

Introduction

I SHOULD PROBABLY begin with a confession.

A number of years ago, when I was first asked to help teach a study of Revelation at my church, I began looking for a way out of it, a good excuse to say no. I was completely intimidated. I thought of Revelation as an impossible-to-understand collection of strange creatures and events that I would not be able to make sense of myself, let alone teach to anyone else.

But then I thought, *I should probably read through it before I say no.*

So I started reading. And just three verses in I read this: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). When I read that, I thought to myself, *Would I ever want to say that there is a blessing from God that I’m not really interested in receiving?* I kept reading, all the way to the end, and there it was again: “Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev. 22:7) and “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:10), which Eugene Peterson paraphrases, “Don’t put it away on the shelf” (Rev. 22:10 MSG). When I read that, I thought to myself, *That’s essentially what I’ve done. I’ve put this book on the shelf assuming I won’t be able to understand it, and don’t really need to.* I realized I needed to take Revelation off the shelf and invest myself in reading, hearing, understanding, submitting to, and rejoicing in this book.

Perhaps you sense in yourself the same need. If so, I’m really excited to open up this book with you in the pages ahead.

Before we begin, however, I want to do three things. First, I want to explore some reasons we have for ignoring or neglecting the book of Revelation. Second, I want to make a case for why investing in understanding this book is worthwhile. Third, I want to present a few basics for grasping the message of this book that will help us as we work our way through it.

Reasons We Avoid Revelation

1. We're afraid we won't be able to understand it.

Revelation is filled with strange creatures, other-worldly imagery, and scenes that we find difficult to imagine and decipher. It demands that we use our imaginations, and we're not really used to doing that when reading the Bible. Revelation is written in a genre of literature we're not used to reading and therefore don't instinctively know how to read and understand. This means that if we're going to rightly understand it, we've got to develop our skills for reading the literary genre of apocalyptic prophecy. As we do, we find this book opening up to us.

Revelation was not written for scholars, so you don't have to be a scholar to understand it. It is a letter written to ordinary believers in the first century with the expectation that they would understand its message. It was written to unveil or reveal hidden realities, not to make them harder to see and understand.

Revelation was not written to create confusion, conflict, or fear in those who read it. Rather, it was written so that ordinary believers who hear it and embrace what is written in it will not only be able to understand it; they'll be blessed by it—blessed in a countercultural way that the world simply cannot understand and does not value.

2. We know there is lots of disagreement about Revelation.

The fact that there is lots of disagreement about Revelation is true. There are a variety of approaches to how to read and understand Revelation, some more valid than others. And there are lots of people who have very strong opinions about how to read and understand

Revelation. Sadly, the varying approaches of interpretation can tend to create a barrier that makes this a closed book to many. And I think that's tragic.

Let me just tell you upfront: if you start into this book hoping to find either an ally or sparring partner for your thoroughly convinced interpretive or eschatological views, you may be disappointed. While my views on some disputed things may be evident in places, it is not my goal to make an argument against opposing views. I simply don't have the space or inclination for that. In most instances I'm not going to present a variety of views and make a case for my own view. I'm just going to state what I think the Scriptures present to us. I'm not interested in critique or controversy or speculation; I'm interested in presenting what is clear and cannot be ignored.

3. We think Revelation is mostly or completely about the future with nothing practical for us today.

Most people assume that Revelation is primarily or even exclusively about the future. But think for a minute. Would it really make sense that John would address a letter to seven churches in the first century that was mostly about things only the generation alive at the return of Christ would need to know and recognize? Doesn't it make far more sense that John wrote to believers in his day as well as to believers in every era between his day and the day of Christ's return about what they need to know, how they are to live, and how they can cope with the harsh realities of life in this world?

Revelation presents a past, present, ongoing, and future reality that servants of Jesus living in between his ascension and return need to see. It sheds light on history as it has unfolded in the past and is unfolding right now. It serves as a corrective to any assumptions we might have that the status quo will continue, and that resistance to the world's system is futile.

Clearly there are things described in this book that are yet to happen. There is a future culmination of the ongoing conflict that has been a reality in our world ever since God put enmity between the serpent

and the woman in Eden. There will be a final battle. Jesus will return. And Revelation is going to help us to see these things more clearly. But that doesn't mean it is entirely or even primarily future focused.

