

Revelation Session Two

Teaching Notes 2022

1. Let's get some introductory remarks out of the way:

- a) In the Bible, there are numerous attempts at attempting to answer the pressing human question of why righteous/good people suffer.

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).

- b) In the early years of the Christ-following movement, persecution, personal tragedy, trials, and discouragements were a reality in life (as they are now as well).

First century communities were filled with crime, filth, stench, crowds, confusion, high mortality rates, etc. history tells us.

- c) To say something extremely obvious but important – 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.
- “The Playing Field” has changed handout
 - The message of Revelation is most powerfully felt by those who have or are suffering the most.
 - 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?

- d) Themes:

Call to courageous witness,
Bold declarations of the Jesus,
Contributed to emerging Christian theology
Striking images and metaphors
God is going to address evil, suffering and injustice
Hope and Victory
Power and freedom in Christ
Vision – preferred future

- e) Some suggest, and I concur – what opening verses say – the book was written to be read aloud by one disciple to a gathered audience of disciples

2. Some specifics about the book of Revelation:

- a) The author of the book is John the apostle.

Revered elder statesman – only living apostle at this point in Christian history.
“Disciple who Jesus loved” – not bragging just stating obvious relationship (do you have that type of growing relationship with Jesus?)

- b) The time of the writing of the book – late first century A.D. (or, if you are academically “hip”, C.E.)

From a Roman perspective, this was the time of Nero and Domitian as emperors of the Empire. They were, in some way, dedicated to the systematic destruction of the Christ movement.

- c) Like John’s other writings, Revelation is personal, situational, and experiential.
- d) The book of Revelation was written from the island of Patmos off the southern coast of Turkey.

It 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.

3. 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) Read the first FOUR verses of Revelation (1:1-4).

John says that this book is an “apokalypsis,” as a “disclosure” of spiritual truths from divine origin (theology of 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.”

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.
- Scholars use the term, “apocalypse” to refer to texts that contain narratives of divine mysteries disclosed through “ecstatic” experiences...complexities of dreams, visions, symbols, objects, numbers
- Apocalyptic literature is highly vision-oriented, filled with conversations with supernatural beings, focus on what is going on in unseen realms of God as well as the cosmic forces (evil and good) that provide the spiritual backdrop to our experience in this world.
- Apocalyptic literature – speaks to people experiencing suffering

- This literature places the reader's lived experience within the context of a bigger picture of time and space that provides an interpretive framework for understanding reality.
- Not meant to be understood linearly – not chronological – exposes us to different realm of reality
- Difference between writing something in words or in music
- Text based – one thing at a time – linear
- Music – several things going on at same time (lyrics, but have movements, harmony, melodic themes...and emotion (West Side story – cry) – Revelation as symphony
- Apocalyptic – focus on God, divine action in the midst of persecution.
- Biblical material includes Daniel, Revelation as well as numerous non-canonical works such as 1 Enoch, 2 and 3 Baruch, 4 Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham, Apocalypse of Peter, and the Shepherd of Hermas.
- See the Bible Project's video on "How to read the Bible – Apocalyptic Literature." Handout on Apocalyptic literature.

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....as one author stated, "the mutual cognitive environment" shared by both author and audience.
- What do we know about NT letters?

3. PROPHECY OR PROPHETIC WORD:

- John's audience would have been familiar with Prophecy.
- What do we know about Biblical prophesy?
- The issues of FORTHtelling (divine perspective on current events/practices) 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.
- Prophetic – call of God, repentance and redemptive action/"conversion"
- There have been four views on the book of Revelation:
 - a) "Preterist" – ALL events in the book of Revelation are primarily events that took place in the first century. You can only interpret the book of Revelation if you understand it contextually...there is NO other interpretation – Revelation is primarily a HISTORY book.
 - 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) and all the events happen in real time (John sees these things happening from an eternal perspective – some happening before his eyes in real time, others he is getting a glimpse into the future).

This is the realm of the Dispensationalist – literal interpretation of futuristic prophetic scripture – pre/mid/post tribulation and millennialism – timetables and secret knowledge

- d) “Allegorical” – idealist – call to heroic living

- e) Dispensationalism handout on website – Pastor Ed wrote one brilliant and thorough ... see mine on Eschatology as a whole reviewing millennialism in much briefer terms – I also have included a handout written by Dr. Anthony Hoekema (onetime colleague of Ed’s at Calvin Seminary – Pastor/Systematic theologian)

- d) 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.

