people are called to ministry, one of the things they have to do is they have to be apt to teach, and God gives these gifts. When Christ rose from the dead, he ascended on high, and one of the gifts he gave were teachers... One of the areas that we can see this very profoundly is interpretations of the book of Revelation and has led evangelicals in particular to have three different views and perhaps nuances within each of these views in such a way that even people who agree in one of these three views have certain specific interpretations upon which they disagree... And so we have amillennialism, we have postmillennialism, and we have premillennialism and various views within each of those... In these differing views of the millennium, we have tremendous areas of agreement in which all agree the Bible is perfectly clear on, and we disagree on the meaning of certain language whether it is literal, or whether it is symbolic. What is the thousand years? Is this a literal thousand years? Does the text indicate Christ is going to come back before that and we'll have the reign of peace only because of his personal reign? Is the reign of peace actually the preaching of the gospel now so that we see God gathering his people and they have peace in their hearts and peace among themselves because of forgiveness of sins? That's basically amillennialism. And then postmillennialism, though, is the preaching of the gospel going to be so powerful that Christ reigns through it and there is the era of peace and then Christ comes visibly to take his throne? Well that's built upon certain ambiguities we might say in our mind, not in the Scripture, but ambiguities in our mind as to the meaning of these symbols.

**Question 8:**

**What are some central theological ideas shared by all evangelical forms of premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism?**

Evangelicals sometimes disagree about the thousand-year reign of Christ in Revelation 20, but still, these views often overlap. What are some central theological ideas shared by all evangelical forms of premillennialism, postmillennialism and amillennialism?

**Dr. James M. Hamilton**

Whatever perspective you take on the millennium, whether you're premillennial or postmillennial or amillennial, everyone is going to agree that the fulfillment of God's purposes is going to be realized and that the prophecies of the Old Testament are going to be fulfilled, and that everyone is going to agree that as God's Word is brought to fruition, Christ is going to return, he is going to reign, and this is all going to result in the glory of God covering the dry lands as the waters cover the sea.

**Dr. William Edgar**

I would say all evangelicals, whether they be pre- or post- or a-mill, share first of all the fundamental idea that Christ will return visibly, in person. And that connected

with his return will be the judgment, the squaring of all accounts, and then the resurrection of the dead for eternal bliss, and the resurrection of those who have not trusted in Christ to spend their lives away from the presence of God. The details, of course, they differ about, but the central idea of the second coming, the judgment, the resurrection is shared by all of them.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

In the evangelical church today, there's a variety of different eschatological perspectives, perspectives about what the book of Revelation is telling us in terms of what to expect in the future, and yet there's, I think, a core that we all agree on, that we've agreed on for two thousand years. First of all that Christ is returning, secondly, that Christ is Lord of the universe even now and certainly in the future, and thirdly, that the new age has already begun, that we are already living in the end times because Christ has come, has died on the cross, he's raised again, he's ruling, he's reigning, we are his people, we are following his lead. And those aspects are true for all eschatological perspectives.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

I hope one of the central understandings of Revelation that we can all share together, no matter what our theological tradition is, is mystery. There's plenty of mystery there. These experts in Revelation — of course we have some, and I love the fact that they spend a good bit of their time in Revelation — but I'd like to think that at the end of the day the experts could even say there's plenty of mystery there. We don't know exactly what it means. We don't know exactly how it's going to turn out except in the very end, and so at the end of the day we look there and say we don't know about a good bit of this book; we just flat don't know. But we praise God that he is our God of mystery.

**Dr. John E. McKinley**

The major evangelical interpretations of the return of Christ and what he does in relationship to a millennial reign, whether that's symbolic or literal or whatever, they all affirm the same basic things. One, that Jesus is going to come back. A bodily return of Christ to the earth has not happened yet. We're still waiting for that. Second, everybody affirms that he is going to rule over creation, whether that is just the eternal state or the here and now. Third, that he is going to complete salvation. So there is going to be resurrection of the dead; there is going to be a restoration of everything and end of evil. And last, that he is going to deal with evil conclusively as the conquering King, he is going to judge all of his enemies and put an absolute end to evil at final judgment. So these are things that are held in agreement. It's lesser details that we disagree about.



### **Question 9:**

#### **How can a loving God send anyone, even his enemies, into eternal condemnation?**

**In the book of Revelation, we see God sending his angel to crush his enemies in the winepress of his wrath. But in a number of other places in the Bible, we read that God is love. To many unbelievers these two depictions of the same God are simply not compatible. They ask, how can a loving God send anyone, even his enemies, into eternal condemnation?**

#### **Dr. Steve Cowan**

Many skeptics of Christianity question the doctrine of eternal punishment, or the doctrine of hell, as Christians have traditionally believed that doctrine, and wonder whether the doctrine of hell is compatible or consistent with our belief that God is loving. How can a loving God send people to eternal condemnation? I think that is a very, very important question, and it's a tough question. But I really think that if we think about it for a little bit and ponder even some examples in our own culture and in our own background, we'll be able to see that there really is no incompatibility between a loving God and the doctrine of hell. Imagine a judge who is sitting behind his bench, and he's got various criminals coming before his bench, and he's having to make decisions about their punishment. And on one occasion the bailiff says, "I've got a criminal waiting in the wings. He's a heinous murderer, he's been caught in the act of a very vicious and terrible murder of an innocent person, and he's really arrogant. He has no remorse. He shows no regret at all over doing what he's done, and in fact, he even is back there in the wings boasting that you're going to let him off scot-free. He doesn't think that you're going to condemn him or have the courage to send him to jail or put him to death, or anything at all." And the judge says, "What arrogance! Bring him before me now!" And then the bailiff brings the criminal before the bench, and it dawns on the judge now why the criminal was so arrogant, because the criminal standing before him is his own son who is a vicious, lifetime criminal who has been estranged from his father for many years. But the judge knows about his crime and with tears in his eyes, he raises his gavel and says, "I condemn you to death." I believe that story is perfectly coherent. It is very plausible. That story is a realistic story about a judge who loves his son but yet knows that justice has to be done, and actually gives justice, I would say, as an act of love. I believe in that situation, it would actually be unloving for the judge not to punish his son, to let his son persist in thinking that there are no consequences to his evil deeds and that his arrogance can go unchallenged. I believe that that analogy, this story, can help us understand how a loving God can send people to hell. We have to understand that people who go to hell go there, if they go there, because they are sinners. God doesn't send innocent people to hell. He sends unrepentant, arrogant sinners to hell. Those are the only people who ever wind up there, and it would be unloving for God not to send them to hell given their unrepentant condition.



**Dr. John E. McKinley**

When we look at the Bible, we have a depiction about eternal condemnation, hell, and we think how can it be that a loving God sends people there? How does this fit with his love? Because it's clear that he does cast people into hell. One way of thinking about this is that love is self-giving; God is giving himself to these people. And for the nonbeliever, the person who has resisted God his entire life, to live in God's presence is going to be experienced as pain. So in a sense, God hasn't stopped being loving when they experience him. It's because they are resistant to him that they experience God as a burning, consuming fire and a spiritual burn, a pain that they're not ready for, and they don't want, and is suffering for them. So it's not a problem of God's love versus his wrath, it is the problem of the sinner who cannot stand to be in God's presence as he is.

**Dr. Glen Scorgie**

One of the most sobering doctrines we have to deal with is the destiny of the lost. And this is a doctrine that we can never address without feeling the deepest pain. John Stott said that no evangelical Christian should ever address it without being close to tears. There's also a great deal of mystery to the meaning of Scripture with respect to the actual lost state and all the dynamics of that, but we can certainly agree that the strong message of Scripture is that the prospect of going out into eternity outside of Christ is a peril to be avoided at all cost and with the greatest urgency of any crisis or emergency that a human being will ever experience. That's certainly the tenor and tone of, and intent of, the biblical descriptions of the lost state. One of the most difficult issues, though, is to reconcile what we read of the horrific lost state with the character of our all-powerful, all-loving God, and how we can make sense out of the thought that this God could send a loved image bearer into that state forever. This baffles us to some degree. This is one of the things at which we look as through a glass darkly. But I think that the imagery of God intentionally and deliberately sending, and in a sense approving of and affirming of, such a perilous destination, needs to be nuanced very carefully. It is true that we have biblical imagery of God in his justice sending people to punishment or to heavenly bliss. We see this "sending out" to punishment. But when it comes to sending people to eternal conscious torment, I think perhaps the deliberate intention of God is not really there... These are people who are against God's desires, against God's love, falling forever outside the locus of his grace... I think it's important for us to purge our sanctified imaginations of the image of a loving God who in some fiendish way delightfully sends people to the horrors of eternal suffering. I think the dynamic is more like a reluctant release of lost sinners to the inevitable consequences of their choice of estrangement from the source of life and goodness.

**Question 10:****Are there similarities between the first-century Roman Empire and the modern world that can help us apply Revelation to modern life?**

Many times it's easy to think that too much has changed in the world over the last 2,000 years for us to make strong applications from the Bible today. But, are there similarities between the first-century Roman Empire and the modern world that can help us apply Revelation to modern life?

**Dr. Dan Doriani**

There are many similarities between the Roman Empire and modern life, and they all are telling. Certainly in those days people were prone to follow the same false gods that we are, things like power and pleasure, and even looking to religion, false religion, for direction. There's a passage in Revelation 11:8 that says this in a very striking way, speaking of the death — the murder, really — of two prophets of God that were found intolerable by those who listened to them, and it says this: it says, "Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where ... their Lord was [also] crucified." Well let's see. What city is "Sodom and Egypt and [Jerusalem] where Jesus was crucified"? The answer is there's no city like that. What it's saying is all the cities in the world, all the people in the world long ago and today are prone to the same sorts of ways to rebel. So "Sodom" represents materialism, and people are always prone to materialism. "Egypt" is forced brutality or trusting in force or strength, and of course, that's something people do today. And the "city where the Lord was crucified" is false religion, human religion, and people turn to false religion today. Now those three, materialism, power, false religion, those are three ways in which people turn away from God. They're the three places *to* which people turn to find comfort and meaning, and those are always the big three, long ago and today.

**Dr. James M. Hamilton**

We can apply the book of Revelation to our modern lives because as in the first century John is clearly critiquing the Roman Empire, and what we see in the Roman Empire is an impulse to exalt either Caesar or Rome as an ideal that Satan is ultimately using as a sort of cheap imitation of God and his kingdom and his Messiah and his realm, his reign. And so that same thing is happening today... Those who are not worshipping God often fall prey to the vice of exalting the state into the place of religion. And so for these people the religion will dictate what everyone is to believe and how everyone is to behave and what people should do with their money. And for Christians, we serve God. We render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, but God is the one who owns us, and Revelation is critiquing that worship of the state.

**Dr. Vern Poythress**

Are there similarities between the Roman Empire and today that could help us? I believe there are. One is that in the Roman Empire there was pluralism, plurality of religions, plurality of cultures, plurality of ideas. We're facing that today. Another

thing — and it's in some ways probably a constant through the centuries — there's always the threat of totalitarian use of power particularly government power, governments growing in their interference with the citizens. And we can see that today particularly in cultures and in nations where Christianity is heavily persecuted. It's often government threats. The second area is the area of temptation to pleasure, to immorality. The cities of today are full of opportunities for illicit pleasure, and that was there in the first century as well.

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

I think there are clear similarities between the first century world in which the book of Revelation was given and the modern world, and these similarities really can help us know how to apply the book of Revelation to our lives. If you think, for example, of the three figures that are introduced in Revelation 13 and following. You find the dragon of course first, but I'm thinking of the three figures of the beast, the false prophet, and then the harlot Babylon, which in a sense are the instruments through which the dragon is waging his war against the church. The beast represents military power and political power run amuck, going beyond its bounds as God had set it and really claiming divine power and using coercive power to threaten those who would not submit. The false prophet represents all sorts of false religion, certainly in that setting, religion that contributes to the power of the beast. And then the harlot represents the allure of pleasure, of luxury, of material affluence. All of those things were true in the Roman world. The Roman Empire in the first century had not fully embraced the worship of the emperor as divine, but it was moving certainly in that direction. And in fact, in the province of Asia among these churches, there were at least temples in some of these cities devoted to the spirits of departed emperors such as Augustus. So the State as divine was clearly there. False teaching, false doctrine in a variety of ways were there, including the emperor cult growing in some of those cities. And then Rome was the economic hub of the whole world, and so all the affluence, all of the pleasure was flowing to Rome, and the whole empire was dependent upon Rome. Now, let's go to the modern world. Do we find those things today? Well we certainly do. We find aggressive, violent, coercive insistence on the worship of the State, more evident in the mid to late twentieth century with Marxism but clearly there. But then we have the rise of Islam, both in countries that are dominated by Islam and elsewhere, insisting on a kind of an allegiance imposed by coercive power. False teaching of all sorts threaten the church as well. And then perhaps in America in particular, and in the West, Western Europe as well, the temptation to — which is more subtle, harder to see — to be distracted by the allure of material comfort or sensual pleasure. Rome was a radically sex-crazed culture. Increasingly through the media and entertainment and, frankly, just our own sinful appetites, too many believers, as well as obviously the unbelieving world, are being led into that form of bondage and slavery thinking that it's freedom. So in all of these ways we do see still today another expression of the beast, the false prophet and the harlot; not just limited to Rome then, not just limited to us today, but in every generation these things threaten the church.

**Question 11:****What was the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first century?**

**In both the Old and New Testaments, the Jewish people played a key role in redemptive history. And yet, the majority of Jews at the time of Christ didn't see him as the Messiah. So, what was the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first century?**

**Dr. James D. Smith III**

Well insofar as an emerging Christian movement was identifying itself and living as a Jewish sect, there was often a warm relationship there. I mean, the detailing of that, the ebb and flow of that, is there in our New Testament records, of course. Increasingly, it seems to us, that a watershed in that relationship was really focused on the issue of Titus and the conquest of Jerusalem, the Jewish wars. And in that situation it seems evident that any number of Jewish people really wanted the Christians as a Jewish sect to come to their aid and sense that Jerusalem and the temple were the preeminent issue in spiritual life. When Christians didn't do that, when in fact they said that relationship with the Messiah in this emerging community was the key that was one problematic issue. It's also the case that numerically, as the Christian mission increasingly became a Gentile mission through the efforts of the apostle Paul, and Peter later in his ministry moving in that direction, that influence becomes a major question, and the Jewish influence goes into eclipse. So there's often a significant positive relationship there. I think the epistle to the Hebrews indicates that, later first century for example. But there are strains and stresses that take place.

**Dr. John E. McKinley**

The relationship between Judaism and Christianity in the first century starts out okay and then deteriorates from then on. Initially all the first Christians were Jews. We have the apostles and many of them after that they see themselves as fulfilling Judaism with belief in the Messiah. This wasn't a huge problem for the synagogues and that sort of thing initially, but then as time goes on you have places in the Greek world where synagogues had been established, they had won converts among the Gentiles called proselytes or God-fearers. Often it would be the case where a whole family would become attached to the synagogue. The wife, mother, and the children would become Israelites because there isn't so much of a commitment to get circumcised as a child — women wouldn't need to be circumcised — and they would accept kosher diet, and that was considered an extension of Israel to them. But the men would not. They would remain God-fearers. So when the gospel comes through and Paul's preaching to people, this is not only the more accurate way to follow God and know God through Christ, but it is a much easier and more appealing way because now there is no need for circumcision, there is no need for Jewish cultural forms like kosher diet, and so it's not just the father who leaves the synagogue, but it's the whole family that leaves. And so, this causes a lot of irritation for the Jews

where they are seen as losing their people to the Christians. And so the jealousy of that loss, on top of the Jews thinking that the Christians are preaching blasphemy that the Messiah is God the Son. So that sort of thing raises a lot of tension between Jews and Christians, and in addition, the Jews had a protected status under Rome as an ancient religion, and they didn't like that Christians were living off of that status. So they wanted to distance themselves from the Christians, and that would open the Christians to persecution. And so this action of not working together and competing with each other made relations really deteriorate. And finally, when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., Christians came to interpret that in some times and places as God's judgment on Israel, that he'd rejected the Jews, and that's probably a reaction to their own hostility experienced from the Jews. So it's just history and culture and changes that all kind of conspired together to rip apart Jewish groups and Christian groups from the beginning.

### **Question 12:**

#### **What attitude should we have towards unbelieving Jews in the modern world?**

**By the time John wrote the book of Revelation, the relationship between the church and the Jewish community had deteriorated. We can see this particularly in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia where some unbelieving Jews were called a "synagogue of Satan." But does the advice given to those two churches still apply today? What attitude should we have towards unbelieving Jews in the modern world?**

#### **Dr. Greg Perry**

The apostle Paul, who was a Jew, and who opened his heart to say in the book of Romans that he would that even he could be accursed for the sake of his own people. And I think that's very revealing for us in terms of the kind of attitude that we should have towards unbelieving Jews in the modern world, as people who are image-bearers of God, and also a people who have received the oracles of God, the promises of God. And certain responsibilities come with that, both in terms of a call to recognize the Messiah Jesus, and to believe in him, and to benefit from the great promises. The way Paul puts it is that he wants to see the nations provoke Israel to jealousy. And so as we live a life of peace, of *shalom*, of flourishing, of wisdom, of mercy and love in relation to our unbelieving neighbors, and to especially unbelieving Jews who have God's Word and can recognize some of these promises and see them — that God would use that, that the Holy Spirit would use that to again provoke them to jealousy and to bring them to faith, and to embrace these covenant promises again as they're fulfilled in the Messiah Jesus.

#### **Dr. Craig S. Keener**

In Revelation 2:9 and Revelation 3:9 it speaks of those who say they are Jews but are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan. It's very strong language. But we need to keep

in mind that this was an intra-Jewish polemic. This was Jewish people speaking about other Jewish people. It's not necessarily a model for how we dialogue with people who disagree with us today. It was similar to the language that you have in the prophets where some of the prophets of Israel were denouncing Israel's sins. And you have even in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which everybody acknowledges is a first century Jewish document or earlier than a first century Jewish document, they speak of the rest of Israel as the congregation of Belial, the congregation of Satan. So it's very strong language that was used in intra-Jewish polemic. Part of what is happening also in the book of Revelation, you see how the seven churches are portrayed; they're portrayed as lampstands. That was the basic symbol for Judaism throughout the Roman Empire. And what Revelation is saying is that there's nothing more true to the heritage of Israel than to follow the King of Israel, the rightful King of Israel Jesus Christ.

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

What attitude should we have toward unbelieving Jews in the modern world? Well, at the very minimum, we should see them as neighbors in the way we see all people as neighbors who share in the image of God and who are people with whom we should share the good news of Jesus Christ. But I do think it helps to remember that we who are Gentiles are sharing in the promises that came to us through the Jewish nation of the Old Testament... The church of the first century was a predominately Jewish church which began to, in a dramatic way as it had never before, engrafting Gentiles into those promises. This was a great mystery that Paul talks about, that the promises to Israel were not just for Israel alone but for the nations. And so out of the seed of Old Testament Israel, through Jesus Christ who is the perfection and the true Israel, those promises have now come to those who were far off, as Paul says in Ephesians 2. We've been brought near. And so, as we look at unbelieving Jews today, we should be appreciative in a certain sense, because we're sharing in the blessings of the things that were promised to them as descendants of Abraham. And we should have a desire and a longing in our heart for them to also share in what was theirs first but which has now come to us as well. We have to insist, however, that as Paul said, he who is a Jew is not one who is a Jew outwardly but one who is of faith in Christ, that whether you are born a descendant of Abraham or a descendant of the Gentiles, it's faith in Christ that reconciles someone to God and gives them a stake in God's blessings and God's promises. John the Baptist said to the Pharisees in Matthew 3 that God can make children of Abraham out of stones. And Paul uses the image of the vine which has branches cut off while other branches are grafted in. And then he says a very important thing that should affect how we relate to unbelieving Jews today, that God can also graft back in those natural branches which have been cut off. So we should always have hope. We should always have expectations that people who are ethnically Jewish, descendants of Abraham according to the flesh, might embrace the promises that were first theirs by birthright but then given to us in the age of the Spirit.