Revelation is actually less about *when* Jesus will return and more about *what* we are to do, *who* we are to be, and *what* we can expect to endure as we wait for Jesus to return to establish his kingdom.

We tend toward being very pragmatic. We want to walk out of Bible study with a to-do list and may assume that the cosmic struggle represented in Revelation doesn't lend itself to practical application. But that simply isn't so. Revelation presents a repeated call that is urgent for every one of us to respond to right now, today. Revelation has everything to do with how we invest the capital of our lives, what is worth getting excited about, or being afraid of. Revelation speaks to our big and little compromises with the world around us, how we view political and governmental systems, and what we expect our money can provide for us.

If we are concerned with what's practical, the day will come when we will look back and it will be clear to us that there was nothing more practical than prayer, nothing more practical than perseverance, and nothing more practical than praising the triune God even when evil was pressing in on us. We'll discover that worship was the "ultimate subversive activity" in a world of idolatry and materialism.¹ Enduring in our allegiance to King Jesus even when it costs us, and living as if we do not expect this world to applaud us, approve of us, or satisfy us, is subversive. It's shocking. And at the same time, it is the ordinary Christian life. It is what is expected of a citizen of the kingdom of heaven living in the kingdom of the world.

4. We know that there is a lot about persecution of believers in Revelation, and that makes us uncomfortable.

Maybe it isn't so much the strangeness or the controversy of Revelation that keeps us from this book. Perhaps, for many of us, it is our love

1 Iain Duguid, "Doxological Evangelism in Practice: Preaching Apocalyptic Literature," Westminster Conference on Preaching and Preachers, Westminster Theological Seminary, October 21, 2020.

of comfort and our lack of ability to relate to being under assault as a believer. The threat of being exiled to an island prison for declaring allegiance to King Jesus is so very far away from the comfortable lives many of us live. We simply find it hard to relate to the tension, the threat, the life-or-death consequences in this book. It is hard to relate to crying out “How long?” when we have the security of a nice house and a good job, a football game to watch on a big-screen TV, and food being delivered to our front door. If we’re honest, perhaps our comfortable lives and all we’re looking forward to acquiring and accomplishing and experiencing in this life make us perfectly content for Jesus to wait a while before he comes back to intervene in the affairs of this world.

Perhaps it is not until we dare to allow ourselves to be moved by the reports of believers in other parts of the world being tortured or killed for their faith, or when we sit with a woman who has been raped or saw her husband killed in front of her eyes by Islamic extremists, or when we consider real people whose churches have been burned and their pastors executed that we finally feel the ache expressed in Revelation by the believers asking how long it will be until Christ comes to set things right. Revelation invites us to share the ache of the persecution endured by our brothers and sisters around the world and throughout history. And it speaks into this ache, telling us that the days of evil having its way in this world are numbered.

Reasons We Should Study Revelation

1. We might not be able to understand everything in Revelation, but we can understand its central message.

If our goal in studying Revelation is to nail down what every image portrays, what every symbol stands for, what every detail means, we’re likely going to be frustrated. Our goal, instead, should be to listen for and take to heart what is really clear.

To help you grasp the central message of Revelation, I’ve prepared a personal Bible study to go along with this book that you can find at nancyguthrie.com/revelation. You will get much more out of this book

if you have spent some time answering a few questions on the biblical text before you read each chapter. At my website you'll also find a complete leader's guide that includes discussion questions to help you if you are leading a group through Revelation using this book.

We're living in such a divided time. We all have our opinions, as well as opinions about whose opinions are worth considering. And that is certainly the case regarding the book of Revelation. Some of us may be more comfortable focusing on interpretive issues or nailing down the details than opening up our lives to the self-examination this book demands of us. You and I can understand the central message of this book. The more significant question is whether or not we're willing to embrace and live in light of it.

2. We need to see this world, and our lives in this world, through the perspective of heaven.

We sometimes foolishly assume we have all of the data we need to evaluate what is happening in our world. But we don't. Our perspectives are limited by our humanity and our earthly vantage point. In the book of Revelation, we find that a curtain was pulled back for John so that he could see beyond the time and space of this earthly life into the heart of ultimate reality. He was enabled to see what is happening in this world, not from the perspective of this earth, but from the perspective of heaven. As we take in what he saw, we find that we are better able to see the true nature of things. Rather than view this world's offerings as attractive, from heaven's perspective we can see how ugly and unsatisfying they are. Rather than seeing the persecution of a faithful believer as a tragic defeat, we're able to see it as a glorious victory.

