

THE BOOK OF REVELATION
Overview Notes – Handout #1
Immanuel Lutheran Church, 2022

1. The Learning Objectives of our sessions:

1. Learn more about Revelation.
2. Learn more about studying the Bible – exegetical, hermeneutical, application (“5 Step Journey”).
3. We want to take this time seriously, and let the Holy Spirit teach us and grow us closer to the Lord, each other as well as develop a deeper hunger for Word of God.
4. Important – there will be NO checking brain at the door – NO question or comment off limits – we will NOT embarrass you or harass you. Our goal is to continue to build a Biblically functioning community.
5. We will use a “Communal hermeneutic.”
6. Our overall objective is for all of us to know the BIG story of Revelation. There is NO reason for you to be intimidated by Revelation.
7. Let’s get to know the historical setting of the book, its purpose, its message, the application of that message to our lives, so that we can become a “proclaimer” of that message.
8. Note – no two scholars *completely* agree on interpretation of Revelation. HOW you view Revelation doesn’t affect your salvation – it can, though, be a story that kindles fear and confusion in you OR hope, encouragement as you bank on promises of God.
9. Abbreviations used in handouts – OT (Old Testament), NT (New Testament), HS (Holy Spirit).

2. In terms of Revelation - it is important to point out:

- a) 2 Tim. 3:16-17 – all scripture is intended for growth, that means Revelation.
- b) Revelation is in the Bible it is part of the “whole counsel of God.”
- c) The problem with lectionary/periscope system is that large swaths of the Bible are left out in terms of public reading. Public reading may be the only way that some people get exposed to the Bible and its teaching (and transformational power). That’s why we will tackle the entire book!
- d) See Revelation 1:3 – Revelation is one book of the Bible that actually carries a promise of blessing for those of you who read it.
- e) Reading Revelation sharpens our ability to study/apply text of the whole of scripture.
- f) Revelation has been the source of fascination and repugnance – examples.

3. Introductory remarks:

- a) In the Bible, there are numerous attempts at attempting to answer the pressing human question of why righteous/good people suffer.
- b) Other books in the Bible that have attempted to answer that question specifically include: Job, Habakkuk, and the Psalms (although others including the gospels and much of the New Testament as well as the Prophets do so as well).
- c) In the early years of the Christ-following movement, personal tragedy, trials, and discouragements were a reality in life (as they are now as well).
- d) How we feel about much of our lives today is echoed in the pages of Revelation – we have a commonality of experience with the original audience of the book. The themes of Revelation ring true in our time.
- e) Themes of the book – a call to courageous witness; bold declarations of the Jesus.
- f) Some suggest, and I concur, what opening verses say, that the book was written to be read aloud by one disciple to a gathered audience of disciples.

4. Some specifics about the book of Revelation:

- a) The author of the book is John the apostle. John (fisherman, son of Zebedee in the gospels) was a revered elder statesman of the faith who was the only living apostle at this point in Christian history. John is described in the gospel of John as the “Disciple who Jesus loved.”
- b) The time of the writing of the book – late first century A.D (most scholars believe between 90-100 A.D.).
- c) From a Roman perspective, this was the time of Nero and Domitian as emperors of the Empire. They were dedicated to the systematic destruction of the Christ movement.
- d) Like John’s other writings, Revelation is personal, situational, and experiential.
- e) The book of Revelation was written from the island of Patmos off the southern coast of Turkey. For a long time, it was suspected that Patmos in the first century was known for being a Roman prison camp (rock quarries). Even slaves of the empire didn’t want to go to the rock quarries...that meant certain death. This could explain the symbolic nature of the book. In recent years, archaeologists have explored the possibility that John was not imprisoned on Patmos but was exiled there. That he lived a relatively peaceful life but was under the watch and “thumb” of Roman imperial authority to keep him and his influence out of the mainstream of the empire.
- f) It is important when reading the book of Revelation to let the TEXT do the “preaching” and to let the Spirit of God do the “convincing.” In other words, lay down the baggage when coming into the book.
- g) One author talks about Revelation is this way – he compares it to a SYMPHONY with movements, chorales around central themes repeated in variations.
- h) The critical themes of the book include – Hope, Power and Freedom.
- i) The central figure of the book of Revelation is Jesus – the Lamb of God.
- j) The message of Revelation is most powerfully felt by those who have or are suffering the most.
- k) Question of application – what feelings of hopelessness have you ever dealt with in your life? What experiences “surfaced” or touched off that feeling? How did you deal with those feelings or experiences?
- l) Revelation’s canonical history is “messy.” Remember, there was no “closed canon” until fourth century. Accepting Revelation into the NT canon (27 books of the NT) apparently was disputed not because of its content but because of lack of use within local churches.