**Question 13:****How should the church respond to the suffering and persecution we endure?**

It's clear that John wrote the book of Revelation to encourage his readers to be faithful to Christ in the midst of suffering. And just as suffering and persecution were a reality for John's original readers, they are also a reality for many Christians throughout the world today. So, how should the church respond to the suffering and persecution we endure?

**Rev. Larry D. Cockrell**

Well, suffering a lot of times is viewed as being negative. However, from a Christian viewpoint, suffering is seen as a discipline, and is a discipline that the Lord uses to mold and shape believers more and more into the character of God. Solomon spoke well of it in Proverbs when he talks about we were made for the crucible, meaning the crucible being something that is hot that you put clay pots into fire and to obviously not purify them but in essence harden them. And again, God does the same, you know, if you will, with suffering. In addition to it being a discipline that he uses to shape and mold us more and more into Christ, it is also seen as an opportunity for fellowship. And Paul spoke well of this in Philippians 3 when he was explaining that he wanted to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, but he doesn't stop there. He talks about the fellowship of sharing in his suffering. And so believers can fellowship with Christ in his sufferings, and also we can fellowship with one another as we encounter sufferings in life as well, knowing that what Paul said in Romans 8:28, God is able to cause all of this to work together for good. And so, therefore, we can have a different perspective perhaps than the world as it relates to suffering and its impact in the life of a Christian.

**Dr. Simon J. Kistemaker**

The church of Jesus Christ here on earth is suffering because of the opposition of Satan, and you find that everywhere. What we as Christians have to do first of all is be in constant prayer for those who are suffering persecution, asking the Lord to send his good angels to guard the suffering Christians. You find that everywhere, well, throughout the centuries, but especially today, when you see the suffering which is going on in North Korea, people suffering not only physically but also spiritually. They know that the Lord Jesus Christ is alive, but when food has run out, where do you go to? And then you have the suffering in Islamic countries, and I can mention many of them. But throughout Asia, throughout Africa, fellow Christians are suffering on a daily basis. And then you have countries of Hinduism. At one time I thought that Hinduism, well, that is, Hindus are such gentle people. Then I met an American missionary working in India, and I sort of mentioned that, well, the Hindus are such kind people and they always smile. And he exploded and said, "You don't know what you're talking about!" I said, "Well, that's how I perceive it." "No," he said, "Hinduism says we have 100 gods... and if we have 101, so what. You know, 'Welcome aboard!' But if you say 'Jesus is the only Lord and Savior,' off comes your

head.” And if you follow the news at all, this is exactly what is happening in India today where the Hindus are persecuting the Christians. One more. The Buddhists. Buddhism is actually not a theistic religion. It doesn’t have a god. Buddha was a man, and the statues you find of Buddha are of a man, a bit oversized but nevertheless a man. But the Buddhists are violently opposed to Christianity. Must I go on? One more: Communism. No use for Christianity in many countries that are communistic. Nevertheless, we move on because the Lord Jesus Christ is saying in the book of Revelation, “I am the victor; I am victorious over all my enemies,” and with that, we as Christians keep moving on.

**Dr. John E. McKinley**

Suffering has a lot of different functions in the life of a Christian, and we can’t always know exactly what is going on. Sometimes we might, but suffering is something God might use to bring about good to us or good through us to somebody else. So in the case of persecution or martyrdom, particularly martyrdom, suffering is not really going to benefit us but it’s going to be a demonstration of our faithfulness to God, and it’s going to be to God’s glory. It might be a witness to other people. But suffering, for us, when we’re not being killed in the midst of it — minor sufferings, adversities, major things, various trials — we can still be joyful in these things because through them we are learning to let go of the things that distract us from God and daily life. So, suffering has the effect of focusing our awareness on what is truly important because of pain, getting us to realize this is not all that there is. There’s something more that I’m living for, and I still trust God in the midst of it because I know that the reality of what I have in Christ is greater than my comfort, my safety, and my happiness and those that I care about.

**Question 14:**

**According to the letters to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, what characteristics does Jesus want the church to manifest?**

Most Christian churches today have both admirable qualities and points of conflict. And the seven churches in the book of Revelation were no different. This shouldn’t surprise us when we remember that the church has always been made up of fallen, but redeemed, human beings. Still, according to the letters to the churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, what characteristics does Jesus want the church to manifest?

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

In Jesus’ letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, he shows what he wants to see in his churches, both in what he commends and praises in many of the churches and in what he identifies as serious weaknesses that need to be addressed. So, for example, he commends the church at Ephesus for their doctrinal discernment, that they could see through false teachers and expose them. At the same time, he has to rebuke the church at Ephesus for having lost that love that they had at first, I suspect



probably for one another, because they are loyal to him but have lost that love. In the doctrinal disputes they have perhaps lost love for one another. Part of the reason I think that, is that when you get to the church at Thyatira, the fourth church, Thyatira is commended for their love, love shown in action, in deeds. But Thyatira is rebuked for failing to be theologically discerning, failing to see through false teachers. Some of the churches are praised. Smyrna and Philadelphia are praised for standing fast in the face of persecution. In fact, Jesus has no word of rebuke for those churches. The churches that are suffering most are the churches that apparently are most pure and most faithful. Other churches are rebuked, Sardis for example, because even though they have a reputation for being alive, they're fundamentally dead. They need to wake up. Or Laodicea which is enjoying affluence and think they're self-sufficient, but they're deluding themselves; they're fooling themselves. They don't know how needy they are, and so in their outward self-sufficiency they've missed and lost their deep spiritual poverty and bankruptcy, and they need to repent and seek from Christ what only he can give. Of course, among the themes that pervade these churches are warnings against indulging in sensual pleasure outside of the commands of God. There's the appeal, not just of sexuality, but of luxury and affluence and materialism that the churches need to be warned against as well. And so, again, we're called to seek our treasures in heaven, to use the language that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount, and that's what Christ is looking for in his churches. So in those commendations and in those rebukes we see that Christ is indeed walking among the churches. He knows our strengths and recognizes them. He also points out to us our weaknesses and calls us to repentance.

### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

Jesus wants the church to show both orthopraxy and orthodoxy in equal measure. That is to say, we should live the right way — that's orthopraxy — and we should think or know or confess the right things — that's orthodoxy. This is maybe clearest in the case like the church of Ephesus which struggled with good deeds, and boy, they tested doctrine to make sure it wasn't false, but their love had grown cold. So maybe we should add even a third thing: orthopraxy, orthodoxy *and* right affections. You've got to believe the right things. Some churches didn't. You've got to live the right things. Some churches went from false doctrine to false practice — antinomianism. But if you have love and knowledge and deeds together, then you're going to be the kind of church Christ wants then and now for us to be.

### **Question 15:**

**Why is it important that our love and zeal for Christ be coupled with strong doctrine?**

**In the book of Revelation, we read that believers in the church at Ephesus were strong in their understanding of Christian doctrine, but they had lost their “first love.” And the Thyatirans had an increasing love for Christ, but tolerated false teachings. Jesus’ words to these churches made it clear that we need both love and**

**doctrine. But, why is it important that our love and zeal for Christ be coupled with strong doctrine?**

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

When we emphasize the doctrinal or conceptual dimensions of Scripture, we want to avoid what people call “intellectualism.” But that’s not the same thing as avoiding intellect or avoiding the mind. When I was a young Christian I actually thought that it was the same as avoiding that, that you just needed to kind of get a sense of it emotionally or something on that level. But then I began realizing, for instance in Matthew 13, what differentiated the good ground from the other soils was that they heard the Word of God and they understood it. Jesus wanted people to understand — “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.” And Paul speaks of not just the Spirit bearing witness together with our Spirit, but he speaks of the mind of the Spirit. He also speaks of the renewing of the mind, that the mind plays an important role... The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, the beginning of wisdom, Scripture says. And so, starting with that love for God and that devotion to God, we read Scripture, we use our minds to try to hear the message. And then when we do that, we submit our lives.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

The reason truth and doctrine is important for our love and zeal with Christ is because relationship is grounded in truth. There’s a fundamental connection between belief and behavior, but also love and knowledge. The deeper your love for someone, the more you’re going to want to know them. And the more you know someone, the greater your capacity to love them. So this connection between love and knowledge is vital for us to realize, that to have a relationship with someone and not know them very well, it just doesn’t work. We realize that at a human level, but we need to realize it in our relationships with God as well.

**Understanding the structure and content of the book of Revelation provides a solid basis for our interpretation of its difficult passages. And for this book in particular several topics stand out, including John’s use of imagery and his use of recapitulation. Once we grasp these ideas, the purpose of the book becomes all the more clear: to encourage suffering Christians to remain faithful until Jesus returns.**

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# The Book of Revelation

LESSON  
THREE

## THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM



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# The Book of Revelation

## Lesson Three

### The King and His Kingdom

#### INTRODUCTION

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After Jesus was arrested, he was brought before Pontius Pilate, and Pilate asked him if he was the king of the Jews. Jesus didn't answer the question directly. Instead he said, "My kingdom is not of this world ... my kingdom is not from this place." Now Pilate knew Caesar and he had seen his palace. He had a very definite idea of what a king should look like. And this man standing before him looked nothing like a king. Imagine how unbelievable Jesus' words must have seemed to him.

Perhaps even believers today may be tempted to question whether or not Jesus is actually king. After all, if we look around us, it's easy to see opposition to God's reign throughout this world. But Jesus' answer to Pilate's question is actually one of the most prominent themes in the book of Revelation. Jesus does reign as king, but his kingdom is not from this world. And the book of Revelation gives us hope that his kingdom is coming. We can experience it now in part, but we will experience it fully when Christ returns. And because final victory in this world belongs to Christ, John calls us to love him and to remain loyal to him until he returns.

This is the third lesson in our series on *The Book of Revelation*, and we have entitled it "The King and His Kingdom." This lesson will explore how the central theme of the kingdom of God runs through the entire book of Revelation and unites all its various teachings.

In an earlier lesson, we said that God rules his kingdom in ways that resemble ancient international treaties, especially those between great emperors or suzerains and the vassal kingdoms that served them. We also highlighted three features of these treaties or covenants that are shared in common with God's relationship with his people: the suzerain's benevolence toward his vassal is paralleled by God's benevolence to his people. The loyalty or obedience the suzerain required from his vassal is paralleled by the loyalty God requires of his people. And the consequences for the vassal that would result from the vassal's loyalty or disloyalty are paralleled by the blessings God grants to those who are faithful to him and the curses he brings against those who are unfaithful to him. All three of these covenant features are prominent throughout the book of Revelation.

Our lesson on "The King and His Kingdom" will divide into four parts that roughly follow the basic contours of these ancient covenants. First, we'll consider the kingship that God holds as the divine suzerain or emperor, as well as the kingship that Jesus holds as God's vassal king. Second, we'll explore the way Revelation highlights God's benevolence toward his covenant people. Third, we'll look at the requirement of loyalty that God demands from his people. And fourth, we'll turn to the consequences that result from loyalty and disloyalty to God. Let's start with the kingship of God as the divine suzerain and Jesus as his vassal.



## KINGSHIP

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Our discussion of the kingship of God and Jesus will focus on two matters. First, we'll survey God's kingship as the suzerain over all creation. And second, we'll describe Christ's kingship as God's vassal or servant king. Let's begin by looking at God's kingship.

### GOD'S KINGSHIP

Many parts of Scripture, such as Psalm 103:19, describe God as the omnipotent king and ruler over all creation. He has complete power and authority over everything he's created. And he exercises that power and authority by governing the universe and all its creatures.

**God has the right to rule over all creation because he is the creator. He made it. It belongs to him, and he has the right to rule over it. And there's a passage in the Psalms — Psalm 24:1-2 — that makes it very clear that this is true: "The Lord owns the earth and all it contains, the world and all who live in it, for" — or because — "he set its foundation upon the seas and established it upon the ocean currents." So he owns it. He rules over it because he made it. It belongs to him.**

— Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.

**God doesn't derive his authority from outside of himself. He is his own authority. His attributes, all of them, are authoritative. But of course, it's not the kind of authority we're used to as human beings, which can be tyrannical, or capricious, or arbitrary. It's authority that is good because God is good. But we can trust his authority because he has an amazing track record. The greatest proof of his authority is, of course, sending his son to die for our sins and to be raised up for our justification. No other philosophy, no other god remotely comes to this kind of answer. So God's authority is in itself, but it's proven over and over again in Jesus Christ.**

— Dr. William Edgar

The book of Revelation frequently speaks of God as the great king over all creation, and emphasizes his active, powerful reign over the universe. We see this in John's greeting to his readers in Revelation 1:4-6. We see it in the description of the heavenly throne room throughout Revelation 4-5. We see it also in the fact that a multitude from every nation gathers before God's heavenly throne and praises him in Revelation 7:9-10. We can even see it in the fact that the angels do the same thing in

verses 11 and 12. And we see it in the constant references to God on his throne throughout the rest of the book.

As just one example, listen to how John greeted the churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 1:4-6:

**John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen (Revelation 1:4-6).**

Notice how many references there are to God's kingdom in these few short verses. God is on his throne; Jesus rules over the kings of the earth; and the church is the kingdom that serves God.

**The topic of the kingdom of God is a massive topic in Scripture, and everyone pretty much agrees that it was the central message of Jesus' teaching. So what does the kingdom of God mean? Ultimately, it means that God is king, that God is sovereign, that God is Lord, that he is the sovereign Lord of the universe. In terms of its statement or its references in Scripture, it really has two main focuses or foci in Scripture. One is that God is the sovereign Lord of all things from beginning to end — throughout history, in every time, in every place, God is king. The other is the manifestation of that kingship in terms of his lordship over human history and over human beings.**

**— Dr. Mark L. Strauss**

**The kingdom of God is the rightful, true reign of God in willing people who rightly recognize God's rightful claim on their lives, who lovingly, trustingly, fully and willingly surrender to the sovereign lordship of God. Now, that means that the church is in some way the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God. The church is the way that God's kingdom is made visible in creation, in history, right now. But that surrender that we experience now is only a precursor. Ultimately, God will renew all things. God will destroy every enemy. God will remove every impediment from our perfectly knowing him and our completely obeying him. He will remove those impediments. That's the ultimate promise of God. But right now, we participate in an anticipatory way willingly, lovingly, freely by acknowledging in Jesus Christ God's salvation and God's lordship over our lives. And**

**through that, the church bears witness to the ultimate gift of the kingdom that is promised in the *eschaton*.**

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

Just like ancient near-eastern emperors, God appointed servants to carry out his commands — vassals who would rule over and administer his kingdom on his behalf. In general terms, God assigned this role to the human race, under the headship of a succession of covenant administrators.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the covenant administrations developed in six major covenants that God made with his people: the covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Christ. The first two covenants — those made with Adam and Noah — identified God as the suzerain king over the entire earth, and marked the human race as the vassal nation that carried out his will on earth. Under the terms of these covenants, God's sovereignty still extends to all the nations of the earth; every single person is accountable to him.

After his covenants with Adam and Noah, God made covenants with Abraham, Moses and David that extended his kingship in a special way over the nation of ancient Israel.

As just one example, listen to what God said to the nation of ancient Israel in Exodus 19:4-6:

**You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6).**

In this passage, God reminded the Israelites of the benevolence he had shown them when he redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. He mentioned the Israelites' responsibility to demonstrate their loyalty through obedience to the covenant he was making with them. And he indicated the consequences of blessings they would receive if they were obedient to the covenant.

In the covenant with David in particular, God established David's dynasty as the conduit of God's blessing and judgments for his people. This covenant is mentioned in passages like 2 Samuel 7:1-17, Psalm 89 and Psalm 132. It states that David's sons were God's vassal kings. They represented the entire kingdom of Israel before God. As in all other covenants, God showed benevolence, expected loyalty and reminded the house of David of the consequences of his blessings and curses.

Later in Israel's history, David's descendants failed so badly that the entire nation of Israel was cursed and exiled by God. But even in exile, the prophets of Israel predicted that in the last days God would renew his covenant through a righteous Son of David. In Jeremiah 31:31, the prophet Jeremiah referred to this renewal as a new covenant. This new covenant would be God's ultimate display of benevolence. He would transform the hearts of his people so that they would be loyal to him. They would enjoy his unending covenant blessings, and would never be cursed again. At the same time, God would

render eternal judgment on all those who opposed him, his vassal king and the people of his kingdom.

God's covenants with David and ancient Israel were always intended to extend their blessings beyond David and Israel. God's reign over David's house was supposed to benefit the entire nation of Israel, and Israel's blessings were supposed to benefit the entire world. We can see this in Psalms 2, 67; Isaiah 2:2-4; and Amos 9:11-15. God would send a redeemer through David's house, and that redeemer would save Israel. And through Israel, he would rescue the entire creation.

Right now, God is redeeming the church through Christ, and incorporating us into his holy, covenant people. As a result, the church is now one kingdom with the Old Testament nation of Israel.

Listen to how this covenantal relationship is expressed in Revelation 1:5-6:

**Jesus Christ ... loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father (Revelation 1:5-6).**

These verses indicate that because Jesus died to free us from our sins, we're now God's special possession and nation. We even bear the same title God gave to Israel in the Old Testament: "a kingdom and priests."

God gave this title to ancient Israel in Exodus 19:6, where one of the covenant blessings was that Israel would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

**Many people through the centuries have argued about the nature of the kingdom of God. It's a clear description that we find in the Bible, and yet just exactly what it means has been a source of a lot of controversy. I think we can say, though, that in its essence, at the bottom, the kingdom of God describes God's rule in the world, in the church and in the individual human heart, so that if you and I are living God's life according to the Scriptures, we can say that we are participating in the kingdom of God.**

— Dr. John Oswalt

**What is the kingdom of God? Well, certainly we could describe that a number of ways, but I think a very helpful way is by saying it is where God's kingdom is established — it's a realm in which God's kingdom is established through his king which leads to the praise of God, the glory of God, and has ramifications in all sorts of ways for life on earth. And so we see the kingdom of God very prominently in the teaching of Jesus. And what we find in the New Testament is Jesus is that king who is powerfully bringing the kingdom of God into our world. The technical term is eruption. There's an in breaking; there's a very powerful entrance of God into our world by means of his messianic King. A great way to say what the kingdom is comes from**

**Geerhardus Vos, and he says, the kingdom comes where the gospel is spread, hearts are changed, sin and error overcome, righteousness cultivated, and a living communion with God established.**

**— Dr. Brandon Crowe**

God's goal has always been to extend his heavenly kingdom to earth, and to populate earth with faithful people. In heaven, God's will is already done perfectly. But on earth, his creatures often refuse to do his will. They refuse to acknowledge God as king, and the kingdoms of this world often oppose God's reign. So, when Jesus prayed the Lord's Prayer, his petition was that one day all of these opposing kingdoms would be defeated, so that only God's kingdom would remain.

Listen to how Revelation 11:15 talks about that future day:

**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15).**

God's special kingdom will endure until it conquers and fills the whole world. This is the final destination of biblical prophecy. When Jesus returns in glory, God's special reign will encompass every kingdom on earth. This same hope is taught in Jeremiah 31:31-34, Zechariah 14:9, and many other passages of Scripture.