3. We want the blessing that is promised to those who "hear and keep" this book.

Many of us have a rather lightweight perception of what it means to be *blessed*. Revelation is going to correct some of our assumptions about what the blessed life looks like for ordinary believers like you and me. And since the blessing promised in Revelation is reserved for those

who “hear and keep” what is written in this book, we’re going to be challenged to think through what it will mean and require for us to hear and keep it. Revelation is going to add some meat to the bones of our understanding of what the blessed life really is.

4. We need to live out of the story Revelation tells.

Every one of us lives out of the story that we believe is true. Some of us live out of the story called “the American dream.” Some of us live out of a story that must end with “happily ever after.” Some of us have come to think that we can craft our own life story toward the end that most appeals to us. There is a story that you and I should be living out of, a story that should shape how we live today and every day to come. According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is the story. And the book of Revelation helps us to see where that story is headed so that we can live out of it in joyful anticipation.

What We Need to Get the Most Out of Studying Revelation

1. We need to be ready to use our visual imaginations.

In many places in Scripture the biblical writers tell us what they *heard* the Lord say to them. But Revelation is different. John writes about what he *saw* in four different visions—a vision of Christ, a vision in heaven, a vision in the wilderness, and a vision on the great high mountain. John draws magnificent pictures with his words, pictures that are intended to make an impression and communicate a reality.

You and I live in a world that is vivid to us. We are inundated with images throughout the course of a typical day. And these images threaten to define reality for us. But they are not a full picture of reality. Revelation is presenting to us a fuller picture of reality that we cannot see with our physical eyes. It is providing for us an opportunity to see beyond the time and space of this world, and to see all of it from heaven’s perspective.

The pictures Revelation sets before us can be strange or, in some cases, nonsensical. But these startling, compelling, even shocking images

are intended to jolt us out of our complacency regarding the evils of this age and the unimaginable blessedness of the age to come. As we process Revelation's vivid pictures we're meant to feel the hot breath of the beast and smell the sulfur from the pit and see the rainbow around the throne. These images are intended to shake us out of our sleepiness and apathy and the *détente* we may have made with the world's ways. Our prayer should be that as we see these things, they will make a deep impression on us, changing how we feel and what we fear and what we want. That's their intended purpose.

2. We need to develop our skills in interpreting symbols.

Revelation uses a lot of symbolism. John's visions include descriptions of physical objects or phenomena that actually represent something else. Of course Revelation is not the first place symbolism is used in the Bible. For example, in Exodus 19:4, when God says to Israel, "I bore you on eagles' wings," he is not saying that he used eagles to fly his people out of Egypt. The symbol of an eagle communicates something about the speed and strength of his rescue. Jesus used many symbols to represent aspects of his own person and work, saying that he was a good shepherd, the bread of life, and the vine. Similarly, but perhaps more pervasively, John uses symbols to communicate sometimes complex realities. Babylon as a symbol of worldly idolatry and immorality. The sea is a symbol for the chaos and threat of evil. Colors and numbers have symbolic meaning.

Sometimes the meaning of Revelation's symbols is plain or is even stated explicitly. For example, we're told that lampstands represent the churches (1:20), white linen represents the righteous acts of the saints (19:8), and the ancient serpent is the devil (20:2). And sometimes it's more challenging to grasp with confidence what is being communicated.

Some interpreters insist that if we don't read every image in Revelation literally, we're not taking the Bible seriously. But an important aspect of taking the Bible seriously is recognizing and interpreting each part of it in the literary genre used by the human author as inspired by the divine author. To interpret symbols symbolically

is not spiritualizing the text; it is rightly interpreting the text. For example, when we read about the Lamb standing as though it had been slain, we instinctively know that John is using symbolism to communicate something about the crucified Christ. When he speaks of God and the Lamb being seated on a throne, we know that he is using symbolism to communicate something about the sovereignty of God over the universe and over history. When he speaks of the beast, he is communicating something about the nature and intentions of Rome in his day and in every government that has set itself against God and his people since then. When he describes a dragon with seven heads and ten horns, he is communicating something about the terrifying power of Satan. In using symbols this way, John reveals the true nature of things.

