



Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

Revelation – A Study Guide

Steve Wilmshurst

Introduction

The book of Revelation was written for a people under pressure – a people who knew all too clearly that the world was against them. Nearly all their early leaders, the apostles, had gone, most of them martyred. Although the gospel had spread throughout the Roman Empire, it had not taken it over. Persecution was looming. It is in that context of suffering and oppression that the Lord Jesus gives John this series of visions. The resulting book is a survival manual, explaining how to survive when the world is against you. Even though it is a little harder for us to see, this is what we need to know in our day also. We are not yet being openly persecuted, but we are heading in that direction. In any case, the world *is* against us and we have to know how to survive as believers on increasingly hostile ground. This is why Revelation is so vitally relevant today.

Date and Authorship

Tradition has always held that the human author of Revelation was the apostle John. The main reason for doubting it is the very different style of Greek compared with John's gospel and letters. Most of these differences can easily be explained, however, in terms of the fact that this is a very different kind of writing from those other books and written under very different conditions. It should also be noted that Revelation contains a number of significant words and themes which are strongly associated with John's gospel.

John spent most of his adult life as a church leader in the province of Asia, and almost certainly his home base was Ephesus. While some commentators have placed the book in the reign of Emperor Nero around 65 AD, several factors point to a later date. Several of the letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 read as if the churches have been established for several decades. Another factor is the strong testimony of the Church fathers, especially Irenaeus who had been a disciple of Polycarp of Smyrna, who in turn knew John. This testimony points to the reign of Domitian near the end of the first century and a writing date around 95 AD. Widespread persecution of Christians had not yet broken out, but in specific locations the rise of the cult of emperor worship and the pressure to conform to local gods and customs were placing severe pressure on the church.

The genre of Revelation

The genre of Revelation is usually described as *apocalyptic*. This genre has its origins in the Old Testament, especially the later chapters of Daniel. The style continued to develop during the intertestamental period. The most obvious common feature is the use of dramatic pictorial imagery. Apocalypses make frequent use of symbols, especially symbolic numbers, which came to have standard meanings – notably the use of seven to represent completeness or perfection. The most important feature of apocalypses, however, is that they claim to reveal heavenly realities which are normally hidden from human view.

Revelation fits into this category, but the book is also *prophecy*, as it claims directly in 1:3 and

22:7,19. That is to say, the heavenly truths about God's plans and purposes are here applied directly to God's people and their present plight. Revelation does not simply reveal what is going on in the heavenly realms, or what will happen in the last days; it tells us what to do about it! Finally, the book is also in *letter* form. We are repeatedly reminded that this document was sent firstly to specific churches of real people living within a 150-mile radius of the place where it was written; and secondly to all God's people, both then and since.

The key to understanding this book, along with the help of the Holy Spirit, is a good knowledge of the rest of Scripture. When people have gone wrong with this book – as so many have – it has usually been because they fail to tie it in properly with other parts of the Bible. There are hundreds of direct and indirect references to the Old Testament here and so often the way to unlock the imagery of Revelation is to refer back to those passages.

Suggested outline

- 1:1-20 Prologue: the Man at the centre of history
- 2:1-3:22 Letters to the seven churches
- 4:1-5:14 The Vision of heaven
 - 4:1-11 The throne of God
 - 5:1-14 The scroll and the Lamb
- 6:1-8:5 Seven seals: *suffering*
 - 6:1-8 The four horsemen: suffering on earth (Seals 1 to 4)
 - 6:9-11 The martyr church (Seal 5)
 - 6:12-17 The day of final wrath (Seal 6)
 - 7:1-17 The crowd of the redeemed:
 - 7:1-8 144,000 on earth
 - 7:9-17 The multitude in heaven
 - 8:1 The seventh seal is opened: silence
 - 8:2-5 The prayers of the saints
- 8:6-11:19 Seven trumpets: *warning*
 - 8:6-13 Warnings in nature (Trumpets 1 to 4)
 - 9:1-12 Torment for the unrepentant (Trumpet 5)
 - 9:13-21 The day of final battle (Trumpet 6)
 - 10:1-11:14 God's Word:
 - 10:1-11 The angel and the scroll
 - 11:1-14 The two witnesses
 - 11:15-19 The seventh trumpet sounds: the Kingdom has come
- 12:1-14:20 Signs of cosmic conflict
 - 12:1-17 The woman and the dragon
 - 13:1-18 The first and second beasts
 - 14:1-20 The redeemed and the lost:
 - 14:1-5 144,000 in heaven
 - 14:6-13 Three angels: the time has come
 - 14:14-20 The harvest of all the earth
- 15:1-16:21 Seven bowls: *God's wrath*