5. Uniqueness’s of the book of Revelation

- a) Jesus’ name is only mentioned 8 times in the entire book...compare that to 9 times in the book of Philemon.
- b) The book is a LETTER but also PROPHETIC and APOCALYPTIC. That is significant because it tells us the GENRE of biblical literature it is which is a key to interpretation of the text.
- c) It is important to keep in mind that we are NOT first century Jesus followers. This is important in that it will be difficult to understand ALL the imagery in the book. Just like art and music and literature, it is an expression of a person’s and people’s perspective AT A SPECIFIC TIME. We might not grab all the intended meaning because we are NOT them and we do not live during their time.
- d) In the book of Revelation, John is attempting to describe the indescribable. John is attempting to capture in earthly/finite terms “heavenly”/spiritual/infinite images and truths.
- e) The spiritual concept of MYSTERY is important here (1 Corinthians 13: 12). Understanding MYSTERY isn’t an “excuse”, it is a worldview/life stance (acceptance of the supernatural and infinite).
- f) Big Message – God is in control and God will have the “final say” on the ultimate issues of sin, death, eternal life, justice and life. We need to hear that God is in control because so often we feel just the opposite way. Revelation is a book of HOPE, POWER and FREEDOM!

6. Principles that will help you understand Revelation – they are not necessarily “rules” but good interpretive parameters...

- a) To understand Revelation – you must learn how to recognize the use of metaphor and symbols.
- b) In Revelation – there are primarily four kinds of images/symbols. Ask yourself when you see them, “What **DID** John mean when he used this? Does his original meaning **HELP US** in understanding its meaning for **TODAY** (our lives)?”

- 1 – Objects -
- 2 – Numbers -
- 3 – Cosmic Events -
- 4 – Creatures -

7. Factors that contribute to the structure of Revelation

1. Sequences of seven occur throughout the book: seven “sermons/oracles” to seven faith communities (ekkklesia) in Roman Asia, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. These lend a framework to the book’s order and story plot.
2. Increasing “theophanies” appear throughout Revelation. Theophanies are human/Divine encounters focused on a chosen visible means of Divine “revelation.” For example, what happened on Sinai in OT, signs of God’s presence, “lightning strikes, voices, thunder, earthquakes” many of which happen in Revelation after the series of sevens (bowls, seals, etc.).
3. Indications that the plot or storyline to the book is NOT linear but MUCH more complicated. That is key in understanding the book from an interpretive perspective (actually argues against the “time-table” approach to interpretation).
4. There are important scenes that “interrupt” the flow of the “progression of sevens” mentioned above.
5. There are in Revelation massive amounts of comparisons and contrasts. For example, God and Lamb; the Dragon and Beast; the call or question of which people are going to worship; Babylon and the New Jerusalem.

8. How did the book of Revelation come about?

1. John had VISIONS AND CONVERSATIONS with angels and God. This book is truly a REVELATION. The importance of the theological issue of Revelation: we know God through GOD’S REVELATION. God chooses to reveal Himself to the world which is an act of GRACE.
2. The language of the OT pervades Revelation.
3. INSPIRATION, the initiative of the HS (necessity of the text in people’s lives – God knew that) as well as the obedience of John as a disciple.

