

HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH THE BOOK OF REVELATION?

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him in order to show his servants the things that must soon occur. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testifies to everything he saw—[that is,] the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and [blessed are] those who heed it, because the [appointed] time is near. (Rev. 1:1-3)

A note on the Scripture text that accompanies each individual message: The *American Standard Version* and the *New International Version*, along with the original Greek and Hebrew, have been used in an effort to achieve the greatest degree of accuracy and clarity. Where words or phrases have been added to the original text in an effort to better express its meaning, those words or phrases have usually been indicated by means of [brackets.]

Introduction

At the very end of the Bible there stands a great “mansion” known as the Book of Revelation.

Some Christians have not dared to approach this great and awesome “mansion,” they have stayed away from it. Sometimes they have entertained misgivings about this final book of Scripture, even wondering if it belongs in the Bible at all, it being so unique when compared to the other books of the New Testament. They have been overwhelmed by the intricate passageways and the strange and imposing pictures that hang on the walls, fearing that they would lose their way and, being intimidated by the scenes portrayed in the pictures, they have avoided this majestic “mansion” of divine revelation.

Other Christians have gone to the opposite extreme. They have entered this great mansion of revelation with little fear or trepidation; they have shown little regard for the sacredness of these grounds and the fact that they are part of Holy Scripture. They have exhibited a fascination, even a pre-occupation, with the gallery of exotic pictures, but they have not allowed this book of divine revelation to have a profound and practical impact on their lives.

So, as we undertake a study of this last book of Scripture, we must begin by addressing the question, ‘How are we to approach the Book of Revelation?’ When we come to the Book of Revelation we are not left to our own devices, the Lord has graciously given His counsel to guide us—that counsel is contained in the opening verses of the book. Because this final book of Scripture is such a mysterious book, it is important for us to heed our Lord’s counsel as to how we are to approach it.

I. We Must Appreciate that Revelation is a Sacred Book

We must approach this book with great reverence, recognizing that it is “*the revelation of Jesus Christ.*” It is not only a revelation that comes from Christ to us;

it is a revelation that God the Father has given to Christ His beloved Son. In a very unique sense, this book belongs to Jesus Christ: the Gospels are about Christ's life; the Acts are performed by Christ working with and through His apostles; the Epistles are written to explain Christ's work; but the Revelation is given to Christ—this book is *"the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him"* (1:1.)

The Revelation is given to Christ by God the Father because Christ is worthy, as is strongly emphasized within the book itself:

And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" ... ⁴I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or [even] look at it. ⁵Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. Look! The Lion who is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, he has overcome, and [he is able] to open the scroll and break the seals."... ⁹And they sing a new song, saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll and break the seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Rev. 5:2,4-5,9)

On one occasion the LORD spoke these words to Abraham:

And Jehovah said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do; ¹⁸seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed by him? ¹⁹The reason I have known [Abraham] [i.e.; the reason the LORD entered into covenant with Abraham] is so that he may instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of Jehovah—to do righteousness and justice; so that Jehovah may bestow upon Abraham that which he has promised concerning him. (Gen. 18:17-19)

Because Abraham was God's intimate friend with whom He had made His covenant, the LORD would now reveal to Abraham what He was about to do in the earth.

In the ultimate sense, Jesus is God's friend and the true heir to God's covenant; and it is to Him that God the Father has revealed all that He is about to do; as Jesus Himself testifies, *"the Father loves the Son and [therefore] shows him everything that he is doing. Indeed, greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel"* (Jn. 5:20.)

Not only has God the Father given this revelation to Jesus Christ personally, He has also given it to Him to share with His people: *"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him [in order] to show his servants the things that must soon occur"* (1:1a.) Note: The Greek phrase, ἐν ταχέϊ, may be better translated, "swiftly," rather than "soon." Such being the case, the meaning of this passage is that the Book of Revelation is revealing events that will take place swiftly in their appointed time, rather than soon in the chronological sense of the term. Here is

another example of the great love God the Father has for His children in Christ: the Father has given the revelation to Jesus Christ so that He in turn may share it with His church.