God's kingship far surpasses the analogies found in the ancient Near East. In the ancient world, human suzerains never fully lived up to the benevolence they promised in their covenants. They never perfectly evaluated the loyalty of their subjects, and they never perfectly dispensed covenant consequences. But in God's covenant our divine suzerain fully lives up to his benevolent promises. He perfectly evaluates our loyalty. And he dispenses perfect discipline and judgment in the form of consequences of covenant blessings and curses. And as we're about to see, he sent Jesus Christ as his royal Son to be perfectly loyal to God on our behalf and to bear the consequences of our disloyalty so we can have salvation in him.

With this understanding of God's universal kingship in mind, we're ready to turn to the related theme of Christ's kingship as God's servant or vassal king.

## **CHRIST'S KINGSHIP**

**Jesus's kingship needs to be understood in light of the ancient Davidic kingship because Jesus is the ideal David. He is HaMashiach, the Messiah. And of course in the Old Testament, the Davidic kingship is patterned after something that we see in the ancient Near Eastern world, so-called suzerain-vassal relationship where the suzerain, the king, rules over his subjects, usually by treaty. And David is God's chosen ruler over the world. And so there's a sense in which God chose David to be his vice-regent to rule on his behalf. And of course Jesus is the one who ultimately fulfills that.**

**— Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.**

It might sound strange to think about Jesus as a vassal or servant king rather than as the suzerain of the universe. After all, Jesus is God, and God is the creator and ruler of everything that exists. We affirm very strongly that Jesus is fully divine, but it's important to remember that Jesus isn't only God. He's also fully human. And as a human being, he sits on the very human throne of his father David, who held the human office of king over God's vassal nation, ancient Israel. In this sense, Jesus' kingship is a human office. And therefore, Jesus is God's vassal, just as David was in the Old Testament.

**The covenantal structure of the Bible is really rooted in the treaty agreements between ancient Near Eastern kings. And oftentimes the suzerain would be the great king and there would be a vassal king related in this covenant with the great king. The book of Revelation talks about Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, as the King — the Davidic king. And so that language reveals a couple of things. One of the things is it shows that Jesus not only reveals who God is, but he also reveals true humanness, the full nature of what it means to be a human being. And so in his role in the New Testament as the son of David, the Son of God language actually, oftentimes, most often, refers to his role as the Davidic king, the Messiah. And in that sense, he represents a historic people. In the case of the book of Revelation, it's the people of God spread throughout all the nations, and he is our king, our representative to the Father, or the suzerain. So he is our king in history, in time, a full human being who represents his people to the Father. Of course, also, he represents God to us, but that doesn't diminish the fact that he's fully human as well and represents us to God.**

— Dr. Greg Perry

The name Christ is a title that directly refers to the office of Davidic king. The word Christ simply means anointed one. It's an Old Testament term that was frequently applied to Davidic kings because they were anointed when they took office. We see this in places like 2 Chronicles 6:42; Psalm 2:2, 6; Psalm 18:50; Psalm 20:6, 9; and Psalm 45:1-2. This is also why Jesus is called God's Christ in places like Revelation 11:15 and 12:10. He's God's anointed one — his vassal king.

As the great Son of David, Jesus fulfills all the aspects of the new covenant that were anticipated in the Old Testament. In him, God's greatest benevolence is displayed. Christ himself kept all the requirements of loyalty on our behalf. He suffered the consequences of covenant curses when he died in our place. And he received the consequences of covenant blessings when he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

Jesus secured his place as God's human vassal king by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. His death took away any power that sin had to condemn and ruin God's people.

As we read in Revelation 12:10-11:

**Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 12:10-11).**

Because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, Satan has been defeated. And Christ now has authority in God's kingdom so that his salvation can come to his people.

And Jesus' obedience earned him the reward of resurrection from the dead and a seat of authority far above any created authority, whether human, angelic or demonic.

As he said after his resurrection in Matthew 28:18-19:

**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-19).**

Of course, in his divine nature, Jesus never received authority. He always had it. But when he rose again from the dead, Jesus said that God the Father gave him kingly authority over the nations, meaning that he had become the Father's human vassal king over the entire heavens and earth.

After his resurrection, when Jesus ascended into heaven, he was enthroned as king. The New Testament makes this clear in passages like Hebrews 1:3, 10:12, and 12:2, when it says that Jesus sat down at the right hand of God the Father. This imagery indicates that the Father is the great high king or suzerain, and that Jesus his Son is the human vassal that serves and represents him. Jesus is the final king over David's house, and over all other human kingdoms on earth. And through him the entire world will be renewed. Since his enthronement, Jesus has reigned as king over the church. And he's been expanding his kingdom by bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

In stark contrast to human kings, God has sent his Son as the perfect vassal king to purchase our redemption at the cost of the cross. He demonstrated his loyalty in his earthly life and suffered the consequences of our disloyalty and he did it on the cross. He gave his life to purchase our forgiveness and loyalty, and he continues to defend and protect us. We should respond to his gracious rule with loving reverence expressed in loyal obedience to our benevolent God and king.

Now that we've explored the suzerain kingship of God the Father and the vassal kingship of Jesus, let's consider the way the book of Revelation describes God's benevolence in terms of the kingdom of God.

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## **BENEVOLENCE**

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God's benevolence as the suzerain of the covenant can be seen in many ways throughout the book of Revelation. Without a doubt, his greatest benevolence was

sending his Son to die for our sins. This theme is mentioned in places like Revelation 1:5; 5:9-10; 7:14; and 14:3-4.

But we also see God's royal benevolence for his people in the way he calls us to himself and makes us part of his kingdom, as in Revelation 1:6; 11:15; and 17:14.

In his kindness he exempted his people from many of the judgments that were threatened against unbelievers in the book, as in Revelation 7:3-4 and 9:4.

Even the prophetic warnings to the churches in Revelation are benevolent opportunities for us to repent. God restrained his judgment so that people would have the opportunity to escape condemnation. John recorded this type of benevolence in Revelation 2:5, 16, 21 and 3:3, 19.

But probably the most frequent way God's grace and kindness are seen in Revelation is through his defense of his people in the midst of spiritual war. So, in this lesson, we'll focus our discussion of God's kingly benevolence specifically on the way he protects his people from being destroyed by these conflicts.

**Well, Spiritual warfare is the reality of any serious Christian in my estimation. It's understanding that there is a spirit world, that there is a Satan, and that those spirits — that Satan — doesn't like us. If Satan attacked Jesus, then you can rather imagine Satan is going to attack the life of the believer today, and we've got to be ready for it. If the first thing that happened when Jesus goes to Decapolis is he sees a spirit-filled person, a demon-possessed person, you can imagine there are such things as demon possession today, and we've got to take it very seriously, and we've got to make sure that we're holy as he is holy in order to take it seriously.**

**— Dr. Matt Friedman**

In the New Testament, spiritual warfare isn't primarily our own internal struggles against sin, but an ongoing war between God and the evil spiritual powers at work in this world. And one way God engages in this conflict is by defending his kingdom against these evil forces. As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the book of Revelation often discloses the workings of the supernatural realm of God and the preternatural realm of angels and demons, and talks about their influence in the natural realm where we live. And the essence of all spiritual warfare in the lives of Christians is that these preternatural forces are in combat with each other, that they influence our world, that demons try to harm our lives and to make us disloyal to God, and that God employs angels to protect us from demonic influence and activities.

**The topic of spiritual warfare is very complicated for Christians because it manifests differently for each person. And one result of this is that when Christians discuss the topic, they often go to extremes. One extreme is that people try to explain everything that happens in terms of nature or science, and they ignore the reality of spiritual warfare. But not everything that happens can be easily explained by science. Another extreme is that people look for demons behind every**



**bush and see spiritual confrontation in everything. I think the truth is somewhere in between. When we get ready for worship services, or actively participate in spiritual, evangelistic projects, or help other people spiritually, we often encounter spiritual opposition. It might manifest as an illness, or an official's unwillingness to help you. It might be obstacles appearing from nowhere, that you can't explain in ordinary ways. In fact, our material world is thoroughly permeated by the spiritual world. And that's why many physical processes that take place in our lives may be echoes of events in the spiritual world. But the cause of these events isn't the main point. They may have spiritual causes, or even be the result of our sin. But wherever we are and whatever happens to us, we have to understand that our Lord protects us. We can rely on his power — his strength. We can draw support from him. And this gives us confidence, no matter what spiritual manifestations we encounter. The reality is that we belong to our Lord, body and soul. And apart from our heavenly Father's will, not a hair can fall from our head. That's why in any spiritual confrontation, we can be calm and sure that the victory will be the Lord's, and — with him — ours as well.**

**— Rev. Ivan Bespalov, translation**

Christians are assured victory in spiritual war. There's nothing the demons can do to destroy our salvation, or to shake our inheritance in God's kingdom. Spiritual war can be disheartening and trying and even frightening. But because of God's benevolence, it can never succeed against us in the long run.

We'll divide our discussion of God's covenant benevolence into three parts. First, we'll look at the way God defended his kingdom in the Old Testament. Second, we'll see how he defended his kingdom in the New Testament outside the book of Revelation. And third, we'll focus on his benevolent protection in the book of Revelation itself. Let's begin with God's benevolence in the Old Testament.

## **OLD TESTAMENT**

The Old Testament is filled with accounts of battles. Israel was frequently at war with neighboring nations. And the Israelites even fought among themselves at various times. But even though most descriptions of wars in the Old Testament highlight human beings that fought with physical weapons, Scripture occasionally pulls back the veil to show us that invisible spiritual battles were also taking place. And in fact, these invisible battles greatly influenced the success or failure of the human armies.

These invisible battles were always fought between God and his holy angels on the one side, and Satan and his demonic armies on the other side. Although most of the human armies that opposed Israel believed that they were following other gods, verses like Deuteronomy 32:17 made it clear that the false gods of the nations were actually demons.

**In the Old Testament, angels and demons are portrayed sometimes as being a part of or standing behind geopolitical conflict. It seems as if the angels and the demons had a hand in how these events and how these conflicts would play out. For instance, we see in Daniel 10 an instance where Gabriel, an angel, comes to Daniel and says, “I heard your prayer. I left a while ago to come find you, but I was held up with a conflict including the angel Michael involving the kings of Persia.” Now to a certain extent, these are mysterious texts and it’s hard for us to understand exactly what that means and how these events would have played out, and what the process would have been of this conflict. But we see that angels and demons are in some way standing behind or affecting geopolitical conflict. For the Old Testament audience, these conflicts between nations were not strictly human or natural events, but they all had a supernatural backdrop. Angels were in conflict with demons. Supernatural hosts were battling in the same way that the earthly hosts were battling. They understood this backdrop to everything that occurred around them, and so Daniel would not have been surprised to find that Gabriel might have been withheld or might have been hindered in his coming to him because of something that was going on with the princes of Persia.**

**— Dr. Scott Redd**

One set of examples that highlights the invisible battles fought between angels and demons can be found in Exodus 7–15. In the days of Moses, God’s people were enslaved by the Egyptians. But God led his angelic armies into battle against Egypt and their pagan gods, in order to rescue his people from their tyranny. He began by sending ten plagues against the Egyptians, including his angel of death that killed the firstborn in every Egyptian household. Then, in a climactic display of his power, he delivered his people by drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea.

**Throughout the entire Bible, one of the main ways that God is revealed, both Old Testament and New Testament, one of the main ways he is revealed is that he is a warrior. One of the most famous passages of course is Exodus 15:3 where Moses is singing at the Red Sea after the defeat of the Egyptians and he says, “Yahweh the Lord is a warrior, Yahweh is his name.” Yahweh is short for a longer expression for God, Yahweh Sabaoth which means Yahweh of the armies. And so even there, what’s being said by Moses in Exodus 15:3 is that at the very heart of who God is, at the essence of who God is, is this idea of warrior. God is a warrior.**

**— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Then, in Exodus 15:11, Moses sang:

**Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you — majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? (Exodus 15:11).**

Moses and his readers knew the answer to this question. No god is like the Lord. After all, the Egyptian gods were completely incapable of stopping the true God from destroying the entire Egyptian army.

The Old Testament is full of examples like these. God frequently identified himself as Israel's warrior king that led them into battle. But these battles weren't just against human enemies; they always involved God going to war against the false gods of the nations.

For instance, in 2 Kings 19, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, taunted Hezekiah, king of Judah, because he believed the Assyrian gods were stronger than Israel's God.

So, in 2 Kings 19:17-19, Hezekiah offered this prayer to God:

**It is true, O Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste these nations and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by men's hands. Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God (2 Kings 19:17-19).**

Hezekiah understood that a battle with the Assyrians wasn't just against Sennacherib and his armies. It was a spiritual battle between the Lord and the gods of Assyria. That's why he prayed not just for victory in battle, but for the Lord to be exalted over their gods.

And God answered his prayer. That night an angel put to death 185,000 men in the Assyrian armies, and Sennacherib returned home in defeat. Hezekiah's army didn't even have to face the Assyrians in battle. God's spiritual power completely destroyed the human army.

**One of the most significant depictions of the Lord in the Old Testament is God's role as king, and as a king, he would have multiple duties just like any other ancient Near Eastern king, multiple duties and functions that give light to his office as king. One of those functions would have been a warrior function. You see, in the ancient Near East, the king was considered the leader of the hosts, the leader of the armies of his nation, and as such, he was also the greatest warrior. So God, or the Lord being a warrior throughout the Old Testament depicts God as a king who is a warrior king. He goes out and defends, he fights for, he delivers, and he protects his own people. God's role as a warrior king is a cause for consolation and comfort, but also a cause for confidence. As we go out into the world around us, God's people can be sure that their God is a warrior and that he**

**goes out and fights for them, and he protects them, and he defends them, and the victory will be his.**

— Dr. Scott Redd

Old Testament stories of war aren't always explicit about the spiritual conflicts between the true God of Israel and the false gods of the nations. But even so, the Old Testament consistently demonstrates that physical battles are greatly influenced by spiritual battles.

Now that we've seen how God demonstrated his benevolence by defending his kingdom in the Old Testament, let's turn our attention to his benevolence in the spiritual warfare of the New Testament.

## **NEW TESTAMENT**

In the New Testament, spiritual warfare does not involve earthly military forces. So, its descriptions of God's benevolence in spiritual war primarily address invisible conflicts in the preternatural realm, and how these spiritual conflicts influence the natural realm. Now, just like in the Old Testament, God, angels and demons are still involved in human wars and international politics. But the focus of God's benevolent protection in the New Testament is how he keeps his faithful people safe from demonic powers.

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament mentions many different ways that God benevolently protects his people. So, for the sake of time, we'll limit our discussion to just two. First, God's benevolent protection in spiritual war is expressed in Christ's victory

### **Christ's Victory**

The New Testament presents Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension as a victory not only over sin and its consequences, but also over God's spiritual enemies.

Jesus' life conquered the demons in many ways, especially as demonstrated through exorcisms. We see this in passages like Matthew 12:25-28, where Jesus taught that he was able to drive out demons with great power and force because the kingdom of God had come.

And regarding Christ's death, listen to what Paul wrote in Colossians 2:15:

**Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (Colossians 2:15).**

In this verse, the powers and authorities are demonic powers. And they have been disarmed and defeated because of what Christ did on the cross. We see this same idea in Hebrews 2:14.

Christ's resurrection and ascension into heaven also extended God's benevolent protection to his people. For example, they resulted in Jesus receiving authority over all his spiritual enemies, so that he could protect and bless the church. This idea is clearly taught in Matthew 28:18-20, Ephesians 1:19-23, and 1 Peter 3:22.

A second way the New Testament talks about God's royal benevolence in spiritual war is by describing the Holy Spirit's power that enables us to resist the devil and his schemes.

## Holy Spirit's Power

Jesus gained power over all his and our spiritual enemies when he lived in obedience to God, died on the cross, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. But at the present time, he hasn't used that power to destroy our enemies completely. In fact, God still allows the demons to influence the world in various ways. But he's also empowered us by his Holy Spirit, so that we can resist them. We see this Galatians 3:2-3, Ephesians 3:16, Colossians 1:9-11, and many other places.

As just one example, listen to James 4:5-7:

**The spirit he caused to live in us ... gives us more grace... Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (James 4:5-7).**

Here, James taught that the grace we receive from the Holy Spirit empowers us for spiritual war, in this case by keeping us loyal to God and helping us resist demonic temptations and influences.

**I think the first thing the Holy Spirit does to empower us for spiritual warfare is to make us aware of the spiritual realm. We tend to gravitate toward just what we can see and feel. But to become aware that there is a spiritual realm that we engage in and have a battle within is so important. So he makes us aware of the spiritual realm in the first place. He gives us conviction of sin. As we overcome sin in our lives, the first thing is to be aware of that sin, and then he empowers us to overcome sin. Also, to lead us to prayer and engage the battle at that front is vital in his role in our lives.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

In Ephesians 6, Paul used the metaphor of a soldier's armor and weapons to describe the ways God protects us in spiritual war. Specifically, he talked about Christians putting on the full armor of God.

Listen to his words in Ephesians 6:12-13:

**Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and**

**against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand (Ephesians 6:12-13).**

Then in verses 17 and 18, Paul went on to say that the Holy Spirit plays a critical role both in forming this armor and as our motivation and power in battle. Listen to what he said:

**Take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions (Ephesians 6:17-18).**

Until Jesus returns to finish what he started, the New Testament calls us to engage in spiritual warfare against the preternatural forces that are still at work in this world. And it promises that the Holy Spirit will give us the tools and the strength to do it.

As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:4:

**The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4).**

Our weapons have divine power because they come from the Holy Spirit. And they are effective against every spiritual danger, from false teachings to the devil himself.

**Let's face it, the Evil One is going to give us grief on earth. When that happens, the question is, is there any hope? Am I all by myself? Is God aware of this and doing something about it? And the resounding answer is, yes he is, and he has offered us abundant power to overcome any attack of the Evil One. Now one of my favorite passages along that line I'd like to read to you just now. 1 John 4:3-4, John says, "...but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." God promises we have greater power. And it is a power struggle. The Evil One has a lot of power, more than we have, except for the fact that we have God.**

**— Mr. Steve Douglass**

Now that we've seen how God demonstrated his benevolence in the spiritual warfare of the Old Testament and New Testament, let's turn our attention to the way he protects his people and fights against their enemies in the book of Revelation.

## BOOK OF REVELATION

**And I think what the book of Revelation teaches us, particularly in a chapter like chapter 12, is that what's going on on the earth is related to what's going on in the heavenlies and that spiritual warfare really has to do with what's really going on in history and what's really going on in our lives, and that spiritual forces are engaged in history, that the great dragon Satan is at work and behind the beast and that these are related, and that the protection that Christians need is in actual churches and communities that exist in Laodicea and at Ephesus, but their protection is also in the Lamb, in the risen Lamb. So the interconnection between what's going on in the heavenlies with Satan and with Jesus and the battle that's going on there is manifest in history, not only in the first century but now. And we see those things going on in the world now where Christians are suffering for their faith. It's not just political forces that are at work. It's demonic forces that are at work.**

**— Dr. Greg Perry**

Throughout the book of Revelation, John alerted Christians to the spiritual conflict that has been going on since humanity's fall into sin, and that will continue until Christ comes again. John symbolically described this spiritual conflict as warfare between the beast and the woman in Revelation 12, and as the warfare of the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth in Revelation 13. John wanted his readers to know that the persecution they were experiencing, and the temptations they were facing, resulted directly from the spiritual conflict between Christ and his enemies.

