How the Book of Revelation Is Interpreted

In our last lesson we surveyed eight keys to understanding Revelation; there is one more piece of unfinished business to complete before we launch into the book; we must look at the most important teachings of interpretations that have developed to explain the book; let’s first have a quick overview of the book.

The Description of the Revelation

The book gives its own outline: The risen Lord tells John to: “Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this” (Revelation 1:19); he saw the glorified Christ (1)—the things that you have seen; the seven churches of Revelation (2-3)—the things that are; the time of the great Tribulation and the return of Christ to earth, His Millennial kingdom and the New Jerusalem come down out of heaven (4-22)—the things that will take place after this.

The controversial chapters deal with the futuristic section, or “the things that will take place after this” (4-22); as we interpret this section of Revelation we see it as future to our time; John sees the Father on the throne with a seven sealed scroll in His right hand; only the Lamb Jesus is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll; it contains the events that will happen at end of time (4-5).

Chapter 6 opens with the seven seals judgment; it unveils the four horsemen depicting the activity of the Antichrist; he comes riding on a white horse of deceptive peace; then he rides the red horse of war, followed by the black horse of famine, and finally the pale horse of death. The fifth seal is the prayer of the martyrs in heaven who cry out, “How long O Lord until you avenge the blood of those who dwell on earth.”

The sixth seal displays cosmic disturbances of a great earthquake with the sun darkened and the moon like blood; it means the great day of God’s wrath has come; there is an interlude before the opening of the seventh seal.
Chapter 7 introduces us to the 144,000 Jewish evangelists, 12,000 from each tribe, who evidently were converted by two witnesses who ministered during the first half of the tribulation—most likely Moses and Elijah (11); the 144,000 are sealed with the seal of God so none can be killed; they witness for three and one half years and bring great revival, a multitude that cannot be numbered from every tribe and nation and tongue; those who come to Christ through the preaching of the 144,000 will all be martyred; yet they will all go to be with the Lord and burst into song; “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

The seventh seal begins seven trumpet judgments which blow on the earth one disaster after another including nuclear devastation, demonic attacks, an Asian revolt of two hundred million horsemen coming ready to invade Israel, and the rebellion of mankind against God (8-9).

Chapter 10 brings an interlude of additional warnings from a mighty angel with the little book; John is told to take the little book and eat it; when he did it was sweet to his taste yet bitter to his stomach; God’s Word is sweet to those who believe but bitter to those who reject the gospel.

Chapter 11 brings us to the end of first half of the Tribulation; it is marked by the Antichrist killing the two witnesses who lie dead in the streets of Jerusalem for three and one-half days before ascending into heaven; all this is witnessed by the whole world (11:1-14); this event introduces the second half of the Tribulation of 42 months or 1,260 days or 3½ years.

The seventh trumpet continues sounding throughout the second half of the Tribulation; it begins with loud voices in heaven proclaiming, “The kingdoms of the world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever; the whole Church in heaven begins praising God as His temple is open where the glory of God shone from the holy of holies and the John sees the ark of the covenant a symbol of God’s mercy (11:15-19); the real Ark is in heaven; the one in the earthly tabernacle was but a copy of the real heavenly Ark (Hebrews 9:23).

Chapter 12 is a scene in which Satan has tried to kill the Christ—not only at His birth, but he even chases Christ into heaven at the time of His ascension; a second time he is cast out of heaven; the first time being his rebellion in heaven when he tried to overthrow the government of God (Isaiah 14:12-21); now Satan takes out his vengeance on the woman, Israel who gave birth to the Messiah; this
begins the battle of Armageddon which lasts throughout the second half of the Tribulation; while Israel is being persecuted God still nourishes her and protects her in the wilderness.

Chapter 13 Satan is called a dragon who possesses the Antichrist and is portrayed as a beast that rises out of the sea and is given authority for 42 months to make war with the saints throughout the second half of the Tribulation (1-10); the sea symbolizes the Gentile nations (Revelation 17:15) which would indicate the Antichrist is a Gentile.

