How to Understand the Book of Revelation
The Difficulties of the Revelation

The refusal of some teachers to teach Bible prophecy and Revelation... Some say “It is impossible to understand;” others see it as a playground for religious eccentrics who use it to map out the end of the world; some believe it’s more for “conspiracy theorists.”

Many reformers rejected Revelation; Luther denied its place in the Bible; Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli said he had “no concern for it is not a biblical book... I can reject its testimonies...;” I am grateful that I have come to appreciate prophecy and have great respect for the book of Revelation; John wrote: “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10).

The reason Revelation is a difficult book.... It is apocalyptic literature and unique to the NT; it is also called “The Apocalypse” meaning “the unveiling” or “to take the cover off;” the ability to understand end time events (eschatology) was hidden until Jesus unveiled it in the Revelation.

Revelation contains symbols like a beast rising out of the sea with 7 heads and 10 horns and on his horns 10 crowns; then another beast comes out of the earth having two horns like a lamb but speaks like a dragon; such symbolism was not new to Jewish readers for this was their way to conceal a message from their enemy during time of persecution; parts of the books of Daniel and Zechariah are apocalyptic, as well as Jewish literature written during the 400 year silence between the OT and NT.

The apostle John wrote the book while banished on the isle of Patmos under Emperor Domitian around 95 A.D.; John refused to submit to Caesar Worship; according to Jerome, after the death of Domitian, and by an act of the Roman senate John was released and he returned to Ephesus when Nerva was emperor; he wrote the book between 95-98 AD.
The reality of the book is that God is both a God of grace and a God of wrath… Revelation is a difficult book in that it teaches the dual nature of God; He is a God of grace, love, and mercy; He is also a holy, just and righteous God who manifests His wrath on those who reject Him; God deals with our sins in one of two ways: grace or wrath (John 3:36; Nahum 1:2-3).

Revelation first presents Jesus as the Lamb who was slain (5:6); in the end, it presents Christ as a roaring, conquering lion (Jeremiah 25:30-31); in Revelation He is called “the Lion from the tribe of Judah” (5:5) who will one day roar from heaven to pour out His wrath on those who rejected His mercy (19:11-18).

The Discoveries for Understanding Revelation

Realize that God wants you to understand Revelation… God would never write a book He does not want you to understand; the word “revelation” means “unveiling;” some great truths that have been hidden are now being revealed and Jesus is at the center of the unveiling; the book opens: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ…” (1:1): we are going to learn things about Jesus Christ that we will find no place else in Scripture.

The book can be divided into three section (1:19); Describe the things you have seen—the glorified Jesus (1); describe the things that are—the seven churches of Asia Minor (2-3); describe the things that are to come—the coming Antichrist, the tribulation, the second Coming of Christ with His Church; the Millennial reign of Christ, the great white throne judgment, and the Eternal State with the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven (4-22).

Rely on the Holy Spirit… This is not a book for unbelievers; it can only be understood by one depending on the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-16; John 16:13; 15:26).

Regard Revelation as apocalyptic literature with symbols that can be understood… There are many symbols in the book; don’t give up for they have meaning; these symbols are often interpreted in the book or from other apocalyptic literature—namely Daniel and Zechariah.

An example of how Revelation interprets itself: when Christ returns He is accompanied by the armies of heaven clothed in fine linen white and clean (19:14); the fine linen represents “the righteous acts of the saints (19:8); that is the Church!
Resort to the plain sense meaning even if not fully understandable... Revelation 9 says there will be an army of 200 million that will march east toward Jerusalem; at the time this was written there weren’t that many people on earth; today China can send an army that large into the battle of Armageddon; in 1909 C.I. Schofield gave a literal interpretation of Ezekiel 38-39 saying Russia will invade Israel in the end times; that took a lot of faith for Russia at the time was a Christian Orthodox nation and Israel as a nation did not exist; Schofield wrote of his commentary: “I don’t understand it. I cannot explain it. But that is what it says. Therefore, I believe it.”