Like the Old Testament, John pointed out that spiritual battles between angels and demons affected human politics. We see this, for example, in the way the kings of the earth gather to battle against God in Revelation 16:14-16. Another clear example is the explanation that the heads of the beast in Revelation 17, as well as its horns, are earthly kings. And of course, John's original audience was itself suffering persecution from earthly governments that were moved at least in part by demonic forces.

But like the New Testament, John also explained that the spiritual battles fought by his original audience took place primarily in the preternatural realm. They were personal struggles to remain loyal to Christ, to resist sin, and to advance God's kingdom through the gospel; they were not calls to take up arms against other human beings. But in every case — whether he was speaking about cosmic struggles, or human politics, or personal struggles — John assured his audience that God was their benevolent protector. He would guard them against overwhelming attacks, strengthen them to remain faithful, and eventually grant them unchallenged peace.

**The book of Revelation focuses a lot on spiritual warfare. It pictures a radical dichotomy between God and Christ and his servants on one side and Satan and his servants on the other side. That's to help us to understand that it's a question of allegiance — are you following God**

**or are you following self and in the process really belonging to the kingdom of Satan? Seeing that radical dichotomy is important for us. The second thing I would draw attention to is that it is asking about our commitments. It's asking about where our minds are going, where our hearts are going, not simply our external behavior. The third thing I think that's involved is that Satan is a counterfeiter, that he has things that are close enough to the truth to suck people in, but they're fake, and identifying that fake character which can still be attractive is one of the challenges for us today.**

**— Dr. Vern S. Poythress**

In response to the stresses and problems caused by spiritual war, the book of Revelation offers its readers at least three different ways to think about God's benevolent protection. First, it emphasizes that Christ has already secured victory for all his faithful people.

Revelation emphasizes that Christ's life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension secured our ultimate victory in spiritual war. Revelation chapters 4 and 5 present this victory clearly, with Jesus pictured as the slain Lamb of God that is found worthy to open the scrolls of judgment against God's enemies. Christ's victory over his enemies didn't put an end to the fighting. But it did ensure that eventually his enemies will be utterly destroyed, and his faithful people will perfectly be blessed. In this sense, God's benevolence and protection take the form of sealing us in victory. There is no way we can fail to conquer because the victory already belongs to Christ. We simply have to persevere until he brings it to pass.

A second way Revelation calls attention to God's benevolent protection in spiritual war is by reminding us that the Holy Spirit is presently applying Christ's victory to the lives of believers.

When Christ secured our victory in spiritual war, he won the right to share the blessings from that victory with his faithful people. And in his benevolence, he appointed the Holy Spirit to apply those blessings to our lives, or as we might say, to distribute those blessings to us.

Many of these benevolent blessings relate to things we see in the book of Revelation. For instance, the Roman Empire has fallen. In fact, all the powers throughout history that have tried to extinguish the church have failed. Far from being defeated, God's kingdom is advancing to every nation, tribe, people and language. And according to Revelation 7, it will eventually complete that task.

The third way that Revelation highlights God's benevolent protection in spiritual war is by reminding us that when Christ returns, God will end this battle by finalizing his victory over our spiritual enemies by utterly destroying them.

Revelation gives us confidence that when Christ returns, Satan and his followers will be ultimately destroyed. They will be rendered entirely powerless to tempt and trouble us. Their punishment will limit them so greatly that it will be impossible for them to fight any longer.

Revelation 17 and 18 describe the punishment of the great prostitute, Babylon, and the punishment of all the kings and inhabitants of the earth that followed her.



Revelation 20 recounts the final defeat of the dragon and his armies. And Revelation 21 and 22 teach that the new heaven and new earth will be completely free from the presence of evil.

When all God's enemies have been rendered powerless, the great spiritual war will end, and God's faithful people will live in uninterrupted peace. This will be the ultimate expression of God's benevolence and protection; we will be completely safe forever.

Throughout the book of Revelation, we can see God's benevolence in providing for and protecting his people. Jesus purchased victory for God's people on the cross, and rose again so that his victory could be applied to all God's faithful people. At the present time, the church experiences that victory in part. We have God's sure promise that when Christ returns, we'll fully enjoy that victory. All Christ's enemies will be judged, and we'll receive our glorious inheritance in the new heavens and the new earth.

So far in our lesson we've examined the covenant kingship of God and Christ as suzerain and vassal kings, and explored how Revelation highlights God's benevolence toward his covenant people. So, at this point, we're ready to turn to our third major topic: the loyalty God requires us to demonstrate as citizens of his kingdom.

## LOYALTY

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As we've seen, at least three features of our relationship with God parallel ancient suzerain-vassal treaties or covenants: God's benevolence toward us as his people; the loyalty or obedience God requires from us as his vassal kingdom; and the consequences of blessings in response to obedience, and curses in response to disobedience. At this point we want to focus on the loyal service God expects of the people he saves by his grace.

When he wrote the book of Revelation, the apostle John was conscious of the church's covenant relationship to God. And one of the reasons he wrote was to encourage the churches in Asia Minor to remain loyal to God throughout the challenges they faced. He wanted them to remember all the kindness God had shown them, as well as the blessings God offered, so that they would live in faithful obedience to the Lord.

You'll recall from a previous lesson that the churches addressed in Revelation faced many temptations to compromise their loyalty to God. John's original audience faced at least four different types of temptation to be disloyal to God.

First, the trade guilds had their own patron deities, and they required their members to worship these false gods. This tempted believers to engage in idolatry in order to gain the opportunity to work and conduct business.

Second, the Roman Empire required its subjects to worship its gods and its emperor. This tempted Christians to worship pagan gods in order to avoid punishment from the government.

Third, Judaism put pressure on Christians to abandon Christ. Judaism was given a special exemption from pagan worship, and Christianity was originally covered by this exemption. But as Judaism distanced itself from Christianity, this exemption ceased to

apply to the church. This tempted many Jewish Christians to abandon Christ and return to traditional Judaism, in order to avoid Roman persecution.

Fourth, wayward Christians throughout the Roman Empire compromised their faith by engaging in pagan practices and sexual immorality. And they encouraged others to follow them in their sin.

These temptations posed significant challenges to the loyalty of churches in Asia Minor. In this context, one important reason that John wrote was to undercut their loyalty to these rival groups, and to strengthen their loyalty to God.

Our examination of the theme of loyalty will focus on two primary expressions of loyalty found throughout the book of Revelation: perseverance and worship. Let's look first at Revelation's call to perseverance.

## **PERSEVERANCE**

Perseverance can be defined as:

**Remaining faithful to God in belief and actions despite temptation, opposition or discouragement.**

To persevere is to overcome any and all forces that would incline us to abandon our faith in God or to rebel against him in a total and final way.

In response to the many temptations believers in Asia Minor faced, John repeatedly called his readers to persevere or overcome. These exhortations can be found in every letter to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3, and throughout the rest of the book, too.

In the letters, we see them in Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; and 3:5, 12, 21. We also see them in places like Revelation 14:12; 16:15; 18:4; 20:4; 21:7; and 22:7, 11, 14. It's no exaggeration to say that perseverance is one of the most prominent themes in the entire book of Revelation.

**In the central part of Revelation we see the language of overcoming a lot, just like we see it with the letters to the seven churches. In 11:7 and 13:7, we see the beast, or the evil one, overcoming the saints, or overcoming God's spokespersons, the witnesses for God, killing them. And yet, in 12:11 we get a heavenly perspective on the same conflict, and that is that they overcame him — in context, they overcame the devil — they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives even to the point of death. And Revelation goes on to speak of how these overcomers are standing before God's throne because they've triumphed over the beast like the Lamb who was slain. He's the conquering lion, but he's also portrayed as a lamb. Like the Lion who was the Lamb who overcame by martyrdom, these God's people overcome not by fighting the world, but they overcome through faith in God and through their testimony, because even when the world does its worst to us, we**

**overcome because we belong to God himself. The seven churches of Asia Minor each had different tests and that each were called to overcome. We each have different tests. We might be jealous of somebody else's tests or dreading somebody else's test, but we have our own, and yet each of us is called to overcome. Whatever the test is, the promise comes at the end of the book of Revelation in 21 that those who overcome, God says, "I will be their God and they will be my child."**

**— Dr. Craig S. Keener**

We'll mention five types of perseverance that John highlighted in the book of Revelation, beginning with perseverance in faith.

In Hebrews 11:1, Scripture defines faith in this way:

**Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1).**

It can be hard to trust God when the circumstances of our lives don't reflect the types of protection, provision and blessing we read about in Scripture. When things are going badly for us, it's easy to think that we've made a mistake, that we've been deceived, that the God of the Bible isn't real, and that we don't owe him any loyalty. And this was just as true in the first century as it is today. So, one of John's great concerns as he wrote the book of Revelation was to convince his readers that things were actually much different than they appeared on the surface. The world was much worse than it looked; and the kingdom of God was much better than anything they could imagine.

John's original audience faced many temptations to believe that things like pagan gods and the Roman Empire were a great source of blessing. Outwardly, these were powerful forces that offered security, pleasure, and prosperity. And by contrast, the Christian life was hard. Believers had difficulty in business. They were persecuted by the government. And the church didn't offer them anything like the worldly pleasures they could get from the pagans. These temptations made it easy for the churches in Asia Minor to abandon their faith in God, and to exchange it for faith in the world.

In response to these circumstances, John insisted that his readers be strong in faith. He wanted them to be confident in their belief that the systems of the world weren't as good as they looked, and that as hard as the Christian life might be, it's the only road to true security, pleasure and prosperity.

This is why the book of Revelation repeatedly describes worldly, sinful powers and desires as monstrous, ugly, deceitful, and corrupt. Yes, the kingdom of Satan and his followers wears a beautiful costume. But if we could see it as it really is, we'd be repulsed by its hideousness. And the same thing is still true today.

No matter how tempting sin is, and no matter how difficult and discouraging life can be as a follower of Christ, it's critical that we persevere in our belief that God is who he says he is, that he will do what he says he will do, and that he will bless us if we remain loyal to him.

Although perseverance in faith is the most important type of perseverance, the book of Revelation emphasizes that true faith manifests itself in other types of perseverance, too. For example, a second type of perseverance mentioned in Revelation is steadfast love for God.

The book of Revelation calls all believers to keep their love for God alive and strong. For instance, in Revelation 2:19, the church in Thyatira was praised for expressing their perseverance in love and faith. By contrast, in Revelation 2:4, the church in Ephesus was rebuked for losing its first love. This failure was so great that the Lord threatened to remove their lampstand, that is, he threatened to eliminate the church.

A third type of perseverance mentioned in Revelation relates to our Christian witness to others.

Churches that were faithful to Christ in John's day inevitably stood in stark contrast to the culture around them. So, John portrayed the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 as lampstands shining in the darkness of the world. As the letter to the church in Ephesus teaches us, when Christians compromised with the world, they lost their distinctive witness, and this effectively extinguished their witness to the world.

We see something similar in Revelation 7:10, where the great multitude in white robes gathered around the throne to praise God by repeating the proclamation that had been their witness to the world: "Salvation belongs to our God." Salvation couldn't be found in Caesar or in any other source, but only through the work of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. And this single truth made the witness of believers critically important. Unbelievers needed to see that their own worship was false and misled, and that only the church possessed the true message of life and hope.

A fourth way Revelation calls Christians to persevere is in moral purity.

Exhortations to moral purity are found frequently in the seven letters to the churches. For example, in Revelation 2:12-17, Jesus rebuked the church in Pergamum for accepting those who not only committed acts of sexual immorality but also encouraged others to join in their practices. And in Revelation 3:14-22, Jesus rebuked the church in Laodicea for worldliness because they valued wealth and comfort over their loyalty to Christ.

The fifth kind of perseverance we'll mention is standing firm in doctrine.

**There are plenty of people all over the place who believe that they love God. But if their idea of God is completely wrong, not the true God, then the more they "serve" God, the further they fall from God. Doctrine is the basis of service, like a tree whose roots are underground and invisible. Many people see its branches and fruit, but they don't see how the root influences that fruit. Many shallow Christians today don't focus on doctrinal issues, but serious Christians know that doctrine is the basis of everything — it's very important.**

— Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong, translation

Revelation consistently calls believers to maintain true doctrine, and not to compromise with worldly ideas. For instance, in Revelation 2:1-7, Jesus praised the

church in Ephesus for their fidelity to true Christian teaching, and for having the discernment to distinguish between true and false apostles. And in Revelation 2:20-23, the church in Thyatira was rebuked for its doctrinal compromises, specifically for tolerating the false prophet Jezebel.

The book of Revelation calls the church to persevere in a wide variety of ways. But Christians that find themselves challenged in these areas don't always know what to do in order to overcome the trials, temptations and suffering they face.

Thankfully, Revelation doesn't just teach us that we need to persevere. It also gives us practical instruction on how to persevere.

**I think the practical steps that we can take to persevere in the face of trials — It's interesting, in the book of Revelation which is full of all kinds of really chaotic historical or other kinds of situations for Christians, that the practical steps are the same that they are in all of Scripture, that the people of God are called to faithfulness, to obedience, to what they know, what has been revealed to them. They're called into community, to stay together, to believe together, to worship together. They are called to testify together. Whatever the context, whatever the persecution, our perseverance is focused on what God wants us to be all the time, whether things are good or bad, and that is to live holy lives. And so I find the book of Revelation and other books like that very encouraging; it challenges to live holy lives, but also encouraging to say this is not an impossible thing. Even in the most critical of circumstances, the people of God are to maintain the means of grace and to speak forth the name of Christ, and to live in such a way where their responses to evil are distinctly different from other responses for those who are without Christ.**

— Dr. William Ury

The book of Revelation lifts the veil of deception promoted by sinful human governments that oppose God. It discloses the beauty and wonder of God's kingdom and the power of Christ. It shows us that God loves his people and promises to bless them in his glorious kingdom. And it assures us of the future blessings we'll receive in the new heaven and new earth, if we faithfully persevere until the end. In short, it gives us every reason to be faithful to God, and to persevere in faithfulness throughout our entire lives, and throughout history, until Jesus returns to make all things new.

Death couldn't hold Jesus after he was crucified, and on the third day he rose from the dead. Something similar is true of the present circumstances of the world. Many earthly powers and groups oppose God, and many of God's people suffer. That can make life really discouraging. But we need to remember that even when life looks the most discouraging, God is still in control, and he still has our best interests at heart. And no matter what, he'll make good on his promises. Our present suffering isn't worthy of being compared with the glory we'll receive when Jesus returns. And that should motivate us to stand firm in our faith and commitment, be steadfast in love, to maintain our witness, to preserve the purity of our doctrine and of our lives. Because just as the darkness of Jesus'

death was followed by the light of his resurrection, the darkness of our present difficulties will eventually be followed by the light of his return and the fullness of his kingdom.

Now that we've seen how the book of Revelation exhorts perseverance in our loyalty to God, let's look at the way it encourages us to express our loyalty in worship.

## WORSHIP

Despite the fact that John's original audience was suffering great persecution, the book of Revelation has a remarkable emphasis on worship. Revelation 4 and 5 describe an amazing scene of worship in the heavenly throne room, with twenty-four elders seated on thrones surrounding God's throne, and four living creatures flying in the throne room and praising God. Similar scenes of worship occur in over half of Revelation's 22 chapters.

While that might seem surprising at first, Revelation makes the connection between suffering and worship clear. Regardless of our present circumstances, even in times of distress, God is still perfect, holy, and good. And he's working all things together for our ultimate benefit, so that in the age to come he will bless us with our full inheritance in Christ.

While the book of Revelation offers many reasons for us to worship God, in this lesson we'll focus on three ideas that are summarized in the praise offered to God by the twenty-four elders in Revelation 5.

Listen to what the elders proclaimed in Revelation 5:9-10:

**You were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9-10).**

The elders mentioned at least three reasons to praise God. First, Christ purchased or redeemed people from every tribe and language and people and nation. Second, Christ appointed these redeemed people to be a kingdom and priests. And third, he has ensured that in the future, they will reign on the earth.

Our exploration of loyalty expressed in worship will parallel this threefold emphasis of Revelation 5:9-10.

First, we'll see that Christ's work of redemption in the past makes God worthy of worship.

Second, we'll focus on worshiping God because he has given us honor in the present by appointing us to be his kingdom of priests.

And third, we'll see that he deserves our worship because of the blessings we'll receive in the future when we reign over the new heavens and earth. Let's look first at Christ's work of redemption in the past.

## Past Redemption

Revelation frequently demonstrates that God is worthy to be worshiped by all his creatures. And it gives us beautiful pictures of how the saints in heaven worship him. And one reason Revelation gives us for worshiping God is the work of salvation that Christ has done for us.

Revelation 14:1-4 presents us with a beautiful picture of the redemption we have already received in Christ. In verse 1, John described believers as having the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father written on their foreheads. In verse 4, John wrote that believers were purchased from among men, and that we are presented as an offering to God and to the Lamb. And in response to this great salvation, the believers offered worship and praise to God, expressing their thanks in a new song.

Every believer should have the same response to the salvation we've received. We've all been purchased by Christ, and we've all been presented as an offering to God and to the Lamb. And we should all respond in thankfulness and praise, worshiping God and his Christ with joy and singing.

When we face hardships, it can be easy for us to doubt God's goodness, and to forget the good gifts he has given us in our salvation — gifts like forgiveness, a restored relationship with our creator and Lord, and eternal life.

We often need to be reminded that the redemption Christ has already accomplished for us and applied to us makes him worthy of our worship, regardless of our circumstances. God loved us enough to enter this sinful world, to endure tremendous sufferings and persecution, and to die on a cross for our sins. No other suffering or hardship in this world is worthy to be compared with the suffering that Christ endured for us. And that makes him worthy of all worship, praise and thanks.

Now that we've looked at how Christ's work of redemption in the past should inspire our loyal worship, let's turn to the honor God has given us in the present by making us his kingdom of priests.

## Present Honor

At the present time, God reigns on his throne in his heavenly temple. And he calls his people on earth to be his kingdom of priests.

In the Old Testament, both kings and priests were highly honored because they had been chosen by God to represent him in his relationship with his covenant people. But they were allowed to prosper in these honored offices only as long as they were loyal to God as their great suzerain. We see this with regard to Old Testament kings in passages like 1 Kings 3:13-14, Jeremiah 34:4-5, and Daniel 4:34-37. And we see the connection between priestly loyalty and honor in places like 2 Chronicles 26:18, and Lamentations 4:12-16.

But even though only a select few in the Old Testament were chosen as kings and priests, the Old Testament looked forward to a day when all of God's faithful people would be both kings and priests on the earth.

As God told Israel in Exodus 19:5-6:

**If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6).**

According to the book of Revelation, the day that the Old Testament foresaw is already here. The church is now a kingdom of priests that reigns over the earth. We see this explicitly in Revelation 5:9-10, and 20:6, and it's implied in many other passages.

**You know, God told Israel in Exodus 19 that God had chosen them to be a royal priesthood, an imperial priesthood as it were. And that language in Exodus 19 is used by Peter in the New Testament to refer to the church. And so this is the perspective that we're to have not only on ancient Israel as a whole but also on Christians as a whole, that we are a royal priesthood, a chosen people, a royal imperial priesthood. Now I know in many respects that sounds strange, because when we think of priests, what we normally think of is that priests do just a very limited number of things; they offer sacrifices, they pray, occasionally they sing, maybe they blow trumpets and are in choirs and things like that. But in reality, what the Bible is saying is that every legitimate, God-ordained activity on the earth from the beginning to the end has been an act of royal priesthood for those who serve God. It's not as if we have just some things that we do that are ministries to God — service of worship to him — and then other things that we do for ourselves or for no good reason at all. Rather, every single thing that we do as Christians is to be done heartily as unto the Lord because it is unto the Lord, whether it's your six days of work, whether it's sleeping, whether it's raising your children. Whatever it is, it is an activity of a royal priest because our job is to move the holiness of God throughout the world in anticipation of the new world to come when everyone who is left will live in this wondrously cleaned, holy, sanctified earth, and they will serve God forever as his royal priests.**

**— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Of course, there are many implications of this truth. For example, Christians are God's ambassadors on the earth. We are called to minister to him and to others. We are obligated to govern the earth responsibly, and so on. But the implication we'll focus on in this section of our lesson is that this honor should inspire us to worship.