Then a second beast rises out of the earth known as the false prophet; he performs great signs calling for the world to worship the Antichrist; he even produces an image of the Antichrist as fatally wounded yet brought back to life; he causes all, small and great to take the mark of the beast so they can buy and sell; those who refuse are martyred; the beast, known as the Antichrist, is given a number which is the number of his name and that number is 666 (13:11-18).

Following is a flash-forward giving an interlude of hope; John saw the Lamb standing on Mount Zion in Jerusalem with the 144,000 showing that though times are now tough in the end there is victory (14:1-5).

Then John sees an angel flying in the midst of heaven preaching the everlasting gospel to those who dwell on earth; his message is “Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come, worship Him who made heaven and earth”; during the second half of the Tribulation it is an angel who preaches the gospel as the work of the 144,000 has been completed; a second angel is sent forth to proclaim that Babylon, the endtime empire of the Antichrist will be destroyed; a third angel is sent forth to warn the people not to worship the Antichrist or to take the mark of the beast (14:6-13).

John then pictures the wrath of God as a sharp sickle thrust into the earth tearing up the grapes of wrath and tossing them into a winepress which pours out the blood of those who opposed the Lord; the blood flows up to the horse’s bridles for 200 miles (14:14-20); this speaks of the carnage of the battle of Armageddon.

From out of that seventh trumpet that sounds throughout the second half of the Tribulation come seven angels with seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God; one by one they pour out on the earth seven bowls of wrath; with the seventh bowl the earth shook and Babylon, the headquarters of the Antichrist fell and all
heaven rejoices over her fall; it is now time for celebration as the saints of God in heaven are now invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (15-19:1-10).

Then the heavens open and Christ, astride a white horse, comes to earth as King of king and Lord of lords; He is followed by the raptured saints on white horses as well as the angels of heaven; they make war against the beast and the false prophet and in victory cast them into hell (19:11-21).

Satan, the devil, is seized and cast into a bottomless pit for 1,000 years as Christ sets up His Millennial kingdom; at the end of the 1,000 years, Satan is released and many join him in a battle against the Lord called Gog and Magog; fire comes from heaven and devours the army and Satan is cast into hell (20:1-10).

Then the unsaved are resurrected from the dead and they stand before the great white throne judgment; there they stand, condemned as death and hades are cast into the lake of fire (20:11-15).

In chapters 21-22 eternity begins with a new heaven and a new earth; the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven which becomes an eternal home for all the saints of God; the book ends with a warning to be ready and a promise from the risen Lord, “Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book;” and John writes: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

The Different Interpretations of Revelation

*The Historian View*... Augustine (354-430) refined the views of Origen, believed to be the founder of the first theological school and who was first to spiritualize Scripture (185-254) by giving hidden meanings to clear and definite words; Augustine too spiritualized Scripture saying that the prophecies of Revelation applied to contemporary events and not to some future period called “the end times;” his view is called “the historic view” and it gave rise to “Amillennialism.”

Augustine saw the prophecies being fulfilled in the Church; the Tribulation was the struggle of the Church against the Roman Empire; the seven years of Tribulation was not to be seen as a literal seven years, rather it meant the complete period of time known only to God as to how long the Tribulation would last, but subsequently revealed in history as the time from the establishment of the Church at Pentecost to the conversion of Constantine in 312.
The beast or Antichrist was the Roman Empire; the false prophet was the Roman council entrusted with the enforcement of Caesar or Emperor worship; the conversion of Constantine to Christianity was the Lord’s triumph over the Antichrist; with that triumph the Millennium had begun, with Jesus reigning over the world through the Church for a thousand years; at first, it was seen as a literal thousand years as many expected His return in 1000 AD; when that did not happen the 1,000 years was said to be a definite figure for an indefinite period of time; Revelation closes with the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven; this was interpreted as a symbol of the Church’s governing glory.