Our first and best step to rightly interpreting various symbols will be to explore if and where a symbol appears in earlier books of the Bible and allow that to significantly inform our understanding. Then we must consider what the symbol would have meant to the first-century audience of this book. Many of the symbols in Revelation find resonance in the specific social, political, cultural, and religious world of the first century. They are not a system of codes waiting to be matched for meaning with people and events in our current day. Rather, they have theological and spiritual meaning pertinent to the first readers of Revelation, and that meaning must inform how we interpret their meaning for us today.

3. We need to have our eyes and ears open for Old Testament imagery and allusions.

In the book of Revelation, John was clearly writing down what he saw and heard. But his book is filled with allusions to the Old Testament, and there are at least two reasons for that. The first reason is that John saw into and wrote about the same heavenly reality that Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zephaniah saw into and wrote about. No wonder the throne John saw is a lot like the throne Isaiah saw. No wonder the kingdom crushing other kingdoms is a lot like the kingdom Daniel

saw. No wonder the new Jerusalem John saw is a lot like the city Ezekiel saw. They were seeing the same things!

The second reason Revelation has so many images from the Old Testament is that John was thoroughly saturated in the Hebrew scriptures. These images were implanted into his consciousness and imagination. It makes sense that he would draw upon words and images he was familiar with to write down descriptions of what he saw. Unlike other parts of the New Testament that set off quotes of the Old Testament, Revelation doesn't call attention to its Old Testament quotes and allusions. It's more subtle. It assumes that those reading and hearing it will recognize its Old Testament allusions and make the connection. So rather than constantly quoting the Old Testament, John simply sees everything and describes everything through the lens of the Old Testament.

4. We need to have a sense of how the book is organized.

There are a number of ways to understand how the book of Revelation is organized.² Kevin DeYoung presents several possible approaches, including seeing Revelation as divided into two main sections: chapters 1 to 11 introducing the story of God's triumph, and chapters 12 to 22 explaining the story in greater detail; or divided into four main sections, each beginning with John writing "what must soon take place" or "what must take place after this" (Rev. 1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). Another way DeYoung suggests it can be divided into four parts would be to organize it into the times John says he was caught up in the Spirit and was given a vision (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).³

We're going to see that numbers are very significant in the book of Revelation. They express the sovereignty of God over history. The number four speaks of completeness in a universal, global, or worldwide sense. The number six refers to humanity. The number seven speaks of

2 Vern Poythress presents numerous ways to outline Revelation in "Outlines of Revelation," Westminster Theological Seminary, accessed October 6, 2021, <http://campus.wts.edu/~vpoythress/nt311/nt311.html>.

3 Kevin DeYoung, "Revelation, Coronavirus, and the Mark of the Beast: How Should Christians Read the Bible's Most Fascinating Book? (Part 1)," Kevin DeYoung blog, The Gospel Coalition, May 26, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>.

completeness, perfection, and salvation. It represents God's sovereign plan in its perfection and completeness. The number ten speaks of completeness in the human experience or dimension. And the number twelve speaks of completeness in terms of the community of God's people, a unity in diversity.

The number seven is especially important in Revelation (used 53 times), so we shouldn't be surprised that another way the book could be organized is in seven sets of seven:

Prologue (1:1–3)

1. Seven churches (1:4–3:22)
 2. Seven seals (4:1–8:5)
 3. Seven trumpets (8:6–11:19)
 4. Seven great signs (12:1–15:4)
 5. Seven bowls of wrath (15:1–16:21)
 6. Seven messages of final judgment (17:1–18:24)
 7. Seven last things (19:1–22:5)
- Epilogue (22:6–20)

The most important thing we need to understand about the organization of Revelation is that it retraces the same events from different angles, each with a different emphasis or focus. As modern thinkers and readers, we tend to expect events depicted in a piece of writing to be in chronological order. In fact, many interpreters attempt to force the events depicted in the book of Revelation into chronological order. But if we try to do that, we find that Jesus is depicted as coming again numerous times and there are numerous "final" judgments. If we were to attempt to impose a chronological reading on it, we would see a back and forth between people persecuting the people of God and being judged for it and then persecuting them again. And we know that doesn't make sense.