When we approach the Book of Revelation, we must appreciate that it is a sacred book of Scripture—a revelation of God to Christ and intended for us.

II. We Must Understand that Revelation is a Symbolic Book

Having received the revelation, Jesus makes it known by sending his angel to his servant John to communicate it to the church (1:1b.) The Lord Jesus caused this revelation to be communicated to the church by means of signs or symbols. Note, by way of example, Revelation 1:19-20,

Now then, write the things you saw, the things that are now happening, and the things that will happen [in the future]. ²⁰[With regard to] the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lamp stands: The seven stars represent the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands represent the seven churches. (Rev. 1:19-20)

John is to write, or make a written record of, the things that he saw (1:19.) Jesus interprets for John the meaning of the things he saw (1:20.) Note: Most of the symbols found in the Book of Revelation are borrowed from other parts of Scripture; those symbols that are unique to Revelation are interpreted by Christ (as in 1:20) or by His angel (as in 13:18.) The method of studying Revelation needs to follow this two-fold guideline: 1) the biblical symbols that are used in a given passage of the Revelation must be identified; then 2) those symbols must be interpreted in the light of their use in the other parts of Scripture.

Why did the Lord Jesus communicate the Revelation to the church by means of symbols? (Note: This is a teaching technique similar to the use of parables.) Symbols make the Revelation vivid and fascinating, so as to stir up contemplation and invite study—the use of symbols provokes thoughtful contemplation and prayerful study. At the same time, the use of symbols shrouds the Revelation in mystery. The use of symbols serves to conceal the message from those who lack a spiritual interest in it—it is intended for Christ’s servants, not for the world at large. Consider what the Lord says with regard to His use of parables: *“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand”* (Lk. 8:10.) Furthermore, the use of symbols also serves to conceal the full meaning of the message until the time appointed for its fulfillment. This method of teaching is in keeping with the equally mysterious revelation made to Daniel, to whom was given the following instructions: *“But you, Daniel, preserve the words and seal the book, safeguarding it until the time of the end. Many will diligently study it, and the understanding of these things will increase”* (Dan. 12:4.) Daniel was instructed to preserve the

revelation he has received, with the assurance that as the time of its fulfillment approached the understanding of its meaning would increase. As Christians, we are exhorted to give our attention to the Revelation and endeavor to understand it, because, however mysterious, it contains an essential message for the church.

When we approach the Book of Revelation, we must appreciate that it is a symbolic book—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we must look to the rest of Scripture to aid us in the interpretation of its symbols.

III. We Must Recognize that Revelation is a Book to be Taken Seriously

We must approach the Revelation with receptive minds and obedient hearts. The very fact that it is the Word of God means that it has a moral and spiritual quality. The study of Revelation must not be approached with a detached curiosity, as one would approach a jigsaw puzzle or a Chinese puzzle. This book of Scripture must be approached in the same way we must approach the rest of Scripture, with reverence for its sacredness and responsiveness to its message addressed to us. This is vitally important to bear in mind because the Revelation is dealing with things that must take place and shall take place soon, or, perhaps more accurately, things that shall occur “*swiftly*” (ἐν ταχει) —i.e.; events that will occur swiftly in their appointed time without further announcement, catching the unprepared offguard and at a total loss to cope with these great cataclysmic events. Furthermore, since the Revelation is a word of prophecy (1:3,) its purpose is to exhort, to comfort, and to call us to be prepared for the coming of God’s kingdom.