Twelve hundred years later the reformers turned the tables on the Catholic Church and saw the prophecies of Revelation applied to the Catholic Church and what they viewed as its apostasy; they saw Revelation as the reformers struggle against the growing apostasy and persecution by the Catholic Church against true believers; the Antichrist was the papacy; the false prophet was the Church’s instrument of enforcement—as in the Inquisition; this was the position of reformers who used Revelation to bash the Catholic Church.

The historical view has many different interpretations, but one thing that characterizes them all is a belief that most of Revelation has been fulfilled in history—either in the conflict between the Church and the Roman Empire, or the reformers and the Catholic Church, or the Church and the world,

*The Allegorical View...* This view takes much of the teachings of Augustine by spiritualizing the book and sees Revelation as an allegory which reveals the struggle of the believer and the Church against the evil in the world enforced by Satan; they deny a literal millennial kingdom which Jesus will administer when He returns to earth; this view is another form of Amillennialism.

It claims that Christ has been reigning over the earth since His ascension and that His reign is spiritual and not physical; the Millennium is the Church age; the Tribulation coincides with the Millennium in that it represents the attack on true believers and their need to remain faithful even in difficult times; in the end, the Church is victorious when Christ comes for the Church and takes her to heaven.

Allegorists have also replaced Israel with the Church and say that Israel as a nation has nothing to do with Bible prophecy; this has led to a pro-Palestinian position with an aggressive anti-Semitic policy; this view is most prominently held by liberal mainstream Protestantism today.
The Preterist View... The preterist view was developed in response to the historicist view of the reformers and their attack on the Catholic Church; the word preterist means “past tense;” this view holds that most all, if not all of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century.

This view was developed in the 17th century by a Jesuit priest named Luis de Alcazar (1514-1613); he was a mild preterist; his purpose was to defend the Catholic Church against the reformers who taught that Revelation was an attack against the apostasy of the Church; rather Alcazar taught that Revelation is a prophecy about the struggles of the Catholic Church through the years; chapters 4-11 was the Church’s fight against Judaism, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD; chapters 12-19 were viewed as the Church’s struggle against paganism, ending with the fall of Rome in 476; chapters 20-22 were interpreted as a symbolic description of papal Rome ruling over the earth; Alazar limited the book of Revelation to the first 500 years of Church history.

A more radical view of preterism developed in the latter part of the 20th century and today is one of the most widely held views of Revelation; it sees most all of Revelation fulfilled in 70 AD with the destruction of Jerusalem, with the exception of the resurrection of believers and the second coming of Christ; it assigns the tribulation to the fall of Israel, the great apostasy of the first century Church, and “the last days” to the period of time between the ascension of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD; the beast is a symbol of Nero in particular and the Roman Empire in general; the false prophet is associated with the leadership of apostate Israel.

A more extreme form of preterism is called “consistent preterists;” it takes the position that all end time prophecy, including the second coming of Christ occurred when Jerusalem was destroyed and Judaism was obliterated with the destruction of the temple and the sacrificial system ended; they do not look forward to any future resurrection or another coming of Jesus Christ; when one dies they either go to heaven or hell.

The Idealistic View... What we call the idealistic view was developed by William Mulligan in 1889; this view advocates that Revelation is a type of adult “Alice in Wonderland” story containing vivid words and symbols that have no specific historical meaning; it is God’s fairy tale to get across the battle between good and evil and that in the end good triumphs over evil; it’s Christ over Satan; it’s the vindication of the martyrs over their persecutors; it’s the sovereignty of God over all who oppose Him.
The Futurist View... This view says that all of Revelation from chapter 4 to the end of the book is future even to our day; this view was held by the early church fathers, and we know this because it is the only view expressed in their writings in the first two centuries after Christ; Papias (c 130), who served as bishop of Hieropolis, Phrygia argued that the Millennium would be a future golden age on earth; other church fathers like Irenaeus (130-202), Tertullian (160-240) and Lactantius (250-330) endorsed the future interpretation; Justin Martyr (100-165) the foremost defender of the faith in the second century, indicated there were other viewpoints, but that the futuristic view was the predominant and orthodox one; he wrote: “I and others, who are right minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declared.”