For instance, in Revelation 5:8-14, there is a beautiful scene of worship in the heavenly courtroom. As part of this scene, the four living creatures and twenty-four elders all praise and worship Jesus the Lamb with harps, singing and incense.

Listen to what they sang about God's faithful people in Revelation 5:10:



**You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth (Revelation 5:10).**

An important reason that Jesus deserves worship is that he has honored his people in the present by appointing them to serve as his priests, and as kings that will reign on the earth.

We see something similar in Revelation 4:10-11. In that passage, the elders in heaven responded to the honor and royal authority they had been given by falling down in front of Jesus, laying their crowns at his feet, and praising him.

Another example can be found in Revelation 7, where innumerable believers have been sealed as God's servants. Their response to the grace and honor they have been given is to praise the Lord for his goodness, mercy, and power.

And in Revelation 1:5-6, the apostle John himself modeled this behavior for us. Listen to what he said there:

**To him who ... has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! (Revelation 1:5-6).**

In these verses, John demonstrated that the church in all ages should respond to the honor we've received by worshiping the Lord that has blessed us as his kingdom of priests.

**It may seem strange to talk about ministering to God or blessing God when we realize that he's independent, he has no unmet needs; he's completely self-sufficient. But in his relationship with us, we can bring him joy in the way we obey him or worship him, or live out our faithfulness. And so daily faithfulness, daily obedience and worship of God actually blesses God and brings delight to his heart. And that's really the primary motivation for living as a Christian. It's not so we don't have bad things happen to us or that God will get mad at us, but that we are able to bring delight to the heart of our creator in the way we live.**

**— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

We sometimes forget that as God's priests, believers actually minister to the Lord in heaven. That is, we perform the services that maintain the heavenly temple, and that please its Lord. For instance, Revelation 5:8 assures us that the prayers of the saints are golden bowls full of incense in God's heavenly temple. And in Revelation 8:3-5, these prayers go up before God, and he responds by sending judgments upon the earth.

God's people today have the honor of being his kingdom of priests. God has brought us into his kingdom, and has appointed us the task of spreading his kingdom throughout the world. And as his priests, we even have the honor of ministering to him in his heavenly temple. Think of it — we work directly for the creator and ruler of the entire universe. He has given us authority over his creation, and he listens attentively to us

when we render him service and prayer. He even listens to our prayers, and uses them as means through which he blesses his faithful people and judges those who oppose his reign. And how should we respond to this great honor? By giving him our thankful obedience and our sincere worship.

Having looked at Christ's work of redemption in the past and our honor in the present, we're ready to see that God deserves our loyal worship because of the blessings he's promised to give us in the future.

## Future Blessings

The book of Revelation calls the church to worship God because of the great blessings he'll grant us in the judgment when we begin our everlasting reign with Christ over the new heavens and earth. One way it frequently encourages us to worship God is by providing examples for us to follow.

Consider the example provided by the elders in heaven in Revelation 11:16-18:

**The twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign... The time has come for ... rewarding your servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name, both small and great — and for destroying those who destroy the earth" (Revelation 11:16-18).**

In this vision, John saw the future day of judgment. On that day, all God's faithful people will receive everlasting rewards, and all God's enemies will be sent into everlasting destruction. As part of this scene, John observed the elders worshiping God because he had blessed them both with rewards and with the removal of their enemies. By this example, the churches in John's day would have understood that God also deserves our worship now, in the present time, because these same future blessings have been promised to us.

Another example can be found in Revelation 7:9-10, where we read this account:

**There ... was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9-10).**

In this passage, the multitude John described was wearing white robes and carrying palm branches. According to Revelation 7:14-17, the white robes symbolized the blessings they had received. They had been brought through the tribulation, and their sins had been forgiven through Christ's blood.

Moreover, they had been admitted into God's everlasting kingdom, and received their everlasting reward. And how did they respond to God? By worshiping him. And their example would have inspired John's original audience to do the same, because the same blessings would be given to them, too. And the same has also been true for believers in every age.

And something similar is true of the palm branches the multitude carried. According to Leviticus 23:40, palm branches were regularly used in the Feast of Tabernacles to point to the ultimate salvation that the Lord would bring. And when Jesus entered Jerusalem during his triumphal entry in John 12, one of the details we're told is that the crowd welcomed him with palm branches, indicating their belief that he was bringing the messianic kingdom of God. So, the palm branches carried by the multitude in John's vision probably indicated that the people had received the future blessings of God's kingdom. And of course, they expressed their thanks for these blessings by worshiping the one that blessed them.

Jesus is already victorious over God's enemies. And every believer can look forward to great blessings in the future, both in heaven when we die, and in the new heavens and new earth when Jesus returns. And that gives all of us a reason to praise and to worship our victorious God.

**When we think about what it means to worship God, quite often we look at the created order, we look at our understanding of the cross of Christ and the forgiveness of sins we have, that we have been adopted as his children. We look at all of these as present possessions. We can say with David in Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork." We see beauty all around us; we're thankful for these things. We look at the Scripture language about the completed work of Christ and what our present privileges are as sons of God and as forgiven people, and we praise God for that. But one of the elements that we have in Scripture that we are to be just as secure in and just as sure about are all those blessings that we have yet future. In fact, I think the Scripture indicates that the things that we have promised in the future are much more abundant and much more glorious than anything we even have now.**

**— Dr. Thomas J. Nettles**

**God deserves worship for things that haven't actually happened in our lives yet because we're so sure they will happen. The Christian faith is one of hope and confidence in God's sovereign goodness and power, and so when he promises something's going to happen, we're able to give him praise and worship for the assurance that that's actually going to happen. We can worship God for everything he has done, is doing, and will do.**

**— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

The theme of loyalty to God is expressed in many ways in the book of Revelation. But as we've seen, the book of Revelation highlights worship and perseverance as two of the best ways we can express our loyalty to God in the present world. Now, this isn't always easy. In fact, the more we suffer, the harder it can be to persevere, and the less motivated we can feel to worship. But John made it clear that even in the worst of times, God still gives his people the strength they need to remain faithful to him. And John also pointed out that we have overwhelming reasons to worship God, no matter what our present circumstances are, and that because of the salvation we've received in the past, the honor we possess in the present, and the glorious blessings we'll receive in the future.

Now that we've explored God's kingship and benevolence, and considered the loyalty he requires from us, we're ready to see what Revelation says about the consequences that result from loyalty and disloyalty to God.

## CONSEQUENCES

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In this section, we'll focus on the consequences that humanity will receive when Christ returns to bring in the kingdom of God in all its fullness. The book of Revelation mentions many rewards and blessings for obedience, and many punishments and curses for disobedience. And quite a number of these can be experienced in the present age. But at this point in our lesson we're going to focus on the consequences that will come when Christ returns.

All evangelical Christians look forward to the time when Christ will return to render final judgment on both the just and the unjust. In an earlier lesson, we suggested that this final judgment is depicted in the cycles of judgment in the four visions John received. While not everyone agrees with this view, most Christians still affirm the general nature of the judgment that John described.

Final judgment is a necessary consequence of the covenant God made with Christ as his vassal king. Christ is reigning as king to bring about the renewal of heaven and earth, so that the creation will fully display the glory of God. In order for that to happen, goodness must be rewarded and blessed, while wickedness and rebellion against God's reign have to be punished and eliminated.

We'll explore the consequences of loyalty and disloyalty to God in two parts. First, we'll look at the final curses that will fall on those who've been disloyal to God. And second, we'll consider the final blessings of the new heavens and new earth that will be given to those who've been loyal. Let's turn first to the final curses against God's enemies.

## FINAL CURSES

The book of Revelation lists at least three elements that will be included in the final curses against God's enemies. The first one we'll mention is the destruction of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet.

The dragon and his followers have opposed God throughout human history. Satan was there in the Garden of Eden, tempting Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And his forces have tried to defeat God and his kingdom ever since. But when Jesus returns, Satan will finally be completely defeated. Revelation 19:19-21 teaches that the beast and the false prophet will be captured and cast into the lake of fire. And 20:9-10 shows that the dragon himself will also be defeated and thrown into the lake of fire, where he won't be able to harm any of God's faithful people ever again. And all the demonic forces that have fought alongside him will share in that everlasting destruction.

A second final curse will be the defeat of enemy kings and nations.

In several places, Revelation describes the destruction of the kings and nations that are God's enemies. For instance, Revelation 6:15-17 explains that the kings of the earth, as well as the generals, the rich and the mighty, will wish that the mountains would fall on them to save them from the wrath of the Lamb. This appears to represent Christ's judgment against all human authorities that oppose his reign.

In Revelation 19:15-21, Jesus appears on his white horse, leading the armies of heaven, and strikes down the kings of the earth so that he can rule in their place.

And in Revelation 16:19, God makes Babylon drink from:

**The cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath (Revelation 16:19).**

As we saw in a prior lesson, Babylon is symbolic of human and governmental forces that oppose Christ's reign. And this verse vividly portrays that all these nations and their rulers will be forced to suffer the full wrath of God because of their disobedience.

A third final curse will be the condemnation of unbelievers.

Not only are the rival kings and nations destroyed at Christ's return, but every unbelieving inhabitant of these nations will receive God's final judgment as a direct consequence of his or her personal rebellion against God. For instance, in Revelation 14:17-20, two angels gather all the unbelievers from the earth and throw them like clusters of grapes into "the great winepress of God's wrath." And in Revelation 20, all those whose names are not written in the book of life are tossed into the lake of fire.

Listen to John's description of this in Revelation 20:12-15:

**And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books... If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:12-15).**

Here John described the future punishment of all unbelievers. They will each be thrown into the lake of fire to suffer God's never-ending wrath because they have sinned against him.

When we think about the world around us and people who are unbelievers, what is it that we should think about them? What attitude should we have towards them? We can be tempted to have an attitude of superiority about ourselves and especially if they have mistreated us or if they mock us, that kind of thing. But I think that Jesus would want us to have the attitude of desiring to serve them, to have compassion, to view them as the lost because we don't know who is going to turn, and so we want to serve them by preaching the gospel to them and hope that they will respond. When we think about on the other side of judgment, what is our attitude to be then? And there should be I think a sense of pity and sadness towards them. And we would want to have at that point a clear conscience that we did love them while we had the opportunity to tell the gospel to them and that they won't be able to point the finger to us and say, "You knew, why didn't you tell me about this Christ?" So we need to be living with them with a view to the future, not condemning them in advance, but serving them and helping them find rescue in Christ.

— Dr. John E. McKinley

Since the book of Revelation shows so clearly that all of God's enemies will be condemned and destroyed in the final judgment, our attitude toward unbelievers today should be one of courage, compassionate witness, and humility. Courage because we know that ultimately the victory belongs to Christ. We must not be intimidated by the threats that might be brought against us by unbelievers who hate our faith and hate our Lord. At the same time, we need to have compassion. We recognize that the delay, at least as we perceive it, the delay of Christ's return, as the book of Revelation shows us, is for the sake of the gathering in of all of God's people. Even the providential judgments that are associated with the trumpets are warning signals, warning sounds, calling people to repentance. Of course they come to repentance through the gospel, and so we need to bear witness. We also need humility, because the reminder that rebellion against God will in the end bring judgment reminds us of what we ourselves deserve. We are not superior to those who are unbelievers today. We were once enemies and God brought us by grace through faith into union with Jesus.

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

As frightening as the curses of the last judgment sound, we have to remember that those curses are absolutely just. Unbelievers will be judged because they deserve to be punished for their disobedience. God is king over his creation, and it's sinful and rebellious to disobey him. And as painful as it might be to acknowledge, God's justice

demands that sin and rebellion be punished. In this sense, punishing the wicked is a central aspect of God's righteous kingship.

Now that we've seen how the consequences of sin and disloyalty are poured out in the final curses, let's look at the consequences of final blessings that will be granted to God's faithful people in the new heavens and new earth.

## FINAL BLESSINGS

In God's final judgment against sin, all the spiritual and governmental forces that opposed his reign will be eradicated from this world, and all unbelievers will be judged along with them. And after creation has been purged of God's enemies, the universe itself will be renewed, resulting in a new heavens and new earth for God's faithful people to enjoy forever.

Revelation 21:1-5 describes the new creation this way:

**I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ... a loud voice from the throne said, ... "the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:1-5).**

We'll mention three final blessings of the new heavens and new earth that John said would come to those who had been loyal to God. First, there will be a complete renovation or renewal of creation.

## Renovation of Creation

Revelation 21:1, 4 speaks of the first heaven and first earth passing away, indicating that they will cease to exist in some sense. We find similar ideas in places like 2 Peter 3:10-11, which talks about the present world being destroyed in order to make way for the new one.

But Revelation 21:5 describes the new heavens and new earth in terms of renewal, indicating that rather than completely vanishing, the old creation will be renovated or renewed. This same idea is also present in passages like Romans 8:19-22. These passages teach that there will be substantial continuity between the two creations, and not just a resemblance. Revelation 21:24-26 even states that the glory and splendor of the nations will be brought into the New Jerusalem, suggesting that redeemed aspects of our present lives will be carried into the new heaven and new earth.

As a result, most theologians conclude that the present creation won't be completely taken away and replaced. Instead, it will be radically transformed.

**Well, we see in Revelation that there certainly are elements in the New Jerusalem that seem to be very reflective of, and in fact, identical with images that we see in Genesis 2 and 3 with the beginning of creation,**

**things like the tree of life. And so we have to ask ourselves, what does that represent? Well, there are probably different ways to interpret that, but I think a surface level reading of that is that there are going to be elements of the New Jerusalem that in fact will comport very nicely with creation as it was originally offered and put forward. So in one sense there's going to be a change that's on the horizon with the new age, but it's not going to be an altogether change. There will be vestiges of that creation that God originally worked that are still very much at play and in place. So we don't really see an exchange of one reality for another, but rather we probably see a transformation of the current reality — a makeover of sorts — into this new reality. And images and symbols like the tree of life help to highlight that continuity between the two realities.**

**— Mr. Bradley T. Johnson**

This transformation will be a thorough renovation, making the world even better than it was when it was first created. The entire creation will be holy and pure, perfectly fit for God to inhabit.

As the angel announced in Revelation 21:3-4:

**Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Revelation 21:3-4).**

Another critically important aspect of the renewal of creation is mentioned in Revelation 22:3, where we're told:

**No longer will there be any curse (Revelation 22:3).**

In the new heavens and new earth, the curse that God placed on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden will finally be lifted. Passages like Genesis 3:17-19, 5:29, and 8:21, make it clear that the present heavens and earth have been thoroughly cursed and corrupted by humanity's fall into sin. The ground resists our attempts to grow food. Wild animals act violently against us. Natural disasters like floods, earthquakes and hurricanes bring suffering to people all over the world. And micro-organisms cause disease and even death.

But when Christ returns, he'll liberate the world from every aspect of this curse. John described the blessings of the renovated creation in various ways, including as a holy city, the New Jerusalem, dressed as Jesus' bride and shining brilliantly with the glory of God. And one of the richest symbols John used in this context was the picture of the river of life that flows through the New Jerusalem and nourishes the tree of life.

Listen to what he wrote in Revelation 22:1-2:



**Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).**

These beautiful verses picture a river coming from God's throne that nourishes the tree of life, which in turn heals the nations. These themes go all the way back to the book of Genesis. Genesis 2:10 speaks of a river that flowed from Eden and watered the Garden of Eden and the tree of life. This river is remembered as a river of delights in Psalm 36:8, and as a river whose streams made glad the city of God in Psalm 46:4.

And an extended discussion of this river is found in Ezekiel 47:1-12. In Ezekiel's vision, a trickle of water flowed from the temple and grew into a river that was so large it couldn't be crossed. The water brought life wherever it flowed, and even turned the salty Dead Sea into fresh water.

Listen to what God said about this river in Joel 3:17-18:

**Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her. In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the Lord's house and will water the valley of acacias (Joel 3:17-18).**

In Revelation 22, this river of life becomes ever greater. It flows from the throne of God and the Lamb, right down the middle of the New Jerusalem, indicating that the ultimate source of all life and healing is God himself.

In John's vision, this abundant source of life waters the tree of life that stands on each side of the river. The tree produces an abundance of fruit that is so effective that even its leaves can be used for the healing of the nations.

**As we read about the New Jerusalem at the end of the book of Revelation, we see lots of elements that recall the Genesis account and the Garden of Eden, and there's a reason for that, and that is that, really, the New Jerusalem is the restoration of creation as it was intended to be. And so we see God creating human being and placing them in a perfect place. And it's true that in the garden they're meant to mature and probably to reach a state of ultimate glorification which then, of course, went sideways when they rejected God's purpose and turned from him. But really, in Eden we see what God intends, what he wants for human beings, and so we would expect in the New Jerusalem to see the restoration of that perfect relationship between human beings and God that we were created to have.**

— Dr. Mark L. Strauss

**When we look in the book of Revelation we see depictions of the New Jerusalem. We find that it contains elements from the Garden of Eden, things like the tree of life. Why is this, from the first book of the Bible to the last book of the Bible? I think that partly what it's showing is that there is a total reversal of the destruction that came through sin and that God has made everything right. Sin has not ruined what he intended, and he has brought it not just back to where it was in the beginning, but he has brought it to perfection. It's not a creation that can fall anymore, but it's a creation that will endure forever.**

**— Dr. John E. McKinley**

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, God cursed them and banished them from the garden, especially so that they wouldn't eat from the tree of life and live forever. But when Christ returns, the river of life will water the tree of life again, and all the nations will have access to its fruit. All of redeemed humanity will be healed. There won't be any more sin, sickness or disease. Natural disasters will never occur again. All nations will govern themselves in righteousness and peace. And all of God's creation will fully display his glory.

A second final blessing God's faithful people will receive in the new heavens and new earth is that the entire world will be a global temple for God's presence.

## **Global Temple**

Throughout the Old Testament, God set aside holy spaces where he manifested his presence in a special way. Genesis 3:8 indicates that he walked in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. And other passages in Scripture indicate that this was because the garden was his sanctuary or temple.

For instance, Genesis 2:15 says that Adam was placed in the garden to work it and take care of it. The Hebrew word for "work" in this verse is *avad*. And the word for "take care" is *shamar*. This is significant because in Numbers 3:8, Moses used these same words to describe the job of the priests that served in the temple. In other words, Adam and Eve did priestly work in the garden, and this indicates that the garden was God's earthly sanctuary.

Beyond this, the river and trees in the eschatological temple of Ezekiel 47:7 strongly resemble the river from the Garden of Eden, as well as the tree of life, which are described in Genesis 2:9-10.

And when Ezekiel 28:13-14 refers to Eden as the "mount of God," it uses the same vocabulary that the ancient world used to refer to mountains that had temples built on top of them.

After the Garden of Eden served as his earthly sanctuary, God also manifested his special presence in the tabernacle. We read about this in Exodus 40:34-38.

And after the tabernacle, God began to manifest his special presence in the temple, as we read in passages like 1 Kings 8:10-11, and 2 Chronicles 7:1-3.