9. Interpretive analysis of the book of Revelation - The Three WORLDS of Revelation:

1. The World BEHIND the text – “author centered” reading of the text – answering the question, “what did the author mean to convey?”
2. The World WITHIN the text – “text centered” reading of the text – answering the question, “is there as story that the author is telling?”
3. The World IN FRONT of the text – “reader oriented” reading of the text – answering the question, “what do we bring to the reading of the text and its interpretation through our own lives, social and cultural locations, personal experience, theological traditions and spiritual (discipleship) values?”

10. The question of Genre:

Read the first FOUR verses of Revelation (1:1-4). John says that this book is an “APOKALYPSIS,” a “disclosure” of spiritual truths from divine origin (revelation). John also says in the opening paragraph that the content is presented as a “PROPHETIC UTTERANCE/PROPHECY” referring to the supernatural origin of the book (this is done when John refers to himself in the third person (“to his slave/bond-servant John). Finally, John communicates the fact that this book is written BY him to OTHERS utilizing a structure that would be similar to a “LETTER.” Let’s explore each:

1. Apocalyptic - All the events in the book of Revelation are a timeless expression of God's promises of hope, power and freedom to humanity in and through a relationship with God. The events in Revelation occurred in first century history and are also snapshots of some broader truths/realities of what will happen in human history as God brings it to fulfillment/completion in His Kingdom.
2. Letter – written to a specific audience. Letters in the New Testament are known for a specificity in structure (Sender, Recipient, Greetings, etc.). It is time and situation specific which gives rise to OUR need to be able to familiar with the political, ideological, and cultural landscape of the first century Roman world and Christian influence in that world.
3. Prophecy or Prophetic Word - What do we know about Biblical prophecy? The issues of FORTHtelling (divine perspective on current events/practices and a call to repentance/redemptive action) and FOREtelling (predictive). The book is about a “Revealing, Unveiling” – that is not primarily about a revealing of history or even upcoming events but rather about the revealing of Jesus in His resurrected glory.
 - a) “Preterist” – ALL events in the book of Revelation are primarily events that took place in the first century. Revelation is primarily a HISTORY book of the events happening in John's life and community.
 - b) “Historist” – All the events of the book of Revelation are events that have taken place IN HUMAN HISTORY – in other words, Revelation is a “snapshot” of the broader events that have already taken place over the centuries of human experience. Luther primarily took a “historicist” view of Revelation:

“The first and surest step toward finding its interpretation is to take from history the events and disasters that have come upon Christendom till now and hold them up alongside of these images, and so compare them very carefully. If, then, the two perfectly coincided and squared with one another, we could build on that as a sure, or at least an unobjectionable, interpretation.”
 - c) “Futurist” – All the events of the book of Revelation are TO COME...or WILL HAPPEN in the future. In this manner of interpretation, the book of Revelation is PREDICTIVE PROPHECY (telling us what will come). This view of predictive prophecy is the foundation of “dispensationalism” and the teaching of Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, and others regarding Revelation (the theological underpinnings to the *Left Behind* series of books).
 - d) Logical question – which interpretive “leaning” will we take?

11. The Setting of the Book of Revelation – Historical Context

The book of Revelation HAD a specific historical context – John refers to historical figures, institutions, activities, and systems throughout Revelation that suggest that these were the objective realities of the landscape as well as people's lives he addresses. John wants his readers to see these realities through a specific strategic LENS but he is also acknowledging that these realities exist and need to be interpreted.

John's audience faced an environment that is dominated by:

- Idolatrous religion (9:20-21)
- Emperor worship (13:4, 11-18)
- Economic practices that were formed around the needs of imperial Rome (“the great city set upon seven hills” that “has authority over the kings of the earth” – 17:9, 18)
- Pax Romana