15:1-8	The seven angels prepared
16:1-9	Judgement in nature (Bowls 1 to 4)
16:10-11	Judgement on the beast's throne (Bowl 5)
16:12-16	The day of final battle (Bowl 6)
16:17-21	The seventh bowl is poured out: 'It is done'
17:1-20:15	The triumph of Almighty God
17:1-17	The woman who is Babylon
18:1-24	The fall of Babylon
19:1-21	The victory of Jesus:
19:1-10	The Hallelujah Chorus
19:11-21	The Word rides out to war and victory
20:1-6	The millennium
20:7-10	Satan's last throw
20:11-15	The final judgement
21:1-22:5	The New Heaven and the New Earth
22:6-21	Epilogue: Come, Lord Jesus!

Seven key themes – suggestions

1. From first to last, Christ is reigning
2. Throughout history, God's plans are being rolled out. In the terrible events of history, he is both warning and beginning to pour out his wrath on rebellious humanity
3. The cosmos is a battleground in which God's people are intimately involved but ultimately safe
4. The battle is fought between the Lamb and the dragon, Satan, with his two henchmen the first and second beasts. Although the key victory has already been won, the battle continues throughout the gospel age
5. The earth is the scene of two rival camps or cities: the 'great city' / the 'inhabitants of the earth' / the 'woman on the beast' / 'Babylon'; and the 'heavenly city' / the 'redeemed', the 'saints' or 'the servants of God' / the 'bride of the Lamb' / the 'new Jerusalem'
6. At the end of days comes the return of Christ, the final judgement, the destruction of Satan and his allies and eternal punishment
7. The destiny of redeemed humanity is eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth

Discussion questions

(It is assumed that everyone participating in this discussion will have read Revelation recently!)

1. What do you think is the key message of Revelation and why? (Assuming, that is, you believe that there is a simple, easily summarised message.)
2. How do you think church congregations feel if and when they are confronted with a teaching series on Revelation?
3. How would you approach/ how have you approached structuring a sermon series on Revelation (a) aimed primarily at believers; (b) aimed primarily at unbelievers?
4. Do you agree with the list of key themes suggested above? Are there others? Which are the most important/ relevant for your own people?
5. How can we bridge the gap between the situation of the believers to whom Revelation was originally addressed and our own day? How do we make the experience of persecution real and relevant to comfortable, western believers?
6. In your experience, what are the main dangers to avoid in preaching Revelation (for instance, excessive focus on the imagery, or on detail at the expense of the big picture; or failing to understand the conventions of apocalyptic; or losing the centrality of Christ in the book; or concentrating too much on debunking extreme interpretations; or excessive dogmatism...)?

7. Is it possible, or wise, to have a fixed view of the nature of the millennium? Can you justify the position you take yourself, or have you just inherited it from someone else? What difference does it make anyway?
8. How should we respond to the reading of Revelation adopted in the *Left Behind* series (see 'For further reading')? Is it dangerous? Table Talk issue 9 (David Field, 2003 – available from Affinity) addressed this question in characteristically robust manner.

For further reading

There are numerous good commentaries on Revelation at various levels. Here are some suggestions, starting with the most technical and working downwards:

Beale, G.K. 1998. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Eerdmans. In the NIGTC series. THE evangelical commentary to get if you know a bit of Greek and have a healthy bank account (or book allowance). Enormous and extremely thorough.

Kistemaker, S.J. 2001. *Revelation*. Baker Academic. Thorough and with adequate technical detail for nearly all purposes.

Morris, L. 2007. *The Revelation of St John*. IVP. Has been through a number of editions. Pretty good though it does not have as much detail as you would like for serious preaching on Revelation.

Wilcock, M. 1975. *The Message of Revelation*. IVP. In the Bible Speaks Today series. Still an outstanding overview of the book – does not get into technical detail.

Wilmshurst, S.M.B. 2008. *The Final Word: Revelation simply explained*. Evangelical Press. In the Welwyn Commentary Series. May be helpful for preaching because it is based heavily on an extended sermon series. Used extensively in this guide!

For very helpful treatments of issues such as Christ's return and the millennium, see Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* – as helpful and as fair to those who differ as ever!

LaHaye, T. and Jenkins, J. 1995. *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*. Tyndale Press. The first volume of the extremely popular *Left Behind* series, which perhaps should be required reading for all pastors!