Hebrews 8:5 explains that these earthly sanctuaries were actually intended to be copies of God's heavenly throne room, where his special presence is always clearly manifested. But in the new heavens and earth, God's presence won't be limited to a small space like a garden or a single building. Instead, God will manifest his special presence throughout the entire world.

Listen to how John described the city of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:22-23:

**I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp (Revelation 21:22-23).**

Revelation looks forward to the time when a temple won't be needed in the New Jerusalem. Instead, God will manifest his special presence everywhere. He'll bless his people by dwelling among his people, and the nations will walk in his light. When that time comes, God's glory will fill the world as completely as the sun now lights the day.

As we read in Revelation 21:3:

**The dwelling of God will be with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God (Revelation 21:3).**

In the new heavens and new earth, God's special presence will be with all his people, throughout the whole world

The renewal of the world will create this global temple because of the work of Jesus Christ. In Revelation 1, Jesus walked among the seven lampstands in the heavenly throne room, symbolizing God's presence among his churches. But when Christ returns, he'll establish his special reign throughout the entire creation, so that the whole world will be God's temple, and his special presence will be manifested everywhere.

A third final blessing John mentioned is that God will establish the never-ending earthly reign of Jesus Christ as king.

## **Never-Ending Reign**

Revelation 21 and 22 indicate that the center of the new earth will be its capital city: the New Jerusalem. And the center of the city will be God's throne. God's throne symbolizes his rule as king. And when Jesus returns, he'll be enthroned in the New Jerusalem, ruling over the entire world on behalf of his Father.

First Chronicles 29:23 indicates that all the Davidic kings had shared the honor of sitting on God's throne in Jerusalem. But only the last Davidic king, Jesus Christ, will be enthroned in the New Jerusalem, and only his reign will never end. All those who are

redeemed will live in the new creation with him, acknowledging his authority and power, bowing in obedience to his throne, giving him honor and glory, and, as we read in Revelation 22:5, even sharing in his everlasting reign.

**Some people live to be 70, others 80, 90 and 100, and then that's the end. Not on this new earth. We live on this earth eternally. Why? Because the Lord Jesus Christ will be with us all of the time. You say, well, he should be in heaven. No. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He will be on this earth as the Son of Man eternally. And now what else would you like to have? Living with Jesus eternally or without him? And therefore, I would say I'm looking forward to being with the Lord Jesus Christ on this renewed earth forever and ever.**

— Dr. Simon J. Kistemaker

Christ's reign in the new heavens and new earth will be absolutely perfect. He'll provide everything his people need. There won't be any sin, any corruption, any sickness, or any death. Nothing will detract from our joy. Every blessing of God's covenant will be ours forever.

As believers, we should long for Christ to rule over us in the new heavens and new earth. And we should live in faithful loyalty to him right now — even when we're tempted and persecuted — knowing that after we persevere in faithfulness, we'll share in the greatest blessings God has ever envisioned for his creation.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we've reviewed the book of Revelation by focusing on the themes of the king and his kingdom. We've examined the concept of kingship, explored God's royal benevolence, considered the importance of human loyalty to the king, and described the consequences of blessings for loyalty and curses for disloyalty.

The hope of all Christians is that one day our King will return. This hope motivates us to endure, and to overcome every trial we experience in life. No matter what hardships we face because of our faith, we have every reason to demonstrate our loyalty to God and his Christ because we know that his word is true. Jesus will return to reign over us and to reward us. And until that happens, we trust in the promise he gave us at the end of the book of Revelation: "Yes, I am coming soon." And our response is the same as John's: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

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# The Book of Revelation

LESSON  
THREE

The King and His  
Kingdom  
Faculty Forum



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# The Book of Revelation

## Lesson Three: The King and His Kingdom

### Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. David W. Chapman	Dr. Craig S. Keener	Dr. Glen Scorgie
Dr. Steve Douglass	Dr. Simon J. Kistemaker	Dr. Mark Strauss
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Dr. Matt Friedeman	Dr. John E. McKinley	Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong
Dr. David Garner	Dr. John Oswalt	Dr. Stephen Um
Dr. Benjamin Gladd	Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington	Dr. M. William Ury
Rev. Michael J. Glodo	Dr. Greg Perry	Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. James M. Hamilton	Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.	Dr. Peter Walker

### Question 1:

**What gives God the right to rule as king over all creation?**

God's reign as the king over all creation is a central theme in the book of Revelation. Throughout the book, we see God governing the universe with absolute authority. But unlike human rulers, God's authority doesn't come from anyone but himself. So, what gives God the right to rule as king over all creation?

#### **Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

What gives God the right to rule as king over all creation is the fact that he is the Creator. We see that so clearly in the book of Revelation in the fourth chapter when John is given the vision of "[the one] seated on the throne," as he's called — it's God the Father clearly — and first we hear the four living creatures praise God the Father for who he is in himself, that he's all-holy, that he's almighty, that he is eternal. But then the choir expands. Twenty-four elders who are part of God's heavenly court sing praise to God because he is the Creator. "By your will [all things] exist and were created," and therefore he is worthy to be honored, worthy to be praised.

#### **Dr. Matt Friedeman**

God has a right to rule over all of creation for a very simple reason: he created all creation. He has the "patent" on all creation, if you will. And so, having the patent on all creation, he knows the purpose for that which he created, he knows the design, he knows how it best operates, and he knows what can destroy it — what can cause it to break down... He knows everything about it. And so, the right to rule? Well, if I'm the created, I perhaps want to look back at the Creator and say, "Now, how do I best operate?"

#### **Dr. John Oswalt**

God, as the sole creator of the universe, has the right not only to describe what the parameters are but also how it is that we will fulfill the purposes of creation. So in

that sense, as the ruler, as the one who establishes what the rules are and how those are performed, it is completely appropriate for God to be described as King.

### **Question 2:**

#### **In what sense is Jesus a vassal king rather than a suzerain?**

**In the book of Revelation we see God the Father as the great suzerain or ruling king and Jesus as the vassal or servant king, which might seem to be inconsistent with what we know of Jesus' nature as God. In what sense is Jesus a vassal king rather than a suzerain?**

#### **Dr. Simon Vibert**

The language of “vassal king” as opposed to “suzerain king” speaks about delegated authority, and Jesus as great David’s greatest Son was of that line of kingship. And even as David had his authority as king delegated from the Father, so too Jesus did as well — God being that one with all authority. In fact, he is the one of whom Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me,” and therefore sends his disciples in the Father’s name to make disciples of all nations.

#### **Dr. Stephen Um**

What we find in the Scriptures is a picture of a king who is a servant king. We find somebody who finds a paradoxical kingliness, which is so unique in any culture. What we find in the Gospels is that there is a picture of a Messiah who has come to fulfill all of the prophecies about this suffering servant in the Old Testament, primarily in the book of Isaiah... So you have a reference in Isaiah 6, for example. This is what it was of Yahweh. It says that he is high and lifted up. And that’s clearly making a reference to Yahweh in the Old Testament. But then you have a reference of the same verbal combination of being lifted and exalted or lifted and glorified in Isaiah 52:13 where it says, “Behold my servant shall act wisely. He shall be high and lifted up.” And that is referring to the suffering servant, the Messiah to come, not Yahweh. And then you go to Isaiah 57 where it says, “For thus says the one who is high and lifted up.” That’s a reference to Yahweh. So, in other words, you have this Hebrew combination of being lifted up and exalted, and it is attributed to Yahweh, and then also the suffering servant who will be the Messiah. Now, you come to the Gospels and you have in the person of Jesus Christ who comes as this king who is the one who fulfills all of these prophecies about the suffering servant in the book of Isaiah. And in the Gospel of John, this is the way John exploits those terms ... The Son of Man was lifted up. And it also says the Son of Man was glorified. And you would normally think that those terms, because we’ve seen them in the Old Testament, they are references that would make a reference to the ascension of Jesus, or the resurrection of Jesus, or the transfiguration. But actually, John uses those terms to refer to the death of Jesus, which clearly shows that it is an upside-down, paradoxical, ironic kingship. So what does this mean? How can we as Christians who believe in a king, who is a servant king, how can that sort of paradoxical kingliness

become a reality for us? The Gospels say essentially: the way up is down. To be exalted is to be humbled. To understand the resurrection is to first understand death and suffering. To know if you want to be first, you must be last. If you want to be a leader, you must first learn to follow. This is the radical nature of the counter-cultural call and life for the kingdom of God.

**Dr. Paul Chang (translation)**

We see Jesus as a vassal king because of his loyalty to his master. Our High King is God, and he will faithfully grant all of the grace and blessings of the covenant to us, the citizens. We receive grace because of the loyalty and obedience of our vassal king.

**Question 3:**

**Did the book of Revelation undermine the authority of the Roman Caesar?**

**The Bible clearly teaches that God is our ultimate authority. And yet, we have human governors and kings who rule over us as well. Scripture tells us to honor these human authorities. But in the book of Revelation, the imperial powers stand in opposition to God’s ultimate rule. So, did the book of Revelation undermine the authority of the Roman Caesar?**

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

Revelation 13 raises the question whether the book of Revelation undermines the authority of the Roman Caesar, of the emperors who were in power at the time when John received those revelations. I think our answer has to be no and yes. No, in the sense that Revelation 13 does not undermine what the apostle Paul tells us elsewhere in the New Testament, in Romans 13 that the governing authorities of the state are appointed by God. They are his ministers of justice. They have a legitimate function; they are established by God. So no, Revelation was not given as a tract to urge Christians to armed insurrection against Rome. On the other hand, Revelation 13 does show us the dangers of a government that oversteps its bounds. Because in portraying — in John’s day, in “the beast” — portraying Rome in its divine presumption, in a sense, the visions given us there do undermine Caesar’s claim to ultimate allegiance, ultimate trust. We know that many of the churches, many of the cities to which the Revelation was first given in western Asia Minor, had received huge amounts of what we would call today “federal relief aid” in the midst of various earthquake damage. A lot of “federal” money, we might say, flowed from the capital of the empire to that part of the world. And they were very grateful. They praised the emperors as their benefactors... There are parallels to the temptation to us today to look to the government to supply all of our needs and to give it an allegiance that it does not have a right to have. So, Revelation upholds implicitly that there is a legitimate function for human government, but as we read it in the context of the whole New Testament.

But at the same time, Revelation warns us against the presumptions of government to claim divine worship and allegiance and trust that belong really only to God himself.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

The book of Revelation is written at a time of great challenge to Christian faith, particularly the churches in Asia Minor where the imperial cult was at its height. So in some ways, the book of Revelation challenges the authority of Rome, and also the authority that Caesar claims for himself as a god, particularly in Asia Minor. This of course runs head on into the claim that Jesus is the Lord and not Caesar. So, we see in the symbols of Revelation and the visions that are very similar to some of the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament that this happens when God's people are in a situation in relation to foreign states that are challenging the ultimate authority of Israel's God, or of the Lord Jesus in this case. So, the book of Revelation is giving comfort to those who face martyrdom, that in the end, Christ's authority is superior to the authority of Rome and to Rome's Caesar.

**Dr. Mark Strauss**

Part of the context of the book of Revelation in the first century is clearly the issue of the worship of the emperor, the worship of Caesar which was increasingly becoming a significant part of Roman culture and context of the Roman Empire and Roman religion, and the demand that Caesar be acknowledged as the absolute supreme lord and even as a god. Well, of course, the Christians absolutely would not worship Caesar as a god, and so, to say Jesus is Lord is really to challenge what was becoming fundamental to religious and civic life in Rome. So, it was certainly a challenge to the Roman Empire — the book of Revelation — to say that Jesus is the sovereign Lord of the universe. When he comes he will conquer every human authority, and he will reign supreme as Lord. That was a direct challenge to the Roman Empire in its claim that Caesar alone is lord.

### **Question 4:**

#### **What attitude should Christians have toward government today?**

**Human history has shown us that all governments are capable of both good and evil acts. Unlike Christ, no merely human government or ruler has ever been perfectly righteous. Still, as authorities over society, our governments have a far-reaching impact on both Christian and non-Christian alike. So, what does this mean for believers? What attitude should Christians have toward government today?**

**Dr. Greg Perry**

The authority of human governments is really rooted in Christ's authority and in God's authority. Paul wrote in Romans 13 that the government and the governor and the king, are servants of God to do two things. One is to do good to those who do righteously and to praise them, and secondly to punish those who are wrongdoers, those who do not do justly. So there's a very clear mandate that we see about the role

of government in Scripture that is rooted in God's justice and in God's goodness. So when human governments aren't acting in accord with their mandate from God and from the Lord's authority, we see encouragement in Scripture to suffer for doing good, and that when we suffer for doing good, we're entrusting our self to the ultimate authority of God. Even though we may be suffering the consequences of an unjust situation, an unjust governor, an unjust king or mayor, that our ultimate confidence is in the one who judges rightly, who gave government their role in the first place. So the role of government and its authority is really rooted in God's authority. So that means that government should act a certain way, but it also means that they're there by God's appointment, and therefore, we are to submit ourselves to their authority because God's put them there as his servants.

**Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner**

I think it's helpful to think of two passages in Scripture when we think of the scriptural view of governments today, and that's Romans 13 and Revelation 13. Romans 13 clearly teaches us that God ordains whatever governmental authority is in charge. So God is sovereign, whatever the government is — we think of the Old Testament, from Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, to governments today — God has sovereignly determined what the government is, and believers are called upon to submit and obey governmental authority ... But now let's consider Revelation 13. Revelation 13 speaks of the beast. I take the beast there in Revelation 13 to be the Roman Empire of John's day. So behind the beast is Satan. So John is telling us that the government is fundamentally satanic in Revelation 13. So it's quite interesting that when put together with Romans 13 where Paul says governments are ordained by God. Is there is a contradiction there? I don't think there is. In Revelation 13, we're told again and again that the beast's authority was given to it. And I think it's quite clear that passive verb, it "was given," the authority of the government was given by God himself. So even the most evil governments, let's think back to Nebuchadnezzar in the Old Testament. Nebuchadnezzar was an evil ruler. But God gave him that authority. The correlation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is complex and not simplistic. God is sovereign. And yet the evil that governments do, they are still held responsible for. So God's sovereignty does not mitigate or rule out human responsibility. So on the one hand, Christians are to obey the government. They are to be inclined to obey what the government says. On the other hand, there should be a recognition that all governments have a tendency to want to arrogate total power to themselves. All governments want to be totalitarian. That is true in the United States, and that is true in every part of the world, that governments tend to want to take such authority. And — what I think John is teaching us — they tend, therefore, to become demonic. They tend to oppose the gospel of Jesus Christ and the people of God. Romans 13 tells us the solution to that is not a call to violent revolution or rebellion against the government. Christians are to be inclined to obey the government. But Christians are to live with their eyes wide open, recognizing that governments want to take on virtually a god-like role in our lives and want to control our lives, and actually end up calling for worship. So that we must be on our toes. We must be submissive to the government where we can, and most cases that is what we will end up doing. But we must also critique governments and point out where

governments are arrogating themselves a kind of authority that belongs only to God and beware of governments resisting the Christian gospel as well. So it calls for a nuanced response, and I think it's very helpful to think of Romans 13/Revelation 13. The two together balance out what the Scripture says about government today.

### **Question 5:**

#### **How much freedom and power does Satan currently have to affect our world?**

**The book of Revelation depicts Satan as a defeated foe, no longer able to influence the nations. Christ's death and resurrection dealt a blow that Satan will not overcome. But even though Satan is defeated, we still live in a fallen world. So, in the meantime, between Christ's first coming and the final consummation, how much freedom and power does Satan currently have to affect our world?**

#### **Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

As we think about what the Scripture says about the power of Satan, even today, to affect our world, we see several themes developed. On the one hand, clearly Satan is active. Paul talks about the way that Satan controls the minds and the hearts of unbelievers. He talks about — 2 Corinthians for example — Satan blinding the minds of unbelievers and holding them in darkness... In Ephesians 2, he talks about unbelievers living according to the spirit of the power of the air; so he's in control of their thoughts and their minds. And of course, Satan threatens believers as well. Peter says in 1 Peter 5 that Satan is prowling like a roaring lion, seeking for people to devour, and so he calls believers to be vigilant, to watch out. Paul himself also says in Ephesians that Christians should not let our anger or our disputes fester over a period of time because that gives the Devil a foothold, an opportunity. So there still is definitely the influence of Satan in our temptation. But the book of Revelation, in particular, also emphasizes that now, as the result of the death of Christ, Satan's power is curtailed in some decisive ways. Actually, you see this even in Jesus' public ministry, that part of the forerunner of some of what John sees in the book of Revelation is Jesus' announcement that his power to expel demons from people who had been oppressed by demonic possession is because he himself, Jesus, has now bound the strongman, Satan; that Christ in his first coming has come to bind Satan and to set Satan's captives free. As a result, in the book of Revelation, we see that the cross of Christ has set Satan's captives free.

#### **Dr. Greg Perry**

In the Gospels we see some extraordinary passages of Jesus' encounters with demons that teach us something about the level of freedom that Satan and his demons have to influence things in the world. The book of Revelation, in particular in chapter 20, talks about the binding of Satan to restrict his activities in some way. And it seems that what we see from the Gospels and from the book of Revelation is that the restriction of Satan mainly has to do with restricting his ability to deceive the nations,



as the witness of God's people goes forth and the good news of the gospel, that during this time of witness — as the gospel writers have put it — that Satan's activities are restricted. It doesn't mean that he can't do anything, but it means that he can only do what he's allowed to do. Now we see this in other parts of Scripture as well — whether it's the story of Job or the encounters that Jesus has with the demons in the Gospels — that he has power over them. And so Revelation 20 and the binding of Satan seems consistent with what we see in the Gospels regarding the power of Jesus over Satan. Not that he can't do anything and isn't active in spiritual warfare, because he is, and we see that depicted in Revelation as well. But that his activities are limited and not ultimate, and that, in particular, the good news is going forth and spreading throughout the world to every tribe, language and nation during this season of witness.

### **Question 6:**

#### **In the Old Testament, did angels and demons influence national interactions and wars?**

**Accounts of angels and demons engaged in battle appear frequently in the book of Revelation. These scenes help us understand how the preternatural realm affects major world events like national diplomacy and global conflict. But did this type of interaction occur only in the New Testament, or do we see something similar in the Old Testament? In the Old Testament, did angels and demons influence national interactions and wars?**

#### **Dr. John Oswalt**

The question of the Old Testament's understanding of the invisible world is an important one. The Old Testament writers clearly are trying to combat the pagan idea that this world is just a dim reflection of the real world, which is the invisible world, and that the important things are happening behind the scenes. The Old Testament is wanting to combat that and to say, no, this world is real and the decisions and the actions that are taken here are real. However, making that point, the Old Testament is still not going to say there isn't an invisible world. It *is* going to say that. And so it's interesting to see how the interaction comes. So you find the angel of the Lord speaking, for instance, to Samson's mother and telling her about what is going to happen, and in this way influencing the choices of Samson's father and mother in their own understanding. When you come to the book of Daniel, you find the statement of the angel, that the angel of Persia and the angel of Greece are warring — they're called the prince of Persia and the prince of Greece. And so this suggests this is a real world. Humans do affect the directions of history, but there are things going on in the background as well that we cannot discount.