- e) In the book of Revelation, John is attempting to describe the indescribable...he is attempting to capture in earthly/finite terms “heavenly”/spiritual/infinite images and truths.
- f) The spiritual concept of MYSTERY is important here (1 Corinthians 13: 12) – understanding MYSTERY isn’t an “excuse”, it is a worldview/life stance.
- g) The importance of writing on scrolls of papyrus during this historical period also makes an impact on our overall understanding of the book...John was NO dummy...led and inspired by the Holy Spirit
- h) Big Message – God WILL have final say (Jesus has our past, present and future in His hands)...why Revelation is given to us – 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!

4. To understand Revelation – you must learn how to recognize the use of metaphor and symbols – don’t fall into the temptation to get hung up on all sorts of stuff and fail to get to the real picture. John is seeing eternal/infinite realities and attempting to put them into reality/finite language (e.g. how do you talk about “love?”).

- For example – John 10:9 Jesus says “I am the gate” – he doesn’t mean he’s literally a metal gate – rather his life/resurrection are a path to God

- a) In Revelation – there are primarily four kinds of images/symbols – you have to ask self when you see them “what did John mean when he used this?”

1 – Objects – scrolls, bowls, seals, clouds, doors, dragons, eagles, earthquakes, colors, keys...(e.g. 1:16) sword – is this a gross picture...is he saying when we Jesus there will be a blade between his lips? No...in John's day the sword was a means of exercising authority/power – Roman gladius. John's point - words have power

2 – Numbers – literal often symbolic – for example, 7 is a number of completion/perfection

- 12 - tribes/disciples, multiples, symbol of people of God
- 6 – imperfection – mark of the beast, that which is in opposition to Christ

3 – Cosmic Events – Global events

- e.g. Psalm 46:6 – talking about unrest – “the earth melts” – not obviously/literally melting – point is – rulers think that they are in control but they are not – God is
- We do the same thing – “that event shook my world”

4 – Creatures – a lot of different ones

- We do same thing – political cartoons – Revelation similar in some ways to political/editorial cartoons
- If you saw an elephant crying in a cartoon – what would that mean? What do you have to know? What would the cartoonist be assuming?
- John uses creatures in the same way – brilliant/creative communication – like unfolding drama – there is power in symbols

5. Structure of Revelation

1. Sequences of seven occur throughout the book – seven “sermons/oracles” to seven faith communities (ekklesia) in Roman Asia, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls – lend a framework to book – order and story plot
2. Increasing “theophanies” – 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, “lightening strikes, voices, thunder, earthquakes” many of which happen in Revelation after the series of sevens (bowls, seals, etc.).
3. Indications that the plot is NOT linear but MUCH more complicated and that is key in understanding the book from an interpretive perspective (actually argues against the “time-table” approach to interpretation) – we will see what some, myself included, see as key to book – HUGE visions of God and Lamb in multiple places throughout the book, no fewer than four visions of final judgment...much like a symphony...musical interpretation helpful
4. There are important scenes that “interrupt” the flow of the progression of sevens
5. Massive amounts of comparisons and contrasts – God and Lamb – Dragon and Beast; call or question of which you are going to worship – Babylon vs. New Jerusalem

6. The Contents of the Book broken down section by section – on website – handout #2

Chapter One - setting the stage

Verse 3 - Urgency of the message of Revelation. When people are under fire in their lives, they are desperate for a message. Around every bend in the story of Revelation, people are challenged to make a decision: "Are you on the side of Jesus or the beast?" (decisional character of the literature of the bible, especially the New Testament – Luke 1:1-4, John 20:30)

Verses 4-6 - The centrality of Jesus is all of life

Verses 9 and following - John's vision of the resurrected Jesus...quite different from the gospels view of Jesus. These are some characteristics of the “post-resurrected/ascended Jesus” (note how this is different from the gospels description of Jesus – except possibly for the Transfiguration story in Mark 9): ·

See rest of the summary on website – look for that too!