

Introduction:

1. The book of Revelation is a polarizing section of Scripture.
 - a. It seems half the people who have a Bible ONLY want to talk about Revelation, and the other half want to avoid it completely!
 - b. Some are certain that they know exactly what it means, and others are certain that no one can know what it means.
 - c. With the many interpretations that are out there, is it possible to know any of the following?
 - i. What the main idea of the book is?
 - ii. Which interpretations cannot be right?
 - iii. How the original readers would have understood it (because, if anyone understood it, it was the original readers)?
2. Part of the reason that the book of Revelation is neglected in the Lord's church is that the language is so different from what we're used to reading in the rest of the New Testament.
 - a. Beasts rising up from the sea, a dragon that waits to murder a newborn baby boy, locusts rising up out of a bottomless pit, a man on a white horse with a blood-splattered garment who is using his sword against his enemies.
 - b. This language is very different from what we are used to reading in the other New Testament books and their focus on love, faith, obedience, forgiveness.
3. Another part of the reason is that so many nuts have gone out and made bold claims about "the events in the book of Revelation are being fulfilled right now!"
 - a. Adolph Hitler was said to be one of the beasts in Revelation 13.
 - b. Saddam Hussein was said to be one of the beasts in Revelation 13.
 - c. Barack Obama is said by some to be one of the beasts in Revelation 13.
 - d. With each passing generation, people are absolutely sure that they—and they alone—understand the meaning of the book because of the events in their time; and with every passing generation, they are proven wrong.
4. With all this confusion, some people view it as presumptuous for anyone to claim "I know what the book of Revelation is talking about."
 - a. Let me state from the outset, that we can know—without any doubt—certain things about Revelation.
 - b. But in order to do this, and in order to weed through all the junk and misinformation out there, we need to understand some things.
5. This is the first in a series of lessons dealing with the book of Revelation.
 - a. Today, we will be looking at the main ways that people interpret the book.
 - b. We will also be looking at specific passages in Revelation that will let us know the proper way to interpret the book.
 - c. And hopefully, by the end of the lesson, we will all be a little less leery of delving into this strange and wonderful book.

- I. Interpretation Method #1: The Futurist Method
 - a. As the name should surely suggest, the Futurist Method of interpreting the book of Revelation is interpreting most (if not all) of the book as something that has still not yet happened.
 - i. Some of them believe none of the book of Revelation has happened, while others believe that the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 were written to actual first-century churches, but that the rest of it is all future.
 - ii. To see just how much this method has pervaded our modern thinking, let's just mention a few things:
 - iii. The Battle of Armageddon.
 1. Armageddon, as the phrase is generally used, denotes the absolute end of something.
 2. Usually, its viewed as a battle at the end of time.
 - iv. The Millennium, or the thousand-year reign.
 1. Have you noticed that people tend to identify themselves religiously by their interpretation of one verse in Revelation?
 - a. Pre-millennialists, post-millennialists, and a-millennialists?
 2. This idea is so ingrained in people's heads that if one of them brings up the topic, and you say "there isn't going to be a thousand-year reign," they start to look like their head is going to explode trying to comprehend the words you just said.
 - b. The Problems in taking this method of interpretation.
 - i. First and foremost, in order to take this interpretation, you have to ignore the first and last chapters of the book.
 1. Revelation 1:1 – The Revelation of Jesus Christ...to show His servants things **which must shortly come to pass**.
 2. Revelation 1:3 – Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein, **for the time is at hand**.
 3. Revelation 22:6 - ...These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to show unto His servants the things **which must shortly be done**.
 4. Revelation 22:10 - ...Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for **the time is at hand**.
 5. All of these statements are divinely-given evidence that the things written in Revelation were things which would take place shortly after they were written.
 - a. How shortly? We'll get into that in another lesson, but keep in mind that when Jesus said "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (Matthew 4:17), the kingdom was a mere 3 ½ years away (Acts 2).