#### **Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

When people ordinarily think about warfare, they think of it as a purely human affair. Oh yes, even Christians will do this. They'll say that God is sovereign over



everything, but then wars and conflicts among nations, political movements of those sorts take place because of human factors. Well, that's true enough. The Bible does tell us that wars are started by people, they're fought by people and those kinds of things. But the Bible also gives us another perspective on international conflict and shifts of power, and it's the perspective and insight into the invisible world behind these things. You see, in the Bible — contrary to the way most evangelicals believe — in the Bible God controls the world, but he does this by many instruments, in fact, creatures in the heavenly places, creatures that are good and creatures who are evil, angelic creatures, we would normally say, and then demonic creatures as well. Psalm 82 strongly suggests that God has actually assigned the nations to these various demons and angels, that they have responsibility for them, because in Psalm 82 the Lord Yahweh presides over the assembly of the gods — gods with little “g” — these are the angels and the demons and the spirits in the heavenly places. And he holds them responsible for what's going on in their nations, the injustices, the lack of attention to the poor and the like. And God says, “You are gods, but because of the way you have treated and led your nations, you will die like men.” And so the idea here is that God does control it all, but that he does this by means of these preternatural creatures. And in addition to that, we find that when there are conflicts between various nations, they almost always involve some kind of angelic force fighting against an evil force. For example, when Moses says that he's going to free the Israelites from Egypt and God says, this is what's going to happen. I'm not only going to bring down Pharaoh, I'm also going to bring down the gods of the Egyptians. And so it's extremely important for us to realize that when Moses delivered Israel from Egypt, he wasn't just dealing with human beings. He was also dealing with the principalities and the powers that were ruling over Egypt, the gods of the Egyptians. And then go a step further. In Daniel 10 is one of those rare... It's a very unusual passage, but it gives us a glimpse into this unseen world of the ways that demons and angels, or spirits, actually affect international conflict. What happens there is that Daniel is that receiving a message from God. He's prayed to God, and he's receiving a message from God about the end of the Persian Empire. And when this message comes, an angel is sent with the message toward Daniel, but it takes a long time for him to get there. In fact, along the way he's met by a character called the prince of Persia. Now this prince of Persia is not a human being because he's about to wrestle with the angel that God has sent from heaven to Daniel. And so this prince of Persia is himself a preternatural creature, perhaps a demon. And as this angel comes to Daniel with the message, the demon, the prince of Persia, stops him, and they start wrestling and fighting, and the angel can't get free of him, and so the message can't get through to Daniel. And, of course then what happens is the archangel Michael, the one who has been given authority over Israel is sent, and when Michael comes, he's able to defeat the prince of Persia and free this messenger angel who goes on and brings his message to Daniel. So we see that these angelic and demonic creatures have great interest in what goes on in the various nations of the world. In fact, when Satan took Jesus to a high place and he showed him the Gentile nations and he said, “If you'll just bow to me, I'll give you all of these nations.” Well, that was a sincere offer because Satan and his minions had control over the Gentile nations at that time. God had assigned them to these nations. That's why they were

full of darkness, full of evil, and under the judgment of God. Of course Jesus rejects that and waits for God to give him the nations of the earth, but it shows that behind the visible world of conflict — the visible world of struggle among various nations in the world — lies an invisible world that we must never forget.

### **Question 7:**

#### **How does the book of Revelation depict spiritual warfare?**

**The New Testament contains numerous examples of spiritual warfare. Encounters between Jesus and demonic forces are common. And Jesus' disciples also cast out demons in his name. But in the book of Revelation, we come across a somewhat different picture of spiritual warfare than we find elsewhere. How does the book of Revelation depict spiritual warfare?**

#### **Dr. Dan Doriani**

The book of Revelation depicts spiritual warfare through a variety of images. In a way, we should say it's all set up by chapter 1, the vision of Christ in his magnificent splendor and power. And then we get images of Satan opposing Christ. For example, in chapter 12 we have the scene where Satan, or the dragon who is Satan, wages war against Michael the archangel. Now that's not quite war against Jesus — and that's important — because, see, it wouldn't be a fair fight: Satan against Jesus. So it's got to be angel against angel. Satan is not equal in power to God. So, since he's a created being, an angel, a spiritual being, he has to fight another created being, Michael. He loses. Satan can't even beat an angel, although he does cause some trouble. No doubt about that. But then as you go through chapter 12 of Revelation you see that... He tries to devour the woman, who represents the church, with the river of water, tries to accuse. None of it works. He kind of goes limping away, and then he gets some other helpers. There is a beast that comes from the sea. There is a beast that comes from the earth. And these are his allies, almost, really, an unholy trinity — if we have God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit — we have Satan and the sea beast and the earth beast and later on the harlot. The harlot, of course, is seduction. And the beast that comes out of the sea represents power — horns, threatening. And then we have the representation, of course, of earthly power. So behind the persecution of the church, behind those who try to force people to give up their faith, whether through arms — swords, guns, or by economic privation — that's an ally of Satan. That's the beast that comes from the sea. Then there's a beast that comes from the earth. And that earth beast, also allied with Satan, tries to get people to worship falsely. It shows signs and wonders and tries to lead people astray. And so we see that there are these forces in this world. The harlot is sensuality, wealth, the pleasures of this world. The beast that comes out of the sea is brute power. And then the beast that comes out of the earth is the deluded religions of the world. All those are pictures of the way in which Satan wages war against God and his church.

**Dr. Benjamin Gladd**

Spiritual warfare in the book of Revelation is perhaps one of the most descriptive themes contained within it. We see this especially in the way that angels function. They are summoned from the throne to cast judgment upon the nations ... It's almost as though you are watching a play. I mean, imagine watching a play, and then the curtains are drawn and you realize that it's... the puppets are just being held by wires. And you say, and you go, "Oh, okay, now I see what's really going on." That's sort of what Revelation does, is it pulls back the curtains to the way that we perceive reality, and it gives us what is true reality, the way that God sees events... that which God calls godly and ungodly, righteous and unrighteous. We're really reading about the way God views human affairs. And so what we find then is not simply humankind managing itself, but we instead see God alone managing history and all these inimical forces attacking the church, and the angels playing a big role, and the saints playing a role. And it's this cosmic display. It's this cosmic theater. But we already know who's going to win.

**Question 8:****How does the Holy Spirit empower us for spiritual warfare?**

Spiritual warfare isn't something that occurred only in biblical times. We still face the enemy's attacks today. But as frail human beings we're not strong enough to overcome these attacks on our own. Left to our own devices, we'd fail every time. Thankfully, we're not expected to fight these battles alone. As followers of Christ, we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to give us strength. How does the Holy Spirit empower us for spiritual warfare?

**Dr. Glen Scorgie**

I don't think that a Christian should go looking for opportunities to engage in spiritual warfare. Some people may disagree with me on that. But I think that when these situations present themselves, a bold Christian, strengthened from the inner self through Christ, should not be intimidated. And the Holy Spirit plays a very vital role in the Christian's engagement in spiritual warfare. One of the texts of the New Testament relevant to this is the one that says that God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power, love and self-control. This is a very profound and succinct insight, I believe, into the ministry of the Holy Spirit, because anyone who is engaged in spiritual warfare will attest that the immediate emotional response is often fear: fear of peril, fear of intimation, fear of defeat, a strong sense of discomfort and vulnerability. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in, because to counter that, there is a Spirit who brings to us a divine authority and a power that is actually not of us but more than equal to face the challenge. So, having done all, to stand. Often when we feel threatened, we become very un-Christ-like. When we're under threat, we snarl like an animal trapped. And I don't think it's any accident that there's a necessary ministry of the Holy Spirit to sustain a gracious tone of equipoise when you're dealing with spiritual warfare and some of the nasty opponents that you will

encounter, both supernatural and very human. To be able to navigate that kind of challenge without anger and wrath and mean-spirited speech, is the work of the Spirit who is a spirit of power and love. But I love that last little insightful addition — he is also a Spirit of self-control — because under the duress of spiritual warfare, the great temptation is not to fight always, but to flight, to flee, to run away, to cut and run, and to lose it, in every sense of concentration on the truth, emotionally. And the Spirit comes alongside as the spirit of self-control. Now there are many other functions of the Holy Spirit, vital functions in spiritual warfare like purging us of the sin that leaves us vulnerable so that we can go into it holy, put the armor on, so to speak, a spirit of discernment and all that. But that simple little verse — God has not given us a spirit of fear but a spirit of power and love throughout, and a sound mind, not going to give way to frightening and ridiculous speculations but rooted and anchored in the truth. Sound mind, self-control, beautiful.

**Dr. David Garner**

When you open the Bible to the very first chapters of Scripture, you find in Genesis 1 that God is the Creator. You also discover very quickly that there is a deceiver in the midst. And after the good creation, the very good creation has been established and he has made male and female, Adam and Eve, in his image, we find the testing, the temptation taking place in the Garden. In that passage, we find that this tempter, none less than, actually, the archenemy of God himself, Satan himself, actually tempts Adam and Eve to believe something about God that they ought not believe. The *modus operandi*, the way in which Satan functions through Scripture, as he is described later, is as the deceiver. He is seen as the accuser of the brethren, but he's also seen as the one who masquerades as an angel of light, but he is a deceiver. And in his deception he is constantly taking the things that are true, that he knows to be true about God, and contorting them, making them seem appealing, making them seem close enough to the truth to lure the hearts and minds and souls of men. Well, in view of that, what we find in Scripture in terms of the arming that we need, like Ephesians 6 will speak about, is that we have need of the sword of truth. The truth is our greatest tool to combat the Enemy. Think about the way in which Jesus engaged Satan in his temptation in Luke 4 and in Matthew 4. How does he respond to Satan? He responds to Satan with the very Word of God. Jesus recognizes that the battle is to be won at the revelation of God. It is by using the tools of Scripture that we are armed to combat the forces of evil. So what does that mean for us as Christians? What does that arming look like? That means we need to do what Psalm 1 says. We need to be people who meditate on the Law day and night. We need to be people who delight ourselves in the instruction of the Lord, because the way in which we will be able to discern error is only by having our minds and hearts shaped by the revelation of God in Christ. Paul speaks a bit about this in 1 Corinthians 2 when he talks about the outpouring of the Spirit, that we have not been given any other spirit than the Spirit of God who gives to us freely all things, and it is that Spirit that actually shapes our minds and directs us to be able to see the clear truth, the clear revelation of Scripture.

### Question 9:

#### How do Christians today experience the temptation to idolatry?

The temptation to turn to idol worship is a prevalent theme in the Old Testament. Many times, the nation of Israel compromised its covenant faithfulness by worshipping something other than God. And in the New Testament, idols had a strong hold on popular culture as well. But in many parts of the world today the type of idolatry seen in the Bible is not all that prevalent. So, how do Christians today experience the temptation to idolatry?

**Dr. Greg Perry**

I think idolatry is, according to Scripture, about ultimate meaning and value. And so when we, as image-bearers of God in these different aspects of our work, or our worship, or our family life, or our civic life, begin to give ultimate meaning to created things, or to these different roles in creation that we have, then we fall into idolatry. So if our job really is where we get our sense of ultimate value or meaning, then it's become an idol to us. And we can see how our job has become more important than our relationship with Jesus if we've lost a sense of kingdom vocation about our job, and it's really about my career — sort of a “careerism” — is one expression of idolatry. So it's about *my* career path, not what the Lord Jesus would have me do to represent him in my work, in my relationship with employees, or with other managers. Or in our family life, we can make an idol of our family. All idols are good things because God has made everything good. And so, what's evil is really just a perversion of the good. So in our family life, if we are really finding our ultimate sense of value and meaning in the success of our children, in the influence our children might have in their schools, or in their careers, or in their sports ventures, then we're falling into idolatry and not seeing that God has entrusted our children and our relationship with our spouse as an instrument of bringing honor to the Lord Jesus Christ, which may well mean sacrifices... So there's these, I guess, checks where we see, what's of ultimate value and meaning? Is it created things? Or is it this sense of kingdom vocation that comes from being image-bearers of God and then having these different parts of our lives in the right place, in the right order in relation to the lordship of Jesus.

**Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong (translation)**

Humans have the desire to worship, so they'll put whatever they revere most in front of them as the object of worship. True honor belongs only to God, so you can esteem, admire, and respect people, but not worship them, because humans are only the shadow and image of God. God is the true foundation. To worship him is to worship him alone, to serve him alone. If you idolize another person, esteeming him or her to the point of replacing God, then you've stolen God's authority, status, and power. You aren't to treat people like you treat God. Anyone who places people above everything or uses anything else to take God's place, will surely suffer, as they have offended God and offended themselves.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

Well I think Christians today do experience temptations to idolatry just like nonbelievers do. I'd like to think eventually you get to a maturity level where they're not quite as tempting, but I do believe it's still a problem. And, you know, the big areas have always been in every culture around the world: money, sex and power. But I think you can also look at some other things. For instance, something as silly as games. You look at that and you think, "Well, what do you mean by games?" If you give football — whether it's American football or soccer which is played all around the world — if you give that more attention and time and emotional energy than you give your worship to the Lord or the reading of Scripture, you may have a problem.

**Question 10:**

**If blessings only come to those who persevere, what happens to us when we fail?**

**In the book of Revelation, Jesus called the churches in Asia Minor to overcome sin and the spiritual forces that warred against them. And he promised blessings to those who persevered and curses to those who ultimately did not. So, what about us today? If blessings only come to those who persevere, what happens to us when we fail?**

**Dr. James M. Hamilton**

Well thankfully, when we fail to persevere, Jesus says to us what he says in the letters: "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline." And so the discipline that God brings into our lives, if we hear the word of God, this is discipline that's meant to call us to repentance. And so we can hear the word of Christ speaking to us as he says, "Be zealous and repent." So when we fail to persevere, we should still fix our eyes on Christ and hear him summoning us to turn from our sin and trust in him and press on to receive the promised blessings that he offers.

**Dr. Stephen Um**

I think the first place to start when we think about this issue about loyalty to God is to realize that apart from the grace of God that has been demonstrated in the person of Jesus Christ that we will not have the ability to be loyal to God. I think that's the first place to begin in realizing that we need to rely on a power or a grace that is outside of us ... And what we need to understand is that if we think that the loyalty comes from within us apart from what God has done for us in the person of Jesus Christ, then we will fail even though we're trying so desperately to be loyal. So we need to look at the loyalty of another. We need to look at the fact that Jesus Christ was the perfect servant who came to meet the demands of the radical nature of the Law. And that loyalty, and that fidelity, and that allegiance, and that obedience, and that service now gets imputed to us, and therefore we are justified... The Bible says that we are justified when we recognize that when we are humble, we will be exalted — Luke 18 — rather than trying to exalt ourselves, because we will be humbled.

**Question 11:**  
**How does the book of Revelation encourage believers?**

**John's central purpose in writing the book of Revelation was to encourage believers. But with the book's apocalyptic imagery and use of metaphor, this purpose can sometimes be hard to see. So, how does the book of Revelation encourage believers?**

**Dr. Jonathan T. Pennington**

The book of Revelation can be very confusing. We all know that when we read it, but really its main function is to give encouragement to believers through the power of the hope and the vision that it gives us. I always like to describe it as a lot like going to a movie or a play where you're so enthralled with it during it that afterwards when you come out you feel like your whole view of the world, and your approach, and your values, and the things you care about are seen through a different light because you've experienced some great story that has changed how you even think about the world. The book of Revelation is like that in that when you enter into it and hear its story, it's like a pulling back of the veil on the true reality of how Jesus is worshipped in heaven even though he's despised on earth, and that gives great hope and encouragement to believers that the one they're following, the risen Christ, truly is at the center of the universe and being worshipped and that someday he will come and make that worship, that heavenly worship, an earthly reality. So the great hope for believers is encouraged and strengthened by the book of Revelation with this kind of visionary power that it gives.

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

The book of Revelation encourages believers in what it shows us about the future and about the present. We'll take the future first. That's a little out of order, but it's right, because Revelation shows us that the future holds for us the return of Christ, his defeat of all of his and our enemies and his welcoming us into the new heavens and the new earth where he will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and there will be no more warring or crying or pain. That is secure, that is sure, because Christ holds the key of death and Hades. He's in control, he's risen from the dead, and that is the hope to which we look. Revelation also encourages believers by reminding us that Christ is now in control, although it doesn't always look like it on the plain of history. But if you think of the visions that accompany Christ's breaking of the seals on the scroll, beginning in Revelation 6 when he is the triumphant Lion — the Lion who has come as the Lamb to be slain — and he begins to open the seals. And we find visions of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, as we call them, released on the earth to wreak various forms of damage, imperial expansion, warfare, bloodshed, famine, disease, death. We might look at their world — well, it looks a lot like our world — and wonder whether things are in anyone's control. But the fact that the Lamb has the scroll, and even these providential expressions of judgment that cause great harm to many on earth come in response to his breaking the seals, assure us that even now in



the midst of our trials, our Savior is fully reigning at the Father's right hand, and he has providential control of everything that happens everywhere in the world.

**Dr. David W. Chapman**

I think when we ask how does the book encourage believers one of the very important things to say is that we can get lost very easily in the details of the book of Revelation as we're trying to figure out what each and every symbol means, and I think it's almost more important to see what's the big picture. If we were to read through, or better, just listen to the book of Revelation in a single sitting, what will we get out of it? And I think what we would hear is in the midst of the travails of this life, there is a Lord and Savior, a Lord and Savior who is in control over all of history in whom we can trust, and because that is true, we can persevere in the now. We can be sure to be his people in the now, knowing that he is going to be victorious and that ultimately we'll be vindicated even in the midst of the travails of our life now. So we can live holy lives unto him, we can encourage one another to do the same. We can indeed overcome, to use the word that occurs so frequently in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation.

**Dr. Simon J. Kistemaker**

The Lord Jesus Christ encourages the believers, and all we have to do is go to these seven epistles to the churches in Asia Minor and there you'll find repeatedly the word "overcomers." And Jesus is encouraging us and is focusing our attention on being overcomers. That is, in spite of all the difficulties we are experiencing, we nevertheless are victorious in the Lord Jesus. Why? Because he overcame. On the cross he overcame the suffering and the death. He who created life, who created the universe, this Lord says, I conquered, and therefore we conquer and we continue to conquer.

**Question 12:**

**How does our worship on earth reflect heavenly worship?**

**As God's ambassadors on earth, we're called to serve and worship God. The book of Revelation reveals a beautiful picture of how God is worshipped in heaven. So, is this what our earthly worship should look like also? How does our worship on earth reflect heavenly worship?**

**Dr. James M. Hamilton**

Creation is already like a temple or a tabernacle in the sense that this place was created as a world in which God would be known, served, worshipped, and present with his people ... There are truths stated in texts like Psalm 78:69 which says, "You built your sanctuary like the heavens like the earth which you founded," and so the tabernacle and then the temple, they are replications of the earth in the sense that this is where God is worshipped, this is where God is known, and this is where God is served, and this is where God is present with his people. So, for those who know him,



that's what this realm is for, and we are the image of God in his temple fellowshiping with him and worshipping him.

**Dr. Craig S. Keener**

If we can speak of the furniture, so to speak, of heaven, you find the ark of covenant in heaven, you find a sea just like the sea in the temple, you find harps. You find so many things that resemble the temple in the Old Testament, so that you put all these things together and you say, what does heaven look like? The way it's portrayed in Revelation, it's portrayed as a temple. And what are people doing there? They're worshipping God continuously. Then you look at the scenes on earth. You have people worshipping the beast, you have God's people suffering, but you have all these hymns of worship to God throughout the book of Revelation, and I think it calls us to look beyond our sufferings, to look beyond our trials, and to get the heavenly perspective by worshipping the God of heaven, the God who reigns over all, the God who is the beginning and the ending and who has the future in his hands. And as we worship God, that's like a foretaste of what the world to come will be like.