Respect the impact of technology... Revelation 13 says when the Antichrist is revealed he will be accompanied by the False Prophet who will make an image of the Antichrist who is mortally wounded but coming back to life; today computer imaging can make a dead man come back to life and make it look so real you will wonder if it actually happened.

Revelation 13 also says that every person on earth will be required to have the mark of the beast on their forehead or right hand to buy or to sell; that is no longer a mystery; computer chips containing your history can be inserted under the skin; even the human eye can be a source of identification as one’s iris is more distinct than one’s fingerprint.

Another example is in Revelation 11; there are two witnesses lying dead in the streets of Jerusalem for 3½ days and the people of the world will look upon them; today we have TV cameras, point it at them, and zap the transmission up to a satellite and the whole world can look upon those bodies.

Recognize the book has flashbacks and flash-forwards... Revelation is a book with frame changes; not every chapter is in chronological order; sometimes the story is interrupted with a flashback to give better understand as to what is happening in the present; sometimes the story is interrupted with a flash-forward for the purpose of giving hope and assurance of victory during a troubling time in the narrative.

An example of a flashback would be Revelation 12:1-9 where Satan tries to kill Jesus at His birth and then again at His ascension; during the second half of the Tribulation the Satan possessed Antichrist takes out his vengeance on the woman who gave birth to the Messiah—the Jewish remnant; it is called “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jeremiah 30:7) but God is going to protect her for 1,260 days to the remainder of the Tribulation.
In Revelation 13 the present context is that the Antichrist is making war on the saints; the false prophet has set up a blasphemous religious system and a totalitarian society; it is a one world government and one world religion and it is a fearful and dark time for the people of faith.

The present tense comes to a halt in chapter 14; there is the flash-forward to the Lamb, Jesus, standing on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, on the earth during His millennial reign, with the 144,000 Jews who have the Father’s name written on their foreheads; this is the same 144,000 who were sealed with the seal of God who had gone to all the nations proclaiming: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb” (Revelation 7); in the midst of the worst time for Israel and the people of faith, the Holy Spirit allows John to see the future with this flash-forward; in the end the faithful are victorious!

Read the Old Testament prophets in regard to the end times...Those who reject the future reign of Christ on earth say there is only one chapter in the Bible—Revelation 20—that speaks of His Millennial reign, therefore it must mean something else so they spiritualize it away.

Revelation 20 is not the only chapter to speak of the Millennium; there are 300 prophecies in the OT about Christ’s first coming but over 500 about His second coming.

An example is Isaiah 24:21-23 which says the pompous king of the earth will be confined to a pit—the grave of the unrighteous; the wrath of God will be poured out on all who reject the Lord; after many days (the 1,000 year reign of Jesus) they will be resurrected, judged and cast into hell; then the text says how the moon will be disgraced and the sun ashamed for the Lord will reign on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, right here on planet earth.

Remember this book as the Revelation of Jesus Christ... This is a book about Jesus Christ (1:1); in chapter 1 there is the glorious vision of Him as the Son of Man; chapters 2-3 we meet Him as the author of seven letters to seven churches of Asia Minor; in chapters 4-18 we see Him as the Lamb that was slain who stood in the midst of the throne of God and who alone is worthy to take a scroll from the right hand of Him who sits on the throne, to break its seals and to reveal the terrible things that will come on the earth; in chapter 19 we see Him returning to earth astride a white horse accompanied with the armies of heaven; He comes as King of kings and Lord of lords; He comes as a conquering King to destroy His enemies; in chapter 20 he locks up Satan and sets up an earthly kingdom for
1,000 years; at the end of that time He casts Satan into hell where he remains for all eternity; in chapters 21-22 He gives us a glimpse into heaven and the New Jerusalem where we will remain throughout eternity; the book closes off with a warning to the unsaved and a promise to those who love Him: “Surely I am coming quickly;” to that John responds, “Amen, even so, come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).