The futurist view was set aside by the Roman Catholic Church in 431 at the Council of Ephesus when it endorsed the work of Augustine in his book The City of God; this book is a battle between good and evil with good as the ultimate victor; the Catholic Church gives an allegorical approach to Revelation; there is no rapture, no return of Christ to earth, no Millennial reign, yet in the end Christ and His Church are victorious.

The Divisions Within Pre-Millennialism

Historic Premillennialism View... This is the oldest systematic view of endtime events that existed during the first 300 years of the Church; with few exceptions all early church fathers who expressed themselves were premillennial until 400 AD; Justin Martyr went so far as to call anyone who wasn’t “heretical;” one of the distinctive features is that it places the rapture of the Church at the end of the Tribulation; at the end of that period Christ will appear and the Church will be caught up to meet Him in the sky at which time they will immediately be glorified and then immediately return to earth to reign with Christ for 1,000 years; this view was undoubtedly held by the church fathers because of the persecution of the Church under Rome; Nero was even seen by some as the Antichrist and Emperor worship as the false prophet.

The Postmillennialism View ... This end time view came long after the Reformation in the mid-seventeenth century; it was developed by a Unitarian pastor, Daniel Whitby; it is called postmillennialism because it envisioned the return of Christ after a literal 1000 year reign of the Church on earth; this view
said that the Church Age will evolve into the Golden Age during which time the Church will rule the earth; this view almost died out with the outbreak of World War 1; however it is making a comeback under the name Dominion Theology; that is, Christ will not return until the Church conquers the world

*The Partial Rapture view...* This view says that when Christ returns He comes only for the “spiritual Christians”—those who live their lives as if Christ could come at any moment; in contrast, “carnal believers” will be left behind to go through the Tribulation which will serve as a “refining” time for their carnality; a “carnal believer” is one who professes faith but bears no fruit; these carnal believers will be saved at the end of the Tribulation, but most likely suffer martyrdom during the Tribulation (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-4).

*Mid-Tribulation View...* This view maintains the Church will go through the first half of the Tribulation and the scene of the two witnesses ascending into heaven is a symbol of the Church being raptured; the time of wrath is avoided by the Church because that refers to the second half of the Tribulation.

*Post-Tribulation View...* This view says the Church must go through the Tribulation because that was the viewpoint of the church fathers; if they suffered martyrdom for Christ why should today’s Church escape it?

*The Pre-Tribulation View...* This is the view that Christ’s coming for His Church is imminent and will occur prior to the Tribulation; it envisions two future comings of Jesus, one *for* His Church and one *with* His Church; Christ comes the first time to rescue the Church from the Tribulation; He comes a second time with the Church to defeat His enemy and to establish His Millennial kingdom; this view was developed in the 1800s by a group in England known as the Plymouth Brethren; those who criticize this view say it is “too new to be true;” yet the Bible does teach “progressive illumination” (Daniel 12:4; Jeremiah 30:24); the Bible is better understood as the time nears for its fulfillment.

### The Delights of Studying Revelation

In spite of all its gruesome imagery, natural disasters and wars, the book of Revelation is the only book in the Bible that promises a blessing to those who read and hear it; there are seven blessings or beatitudes in the book:

1. Blessed is he who reads and hears the words of this prophecy (1:3).
2. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord that they may rest from their labors and their works follow them (14:13).
3. Blessed are those who keep watch and who keep their garments clean for they will be ready when the Lord comes as a thief in the night (16:15).
4. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:9).
5. Blessed are those who are holy and take part in the first resurrection for they shall be priests of God and shall reign with Him a thousand years (20:6).
6. Blessed are those who keep the words of this prophecy (22:7).
7. Blessed are those with clean robes that they may have a right to the tree of life and enter by the gates to the New Jerusalem (22:14).

With our next lesson we will begin our study of this book so come and expect to be blessed. Amen!