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

I think one of the weak parts of what we do is worship. I find out that when I teach my people to pray in the church where I pastor, we always talk about the four parts of prayer: adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. Beautiful stuff, but I've found in the evangelical tradition the "A" part of that, the adoration, is really the weakest part. And I think we've got to find a way not only to worship with our songs, with our lips, but also with our lives. I'm thinking right now of Revelation. One of the things that's going to be done quite a little bit in heaven is worship. All over Revelation you see these songs that come: "Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever, Amen." Beautiful stuff. That's the stuff that ought to be on our lips all day long, not just on Sundays but all over our life all day long. What do the songs of heaven have to do with us and how we live the day? How we handle our finances today, whether we go to see that movie or don't go to see that movie, or whatever else it might be, our lives are to be lives of worship, our lips are to be lips of worship. It's what we'll be doing in heaven that ought to have impact on what we're doing today.

**Dr. Greg Perry**

We have this incredible scene in the book of Revelation of those who believe in the Lamb gather to worship and to acclaim him from every tribe, language and nation on the earth. And there's really a couple of things going on in chapters 4 and 5 where we see, on the one hand, images from the heavenly council that are very familiar from the Old Testament, but there's also something else that is very related to what's going on in the history at that time in Asia Minor, and that is in every Roman city there would be these acclamation assemblies. Every time there was a city-wide event, the society would be represented in every strata. And so there was these thrones in the first couple of rows of the theater. And we see the thrones, of course, in the book of Revelation 4 and 5, and we see this great multitude of people. And what they would do in the acclamation ceremonies is sort of reaffirm the benefaction of Caesar, the

benefaction of the elders of the city and how they had brought blessing and prosperity — and even sometimes they would use the word salvation — to their city. And so these great acclamation assemblies brought honor, honor to the city leaders, and honor to Caesar, and to the gods who were seen to protect the city. And so what we see in the ministry of Christians on the earth in their worship and in their witness in society is bringing honor and acclamation to the true King, to the true Creator, the true Savior who has brought blessings to our cities and to our lives and honoring him with their life, not only with their worship but with their witness and with their wealth, and the ways that they would benefit the city themselves, to bring this sort of honor to Jesus as the Lord, the *Kurios*, instead of falsely attributing it to others.

### Question 13:

#### According to Revelation, what is the goal of human history?

Throughout the years, many authors have written on eschatological matters. And this shouldn't surprise us. People have always wondered about the end times. We want to know, why are we here? What is our ultimate purpose? What is God's plan for us and the world? In the book of Revelation, John often addressed these themes. So, according to Revelation, what is the goal of human history?

#### Dr. Peter Walker

The final two chapters of Revelation give us an incredible account of the goal of human history, where God is taking the world. John has this vision of seeing a new heaven and a new earth, the heavenly Jerusalem coming down like a bride dressed for her husband, and then this promise that God is dwelling amongst his people. So, the overriding impression is that God is going to be with his people, and he is going to be wiping away tears, and everything that was just evil is going to be removed, and God is going to be restored amongst his people. They are going to worship him and enjoy him forever. There's a big question there about what that means for our own present creation — is that something that is going to be completely got rid of, and God is going to do something completely different? This new heaven and new earth, what does that mean? Well, the Greek word there for “new” may actually speak not just of something *completely* new, as so much as a renewal. And it may therefore be that actually what's being portrayed to us is the *renewal* of our creation. So it's not as though God gets rid of the old creation — that was a load of junk, and let's start something else — nor, indeed, does he create something which is totally disembodied and completely different to our normal created life. On the contrary, he saturates the whole of our creation with his divine presence and reality. The one great difference is sin and death have been removed. And if that's the case then — that what we're looking forward to as Christians is the renewal of creation — I think this can give us a real positive emphasis to our created life, to living in this world, to how we care for our environment as well, but also to make sure that in the present we do works and deeds which are signposts of the future kingdom. So, God is not going to be removing us out of this present world into something completely different; he's instead going to

be renewing this human world, this embodied world, and flooding it with his meaning. There's a verse in the Old Testament, isn't there, that the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. And I think that's the biblical hope. It's slightly more this-worldly than we sometimes think. Perhaps God is going to remove us to some completely different place. Instead, the biblical hope is this-worldly; God is going to renew his creation. It was good at the beginning, and it will be very good at the end.

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

According to the book of Revelation, the goal of human history is the whole earth being transformed into the visible and immanent temple, garden, realm, throne of God. And it's the very same purpose with which the Bible opens in Genesis 1 and 2, that God made a world that was very good, but he made a garden in which his presence was immanent and visible, and it was a holy place, and the man and the woman were told to spread the Garden in effect to the whole world by multiplying, filling it, subduing it. And of course, in the Fall, that program is interrupted, but yet in the promise in the Garden — that there would be a seed of the woman which would bruise the serpent's head — that promise is ultimately fulfilled. And so the earth becomes a place where the glory of God is not hidden any longer, but it's an earth filled with the glory of God. And there's no temple in this new earth, because God and the Lamb are its temple. There's no need for a temple because God himself is our dwelling place in a perfect and full and final way. All the effects of the curse have been removed, except the signs of our redemption, the crucifixion scars of Jesus Christ. There is no sun or moon because the sun and moon, which derive their glory and their light from God himself. He is present, and he is its light day and night. There is life. The Tree of Life, which was in the Garden of Eden, to which access was barred because of our sin, now is open and available in its life-giving presence. And there is life in the Spirit that is the never-ceasing flow of life that comes from the throne of God, like the waters that fill the earth and bring life in Ezekiel's vision, and in John's promise to the woman at the well. So it's a place of no sorrow or pain, but it is a place of immeasurably more glory than if the Fall and if sin had never happened, because God is not only the consummator of an un-fallen creation, but he's the victor over a fallen creation.

**Question 14:**

**How will the new heaven and new earth be both familiar to and different from the current heaven and earth?**

**The final chapters of Revelation tell of a new heaven and a new earth that will far surpass the world we know now. The first earth will pass away, and God will make all things new. So, if God is making all things new, how will the new heaven and new earth be both similar to and different from the current heaven and earth?**

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

When it comes to the relationship between the new heavens and the new earth and the heaven and earth we live in now, I think there will be a lot more continuity between the two than we tend to think. We tend to overly spiritualize or make it overly mystical, but the Bible says that the heaven and earth that we now know will be restored, which includes the physical realm, and so I think we will laugh and eat and drink and play and enjoy walks on the beach in ways we tend not to think. Now the thorns and thistles and relentless difficulty and twistedness of life in a fallen world will be gone, and every tear will be wiped away, but it will also include the physical realm.

**Dr. John E. McKinley**

When we look at depictions of the new earth and compare them to the present order of situation, we find, yeah, similarities and differences. Similarities are helpful because it means it's not going to be so totally strange to us. So I think it's going to be a physical place. It's described that way. I think that's realistic. There's going to be gender and ethnicity. The kings of the nations are going to bring their glory into the New Jerusalem. We'll still have our sense of ourselves as either male or female. And there's also going to be rich relationship among people. The differences are that there's not going to be any pain, or death, or sin. With death removed as the consequence for sin that means that there's no sin. There's going to be no sense of separation from God, and there's going to be total wide-open space for people to have relationships; the full extent of *shalom* where people can be open and accessible to God and to one another.

**Dr. Mark Strauss**

It's clear from the book of Revelation that the new heaven and the new earth is really a restoration of creation as God intended it to be. God created a perfect world, human beings rebelled against him, creation entered a fallen state. And so it's a restoration. But there is a measure of tension in Scripture itself. Peter, for example, talks about the heavens and earth being destroyed with a fire, and so, particularly in our concern for the environment today, we ask whether creation is good and will be ultimately restored into a pristine state or whether it will be wiped out and rebuilt from the ground up. And I have to say there's a measure of tension in there. What we do know, however, is that creation is good. When God finished with creation in Genesis, he pronounced it good. And so the new creation will be intimately related and closely related to the kind of creation God originally made in Genesis. So there is that continuity. And what that means is we do need to regard God's creation and the whole world as a precious gift from God. And so we should be concerned with environmental issues and with the preservation of the goodness that God created in it.

**Question 15:**

**Given that all Christ's enemies will be condemned in the final judgment, what attitudes should we have toward unbelievers?**

Nothing in the book of Revelation should fill Christians with mixed emotions like the lake of fire in Revelation 20. While we rejoice that the enemies of God will finally be defeated once and for all, many of those "enemies" are family, friends, or co-workers we've known and prayed for. Given that all Christ's enemies will be condemned in the final judgment, what attitudes should we have toward unbelievers?

**Dr. Matt Friedeman**

We believe that there's going to be a judgment day, and we believe that unbelievers will be condemned and condemned to eternal damnation. So understanding that, what should our attitude be towards them? I think Jesus said very simply, "love your neighbor." And I believe when he said that... It's interesting, the story in Luke that comes next, and that is, there was a man of another race that reached out to a man of another race in order to have compassion on him. There was a Samaritan that reached out to a Jew. They did not like each other, they were enemies, and yet the story of the good Samaritan is the story of a man reaching out to another man and they're not supposed to like each other. I think even today there are people we're not supposed to like. You can just imagine. It's woven into the warp and the woof of our world we're not supposed to like. And yet Jesus, I believe, gives us the grace to reach out in a wonderful and compassionate way to touch those who perhaps are enemies, or the untouchables, or the unlovable, and he definitely wants us to love them. And I do believe he is still working miracles today bringing those unbelievers, those untouchables, to a relationship with him.

**Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong (translation)**

We aren't to treat all unbelievers as enemies, because we're to love unbelievers. They're the people we are to preach the gospel to, the chosen people of God that we must win back. If we treat the unbelievers as enemies, we lack the power and the love to preach the gospel to them. I went to Taipei for the first time in 1970. The people there were loudly praying for mainland China, but they all hated the communists bitterly. I told them: "You hate the communists this much? If a communist was brought before you, how could you preach the gospel to him while you hate him? When you pray for the mainland, you can't stop at your words and ideals. You must ask God to give you the ability to love atheists, love communists, and love those who oppose Christianity. Only then can you bring them back before God." That's the way it is. So many people are like Paul was before his conversion, temporarily placed into the opposing camp. How did he become Christianity's greatest evangelist, the greatest proclaimer of the gospel? Aside from Jesus, Paul was the bravest warrior, witness, and hero for the gospel in all of the New Testament. Today, we must be aware of two things: first, we need to understand that some people are still in the enemy camp. How do we rescue them and bring them before the Lord? Second, we

must realize that the enemy has placed his agents among us. We are to expel them. We must do both of these things.

**Dr. Robert G. Lister**

Christians, in their attitude towards unbelievers, need to start with the careful reminder that we're not God. And we can be glad that we're not God. Not being God means, among other things, that we're not responsible to pass final judgment on anyone. And so, while we can trust that the Lord of all the earth will do right in what he does with any individual, that's not a role that's assigned to us. And we know that while unbelievers are yet living, while they're yet breathing, one of the things that God is doing is being kind to them in giving them yet more opportunity to repent. God's demonstrating patience to people who already deserve to be under judgment that they might have more opportunity to repent. And so one of the things that we would do as creatures and not the creator, is seize that opportunity to pray for them, to share the gospel with them. Many of us have loved ones who are not believers and are committed to be in prayer for those loved ones as well as unreached peoples around the world. So we have to differentiate our role from God's role, trusting God to do his and to do his in a way that no one will have a claim of injustice against God, while also recognizing that while unbelievers are living, they have an opportunity to repent, and we want to present them with that opportunity as much as we possibly can. The other thing that's critical to remember is that we were once unbelievers ourselves, and if we had a holier-than-thou attitude or a superior-to-unbeliever kind of attitude, that would betray a misunderstanding of what we were and that the only difference between us and them now is God's grace in our lives, and it's nothing intrinsic to us. And so we can celebrate God's work in our lives and seek by prayer and evangelism God's work in their lives as well, trusting that the Lord will call his sheep to himself in ways and times that are appropriate to the outworking of his plan.

**Question 16:**

**What practical steps can we take to persevere in the face of trials and suffering?**

Many times we read through Scripture and want to ask, "So, now what am I supposed to do?" Life can be difficult and can leave us feeling wounded and anxious. But it helps to remember that many people in the Bible's original audiences were also hurting and needed encouragement. And the Bible does provide us help in this area. What practical steps can we take to persevere in the face of trials and suffering?

**Dr. Steve Douglass**

There are so many practical steps that Christians can take that time really doesn't allow for a full coverage of that subject. I want to just tackle one segment — our perspective. Sometimes I find if I think right, that I will then feel right, and do right. And the most important perspective that I have to bring to trials and difficulties is a

perspective about God. Because, see, I can doubt that God is aware or that he loves me, or what's this thing about the sovereignty or the control of God over everything? Or, how did that happen? So what I find is there are three really important things to remember about God when a crisis hits. The first is that God is indeed sovereign. Let me sample a passage of Scripture for you:

To the King ... immortal, invisible, the only God, be glory and honor forever and ever (1 Timothy 1:17).

That sounds like somebody who's got it together. ... A second thing that we need to remember about God is that he loves us. You might think, okay, okay, he's sovereign, but I'm not sure how he thinks about me. Well, he loves you. He loves you. "For God so loved the world that he sent Jesus" — John 3:16. "In all things, God works for the good of those who love him." He loves us, we respond in love. That's how it works — Romans 8:28. I know I've heard people say, "If God really cared about me, he never would have let this happen." Well, think about your theology for a moment. God does care about you. Maybe you're misinterpreting the event, but there's no question God cares about you. And the third thing to remember about God is he is aware. Some time ago there was a big, worldwide financial crisis, and we felt that in the United States. And I heard many people say, "Didn't God know that I had to keep this money in order to have my needs met?" And the answer is, yes, I believe we can safely say God knew what your needs are. God is certainly aware. In Psalm 139 we find out that God is aware of everything about us. It's not a question mark. He is ... So as you face some kind of crisis in your life, just take stock of who God is, and you can relax. He's in control. He really, really does love and wants to provide for us. And he's perfectly aware of what is going on.

### **Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Life is filled with suffering. Ever since the fall of humanity, God has cursed the world and brought a relentless difficulty to every day. The world has difficulty and pain and suffering woven throughout. And especially if we pay attention we will find that an undeniable fact. So how, then, do we find peace and joy in the midst of all the trial. Well, it comes through depending on God, the Creator, and the one who cursed everything, and his redeeming work, if we're ever going to have hope. The Bible says that when you see things from God's perspective, that, as hard as the suffering is in this life, it's a slight, momentary affliction compared with the surpassing weight of glory that will be revealed. Paul says in Romans 8 that the struggles of this present time, the suffering of this present time isn't even worth comparing with the glory that's going to be revealed. So, when we are able to trust God in his sovereign goodness, that he is all powerful, he's all good, as he's working out his plan, and even in the midst of suffering, often *mostly* in the midst of suffering, God is refining us, and redeeming us, and in the process of restoring what was lost in the Fall. That's where we find our hope; in the God, who's working everything out for good, and for his glory.

**Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong (translation)**

I'm certain that suffering itself has value. The Bible says that suffering for the sake of righteousness is better than suffering because of sin, because suffering for the sake of righteousness is equal to the will of God as discussed in the Bible. And it is the cross that people must bear ... Psalm 119 has these three sentiments: "before I was afflicted I went astray," "it was good for me to be afflicted," and "because I was afflicted I am refined as pure gold." When these three sentences become the motto of a person in suffering, he or she can overcome it and not be consumed by it.

**Dr. John E. McKinley**

Somehow in God's sovereignty, he perfects his people through suffering. It was the case for Jesus, we're following in his steps, and so we can expect to have difficulty in life. We're assured in the midst of that that God is going to bring us through even as much as we're sure we're going to have suffering. And in Romans 8, Paul tells us that we are more than conquerors through all these things, that we are to count them not as somehow God abandoning us, but God using them just like a good coach for an athlete to train us, to bring us closer to him to fight against our real enemy which is our sin in ways we obstruct God by our fears and hold back from him. So the apostles rejoiced when they suffered. They thought it was a great thing to be counted worthy, to suffer for the name. Certainly persecution for the sake of Christ is easier to bear, but all kinds of sufferings that come to us are redemptive, whether it's cancer or a difficult sickness, or trouble at work, or financial distresses, these things are all God's materials to transform us. And then we cry out for help. We cling to God, we identify with Christ, and we have a communion of suffering with our fellow believers and find God comforting us in that. So we should have gratitude in a weird kind of way that we are being treated as children, and this is discipline, where God is disciplining us and helping us to become like Christ through these difficulties that we go through.

**Question 17:****How important is it to remain faithful to Jesus?**

**John wrote the book of Revelation to encourage his readers to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of suffering. John's original readers faced both persecution and temptation and needed to know, just like we do today, why they shouldn't give up. How important is it to remain faithful to Jesus?**

**Dr. M. William Ury**

I think Jesus placed this concept of faithfulness before his disciples, before us, so continually. He did that because he wanted to emphasize the relationship at the base of all salvation ... Way back when I was just becoming a disciple of Jesus, somebody preached a sermon, and I'll never forget the four points. He said every disciple has to have a heart for God, to be available to Jesus, to be faithful to him, and to be teachable. Now, 39 years later I've thought to myself, it really doesn't get much deeper than that. Faithfulness is what Jesus offered to us as the joy of walking with



him, knowing him intimately, but he also wants my responsiveness daily to him. He's not forcing me to obey him. He's not making me follow a law. He says, I need a faithful heart no matter what your emotions are today, no matter what you feel is going on in the world, badly or good, I need a faithful bride. I need a faithful servant, a faithful lover of my own heart. And that's what I think he was getting at with guys like me who tend to look at the world in terms of how I can define spirituality. The Lord says there's something much deeper than that. I want a faithful heart. Just like a married couple, that's the foundation of true love. Faithfulness no matter what comes down the road. So the Lord requires faithfulness, but he also enables faithfulness by his Holy Spirit's presence.

**Dr. James M. Hamilton**

The book of Revelation is out to teach that remaining faithful to Jesus is more important than staying alive, so people are called, for instance in Revelation 2, to be faithful unto death because Jesus is worth more than life. And so everything, *everything* rests on whether or not we're faithful to Jesus. If we're not faithful to him, we lose everything. If we are faithful to him, we gain more than we could ever imagine.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Jesus placed such a strong emphasis on faithfulness to God. He did this because faithfulness is an expression of trust. It's an expression of realizing God really does deserve our faithfulness, our trust, our obedience, our devotion, above all else. When you disobey doctor's orders, you're not just saying something about the orders; you're saying something about the doctor. And when you disobey God, you're not just saying something about his commands that you're disregarding, you're saying something about the God who gave those commands. And so faithfulness is an expression of trust. It's an expression of seeing God for who he is, and then of course, doing what he says. And so when Jesus comes, he submits to the will of the Father as the Son, but he also displays for us what our lives as human beings should look like, obeying God, being faithful to him. Jesus becomes the faithful one, the one who we put our faith in because he always expressed faithfulness to God by obeying God. So, faithfulness to God is an expression of obedience, it's an expression of daily devotion and trust in who he is. Paul in Romans talks about the Christian life in his apostolic ministry as one that should lead to the obedience of faith. It's a beautiful expression, which in some ways summarizes the Christian life. We see God for who he is, we put our faith in him, and that naturally leads to obedience. We obey the God that we trust.

**One of the major themes that runs through the book of Revelation is the theme of the kingdom of God. We see this in the book's vivid imagery depicting God in his throne room and Jesus as his vassal king. John reminds us that we have a king who is worthy of our honor and allegiance, who will one day bring the coming kingdom that far surpasses anything we know now. And as we persevere through our suffering and trials, we can be assured that he is faithful and that we will be richly blessed when Christ returns in glory.**

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