Instead of reading through Revelation as a chronological depiction of events, it helps us to recognize that John repeatedly rehearses events taking place between the first and second coming of Christ. In this

way he brings us to the end of history repeatedly in the book and then starts over again, showing the same period of time from a different angle. Earlier in the book he focuses more on the time leading up to the second coming of Christ in final judgment and salvation. And later in the book, the focus is more on those final events. In “each series of seven (seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls), and also within the interlude of Revelation 12 to 14, the reader is brought to ‘the end.’”⁴ So as each of these sections begins, it is as if John picks up his camera and moves it to another location or angle and shoots the same scene again, each time adjusting his lens to focus in on different aspect of the scene and with a greater intensity. This means that Revelation is made up of seven sections that are parallel to each other—seven sections that depict the same period of time—the time in between Jesus’s first and second coming—from a variety of angles.⁵

5. We need to replace an unhealthy fascination about the future with a determination to follow Christ in the present.

While some people want to avoid Revelation, others are enormously interested in it. But sometimes that interest isn’t particularly healthy. Some are fascinated by the possibility of matching up what they hear about on the news with strange details or images in the book. If that’s what you’re hoping for in this book, I might as well tell you that you are going to be disappointed, perhaps even annoyed. But, more impor-

4 Joseph R. Nally Jr., “Recapitulation: Interpreting the Book of Revelation?,” Third Millennium Ministries, accessed September 7, 2021, <https://thirdmill.org>.

5 For more about Revelation’s recapitulation of sections that are parallel to each other, see William Hendrickson, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015), 25–26, who writes, “Different sections ascribe the same duration to the period described. According to the third cycle (chapters 8–11) the main period here described is forty-two months (11:2), or twelve hundred and sixty days (11:3). Now, it is a remarkable fact that we find that same period of time in the next section (chapters 12–14), namely, twelve hundred and sixty days (12:6), or a time and times and half a time (3 and 1/2 years) (12:14). A careful study of chapter 20 will reveal that this chapter describes a period that is synchronous with that of chapter 12. Therefore by this method of reasoning, parallelism is vindicated. Each section gives us a description of the entire gospel age from the first to the second coming of Christ.” See also, Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 223–26, and G. K. Beale with David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 22–25.

tantly, if that is what you want most to get out of studying the book of Revelation, you're going to be too preoccupied with the future to grasp its implications for you in the very real present.

Revelation wasn't written to entertain, or to set out a timeline for the future, or to satisfy our curiosity about when Christ will return. Revelation was written to fortify Christians to live in the world, enduring its harsh treatment and alienation, with a firm confidence that this world is not all there is, and that, in fact, what may seem like defeat is going to give way to victory.

If, when we finish this study, we can explain every symbol, identify every Old Testament allusion, and trace every connection but are still intimidated by the world's opinion of us, still enamored with the world's wealth, still attracted by the world's comfort and pleasure, then we will not have truly heard and kept its message. We will not have truly understood and embraced the book of Revelation.

My goal is to open up this text to you, taking away the intimidation or fear factor. I want to focus your attention on the Lamb standing as though it had been slain, to help you listen to the voice of him who is Faithful and True, to encourage you to open the door to him who knocks, to challenge you to welcome the authority of the King of kings, to invite you to pull up a chair at the marriage supper of the Lamb, to direct you to find your home in the new Jerusalem.

It is my goal to cut through the confusion and help you to see the beauty, the hope and help, that is uniquely presented in this book. I want to focus your gaze on the glorious Son of Man and to instill in you a determination to overcome the world. I want you to be drawn into the worship around the throne. I want you to feel the relief that someone was found worthy to open the scroll. I want you to sense the reality of the judgment to come to all who refuse to become joined to Christ as well as the relief, the rest, and the reward to come to those who belong to him. I want to help you to see this world for the Babylon that it is so you'll be motivated to flee from it to the new Jerusalem where God himself will make his home with you. I want you to get goose bumps because you can almost taste the food that will be served at the

marriage supper, and can almost feel your tears being wiped away, and can almost see the eyes of your Savior looking into yours as you finally see him face to face.

I've realized something as I've been studying Revelation. We begin our study of this book thinking that our biggest challenge is going to be understanding it. And it isn't. The biggest challenge is opening ourselves up to the adjustments in our lives that this book calls for. Yet this biggest challenge is also what promises the greatest blessing. So let's work our way through the book of Revelation, stopping at every step along the way to consider what it means for us to hear and keep what is written in it so that we can anticipate experiencing its promised blessing.