Verse 3 indicates that a word of blessing is pronounced upon the one who reads and upon all who heed (hear and obey) this revelation from Christ to His church. Note that our Lord Jesus attaches to the Revelation the same type of exhortation that He attached to His Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. ²⁶But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matt. 7:24-27)

As we study the Revelation, one of the great themes it presents to us and to which we must be sensitive, is the sovereignty of God. One of the great overarching messages of the Revelation is the fact that the Lord God is in control and that He is the Ruler over all things. The LORD is identified as “*the Almighty*” (1:8.) He is seen seated upon the throne (4:2.) All the events that take place upon the earth are under His complete control and serve His sovereign

purpose. Even when the Revelation speaks about the activities of the devil and the beast, the phrase, "*he was granted permission*[to do such and such,]" is used to indicate that their activity is carried out by the sovereign permission of the LORD (cp. Revelation 13:5b,7.) With reference to the demonic beast revealed in Revelation 13, we are informed, "*[The beast] ... was granted permission to rule for forty two months ... ⁷He was granted permission to wage war against the saints, and to overcome them; furthermore, he was granted authority over every tribe and people and language and nation*" (Rev.13:5b, 7.) Even when the devil proceeds to establish the anti-Christ kingdom upon the earth (Rev. 12-13,) we are made to see the Lord Jesus standing sovereignly above all—and His people with Him: "*Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him were one hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads*" (Rev. 14:1.)

This is one of the central themes and purposes of the Revelation: to proclaim that the LORD is God, the sovereign God—and this message is intended for the comfort and assurance of God's people. The message of the Revelation is that there are bad days ahead before the final end arrives: hard times for the world, and for the church of Jesus Christ; but the Lord says, "Fear not, be assured that your God reigns, and none of Christ's sheep shall perish."

Another great theme the Revelation presents to us is the revelation of the very heart of God. If there can be such a thing as a tension in the heart and mind of the Almighty it is not a tension between His mercy and His holiness, that has been divinely resolved at Calvary, note Romans 3:25-26, "*God presented [Jesus Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement ... ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be [both] just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*" If there is a "tension" in the mind and heart of God, it is the tension between His love for His people and His long-suffering over the world, as the Apostle Peter points out: "*The LORD is not negligent with regard to the promise, as some consider negligence; on the contrary, he is exhibiting great patience toward you. He does not desire anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance*" (2 Pet. 3:9.)

If we might phrase it like this, in the Revelation you find God "torn" between His desire for the final redemption of His people and His desire for the repentance of the world. The LORD hears the cry of His people, as we long for the consummation of our redemption:

When [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw beneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain on account of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Master, [you who are] holy and true, will you refrain from judging those who dwell on the earth and avenging our blood?" (Rev. 6:9-10)

It is God's desire to bring history to its ultimate conclusion with the coming of His eternal kingdom; yet, for Him to do so means the eternal damnation of the unrepentant world, and so it is that the LORD restrains the final coming of His kingdom and calls upon His people to wait: *"Each one of them was given a white robe, and they were told to rest for a little while longer, until their fellow servants and brothers, who were destined to be killed just as they had been, shall have finished their course"* (Rev. 6:11.) The LORD calls upon His people to wait *"for a little while longer,"* as He brings the world through cycles of ever-increasing temporal judgments as a warning of that inevitable day of final judgment and as a call to repentance (the first cycle: The Seven Seals, Rev. 6:1-8:2; the second cycle: The Seven Trumpets, Rev. 8:2-11:19; the third cycle: The Seven Bowls of Wrath, Rev. 16:1-21.)

The message of the Book of Revelation addressed to the church of Christ may be summarized in these words: Although there will be hard times for the people of God, be assured that the LORD is in control, and His kingdom will surely and finally come; therefore, take courage, take comfort, and be prepared.

When we approach the Book of Revelation, we must appreciate that it is to be taken seriously.

Conclusion

That great "spiritual mansion," situated at the close of the Scriptures, the Book of Revelation, can be a very intimidating edifice: mysterious and awesome. Indeed, when we enter through its gates we find that we are standing on holy ground, and when we open the door we find ourselves in the presence of the LORD God Himself.

As we approach the study of this last great book of Scripture, we must be careful to heed our Lord's counsel, suggested to us in the opening verses of the Revelation, namely, 1) that we appreciate the fact that the Revelation is a sacred book; 2) that we appreciate the fact that the Revelation is a symbolic book; And 3) that we appreciate the fact that the Revelation is a book that must be taken seriously. As we bear in mind these things in our study of the Book of Revelation, we shall receive the blessing it is intended to convey.