- b. The same word translated "shortly" (tachos in Greek) is translated "quickly" in Acts 22:18 (READ).
 - i. After reading that verse, what would you think is meant by that word? Hundreds of years? Or something that is imminent?
- ii. Also, taking the "everything in the book is still yet future" view makes the book completely worthless when John wrote it and gives a command that is impossible to follow.
 - 1. What do I mean by that?
 - 2. The book was written to Christians in the first century, and if the book only deals with things that are (at minimum) 1916 years away, what good does that do for them?
 - 3. A blessing is pronounced on the ones who "keep those things which are written therein" (1:3).
 - a. If none of it has happened yet, then it is impossible for anyone to be blessed until the fulfillment of the events described.
 - b. The futurist view basically has John saying, "Things are about to happen...well, around 2,000 years or so from now maybe...and if you read this book and keep the things written in it, you will be blessed....except you can't keep these things because you'll be dead and forgotten long before any of these things take place.
- iii. Taking this view makes our all-knowing God out to be a god of confusion.
 - 1. With each passing generation, the details in Revelation are given new applications to different countries and leaders, and with each generation, the applications are proven false over and over again.
- iv. Taking this view ignores that it was written to give instructions to real churches in the real first century.
 - 1. Jesus, in Revelation 2-3, spoke to real congregations about their real trials and troubles that they were THEN enduring.
 - 2. Those who believe the entire book is set in the far future (from John's perspective) have to ignore that these were real problems that real churches were dealing with AT THE TIME IT WAS WRITTEN.
- c. Are there commendable points to the futurist position?
 - i. This view does attempt to make the book of Revelation relevant to each generation, but in doing so it interprets it as irrelevant to all preceding generations.
 - ii. This view does encourage people to look for God's workings in the affairs of mankind today.
 - iii. It doesn't matter how many good points it may have, though; it contradicts Scripture, thus it cannot be correct.
- d. This is the view taken by the majority of denominationalists including Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Catholics, etc...

- i. They do not all interpret it the same way, but the majority of each of these groups place the entirety of the book in the far future from when it was written.
- ii. Baptists and Pentecostals read Revelation with the idea of a thousand-year reign of Christ, a rapture, tribulation for seven years, etc...
- iii. But Catholics, who also view it as far future, don't hold to any of those things.
- iv. This is just to say that there are many different "flavors" to the futurist method, all of which contradict the clear statement that the things were "shortly come to pass."

II. Interpretation Method #2: The Historical Method.

- a. This method of interpreting the book of Revelation became very popular during the Reformation movement and the time thereafter.
 - i. Basically stated, this view states that the book of Revelation gives an overview prophecy of the entire future of the church from the first century through the final judgment.
 - ii. This view makes the claim that Revelation foretells the apostasy of the Catholic Church, the rise of Islam, the split of the Greek and Roman churches, the attacks of the Huns, the Reformation Movement (some believing Martin Luther is under consideration in part), and some within the church who hold this view also believe that the Restoration movement is foretold.
 1. One interpretation using this method states that the woman in Revelation 12 who is taken into the wilderness by God for 1260 days is the church, who will remain hidden from sight for 1260 years until Alexander Campbell preached his first sermon in America.
 2. The Gospel Advocate commentary on Revelation takes this position.
- b. What are the problems of this interpretation?
 - i. First off, it assumes that God would craft an entire book which focuses mostly on a group of people who aren't really the church, and the troubles that it would go through.
 1. Do you believe that God would pen a book TO Christians, describing in advance, a 1500+ year history of a denomination?
 - ii. Secondly, the overwhelming majority of the book is assigned to a time far distant to John's original audience.
 1. This makes the book have very little meaning to the original audience.
 2. It also, therefore, has a hard time dealing with the phrase "shortly come to pass."
 - iii. Thirdly, it brings no comfort to Christians who were then undergoing persecution.
 1. "You're undergoing persecution now, but don't worry, eventually the church is going to go into apostasy."
 2. Forgive me if I don't think the Christians in the first century would find that comforting at all.

- iv. Fourthly, most commentators who take this view have historical events lined up to match with almost the entire book.
 - 1. You may say, how is that a problem?
 - 2. If their theories are all correct, and they've lined up Revelation with historical events, then there's nothing left to happen except for the final judgment.
 - 3. Basically, they've got pretty much all of Revelation spoken for, and there's not any space left for any future events on earth.
 - 4. So, according to this general interpretation, there is nothing else scheduled to happen in the church, so the final judgment will be here any day now.
 - 5. What happens if there is another thousand years of life here on this earth?
 - a. There's nothing in their method to account for any more time of the church here on earth, without backtracking and changing their applications.
 - c. Are there good points to this method?
 - i. This view encourages people to live in expectation of the final coming of Jesus, but that's something they should be doing anyway.
- III. Interpretation Method #3: The "Spiritual Method"
- a. This view, taken by a growing number of people, basically states that there are no actual events under consideration in Revelation, but instead that it is a series of symbolic visions designed to show the continual battle between good and evil, and that ultimately Christ wins.
 - i. There are those within the church who have begun to take this view and some have written commentaries on the book with this emphasis in mind.
 - ii. This view basically says there are no future events described, nor are there any past events described; just spiritual principles.
 - b. What are the problems with this method?
 - i. The inspired word says that the book of Revelation deals with actual events (1:1).
 - 1. This alone is enough reason to reject this interpretation.
 - ii. The inspired word says that it deals with actual people (17:10).
 - 1. Five kings have fallen, one is (presently).
 - iii. The inspired word says that it (at least in part) deals with a specific city (11:8).
 - 1. The city wherein our Lord was crucified.
 - iv. The proponents of this view say, "the battle between good and evil was about to come in full force, and that's why he says 'must shortly come to pass'."
 - 1. The problem with this is that the battle between good and evil has been going full-force since the beginning, throughout the Old Testament, and during the time of Christ on earth, and during the ministry of the apostles.

- c. Are there good points to this method?
 - i. It does seek to make the book of Revelation relevant to every generation, because the battle between good and evil continues in each generation.
 - ii. But good intentions do not make up for ignoring clear statements from the book.
 - d. Many take a hybrid view of Revelation.
 - i. The Catholic Church, in general, spiritualizes much of the book, but places some of it in the far future at the Second Coming of Christ.
 - ii. Some in the church basically agree with this view, making chapters 4-20 represent spiritual warfare, and chapters 20-21 the end of time.
- IV. Interpretation Method #4: The Preterist Method.
- a. This method, basically stated, is that the book of Revelation was written to comfort Christians during a time of persecution, to let them know that God is in control and that the persecutors would be dealt with.
 - i. More specifically, this method holds that the events described in Revelation have been fulfilled, at the very latest, during the days of the Roman Empire.
 - 1. Some believe it was fulfilled in the overthrow of the Roman Empire (AD 487).
 - 2. Others believe it was fulfilled in the overthrow of Jerusalem and Judaism (AD 70).
 - 3. We will deal with these differences in another lesson.
 - ii. This is the most common view of Revelation among preachers, teachers, and commentators in the Lord's church.
 - 1. However, most take a hybrid view, assigning some of it to the past, and some of it to the future.
 - b. What are oppositions to this view?
 - i. It is said that if it was written about things that have now been fulfilled, that the book is of no value today.
 - 1. If this is true, then the Old Testament has no value for us today either, since it was written about things which have now been fulfilled.
 - 2. But we can look at the Old Testament and see things that God did, and then learn from them, and make application to our own day and situation.
 - 3. This argument is not valid.
 - ii. It is said that chapter 21 is all about heaven after the second coming and the final judgment, so it can't all be in the past.
 - 1. This is something we will look at closer when we get to that point in our study.
 - 2. But if we look at the chapter, we can see that it is NOT in heaven, for this holy city came OUT OF heaven (Revelation 21:2, 10).
 - 3. We can also see that this New Jerusalem was presently with men (literally "with the humans") (21:3).

- iii. It is said that taking this view means you deny the second coming of Christ and a final judgment, and that you claim we are presently living in heaven.
 - 1. The final judgment is clearly described in other places (Matthew 25, for example).
 - 2. Jesus told the apostles that He was going away to prepare a place. This demands that heaven cannot be on earth.
 - 3. This argument basically takes the views of some wacky people and applies it to everyone, which is dishonest.
 - a. It's the same thing as someone saying "all church of Christ-ers believe you'll go to hell if you use more than one cup."
- c. What are the good points of this view?
 - i. It agrees with the inspired statements that the book contains things which must shortly come to pass.
 - ii. It makes the book have meaning and comfort to the people to whom it was written.
 - iii. It lays down principles that we can read and apply to our own lives (Stick with Jesus and you will win, God is in control, etc...), thus it DOES have application to each generation of Christians.
- d. This final view is the one which we will take as we go through our study of Revelation (though the others will occasionally be referenced).

Conclusion:

- 1. Now you may wonder, "exactly how does this help me?"
 - a. First, this introduction to the methods of interpreting Revelation is to help you understand where other people are coming from.
 - b. Secondly, it is to help you get a better understanding of the book so that it isn't so mysterious (many people avoid the book thinking it cannot be understood).
 - c. It also should help to know which approaches CANNOT be true (and when you eliminate those which cannot be true, you are better able to discover the true interpretation).
- 2. Do people misinterpret the Bible?
 - a. Absolutely, and not just in Revelation.
 - b. But the Bible CAN be understood!
- 3. The Bible says that if you want to be saved, you have to:
 - a. Hear, believe (Romans 10:17).
 - b. Repent (Acts 2:38), confess (Romans 10:10), and be baptized (Acts 2:38).
 - c. Then you must stay faithful to the one who saved you (Revelation 2:10).