

OVERVIEW

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

BY RAY C. STEDMAN

What is it that makes us want to read the last chapter of a book first? For some reason, many people begin reading the Bible with the book of Revelation, but this is a serious mistake. This book plunges you into a confusing array of dragons and trumpets and vials and seals, with many amazing sights and sounds and visions. A person starting here might well throw the whole Bible away in frustration, unable to make head nor tail of it.

It is very significant that the book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible. And if you have read the rest of the Bible before you come to Revelation, you will be much better equipped to understand the climax of the entire revelation of God to his people.

Nevertheless, the reason many have difficulty in understanding this book lies not only in interpreting the symbols, but also in failing to take note of the suggestions that are given in the first eight verses. If you read these verses carefully and thoughtfully, you will have a tremendous key to this book. They are like certain introductory remarks often found on the title page of a book, and if you read them that way, you will be greatly helped. The title of the book is the first line:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him ... {Rev 1:1a RSV}

Notice that it is not “the revelations,” plural. The book is all about Jesus Christ, and it is his self-revelation: it was given to him by God the Father to reveal to his servants. The purpose of it is in the next line:

... to show to his servants what must soon take place; {Rev 1:1b RSV}

This book was written by the Apostle John when he was a captive on the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, and it dates from about 95 A.D., toward the close of the 1st century. John was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, he tells us, and he began to see visions – revelations given to him by the Lord Jesus through an angel – of things which must shortly come to pass, so it is clearly a predictive book. Then you have the method by which the book was given in the next phrases, and this is very important:

... and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, {Rev 1:1c RSV}

The words, *he made it known* are a translation of a Greek word which means, “he signified it,” which is the way the King James Version has it. Or, “he sign-ified it.” He made it known by signs, by symbols.

One of the reasons symbols are used in this book is that it is dealing with things in the future, which were beyond the imaginations of men and women of the 1st century. References are made to events that are just now beginning to break in upon the world as awful realities – nuclear warfare, worldwide plagues, biological warfare. How could these be described to a generation who knew nothing about guns or machines?

When we want to try to convey some abstract thought, we often put it in symbolic form. There was a story that made the rounds a few years ago about the governor of Montana who commissioned an artist to paint the thoughts that went through the mind of General Custer at *Custer’s Last Stand*. The artist worked away for weeks and weeks, and finally, there came the day for the unveiling of this

painting. Imagine the governor's surprise when he saw a cow with a halo around its head, standing in the center of the picture, and coming over the hill was a file of Indians with sacks of cotton on their backs. The governor said, "What do you mean by this? What does this portray?" And the artist said, "Well, governor, it should be very clear. These are the thoughts that went through General Custer's mind at the battle. He is thinking, 'Holy cow! Where did all these cotton-pickin' Indians come from, anyhow?'"

Now I mean no irreverence, but this is a very clear description of the need to resort to symbolic language when you are describing something that lies outside the experience of another, which is what we have in the book of the Revelation.

Another helpful thing to understand about these symbols is that every one of them has been taken from someplace else in the Bible. They are not suddenly introduced to us; they are, for the most part, picked up from other parts of Scripture and reused in a consistent manner here in the book of Revelation.

Now the third thing on this "title page" is a special blessing for those who read this book. I think the Holy Spirit knew that it would be difficult for many, and so these words are added,

Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near. {Rev 1:3 RSV}

Have you ever qualified for that blessing? This book is written for that purpose.

Now the time of these events is suggested in the phrase, "the time is near" (Vs 3); that is, the events of this book began shortly after John wrote. Then we have the destination of the book:

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: {Rev 1:4a RSV}

The first part of the book is a collection of letters specifically addressed to seven churches that form a rough circle in what is now called Asia Minor. There were more than seven churches in that district, but these seven were selected because they are representative, not only of that day, but also of all churches of any day, and of the whole age of the church, from beginning to end.

Then the author, or authors, of this book is given to us:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. {Rev 1:4b-5a RSV}

There is the triune God: the Father in his eternal sovereignty; the seven spirits, signifying the Holy Spirit in his seven-fold plenitude of power; and Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness. They are united in giving us this amazing prediction.

Next is the dedication, similar to the dedication found in many books of any age:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. {Rev 1:5b-6 RSV}

Here is the One who by his acts has laid the foundation for all human blessing, and it is to him this book is dedicated.

Then the subject, the general theme of the book, is introduced:

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. {Rev 1:7 RSV}

This is a book about the second coming of Jesus Christ; how it will be accomplished, what will happen on earth that will produce these events, and what will be the result after he comes.

And finally, the signature of the book, the personal signature of the author:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. {Rev 1:8 RSV}

Bear in mind that when this was being written the church was being persecuted. This was during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who was one of the most vicious persecutors of the church, a man who declared himself to be the lord and god of the Roman people. Therefore, these Christians badly needed some encouragement, and here, in effect, is the personal assurance of God, saying, "Don't worry, I'm the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the A and the Z, the

One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty One.”

One other thing about this first chapter, and then we will look at the book in general. The basic plan of the book is given in Verse 19; John is told:

Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. {Rev 1:19 RSV}

There are three divisions of the book of Revelation: the things John saw, which occupy Chapter 1; the things which are (which existed in his day) – the seven churches, which occupy Chapters 2 and 3; and then, beginning with Chapter 4, there is a long section which deals with things which are “hereafter.”

I believe that means “after the church is gone.” While Chapters 2 and 3 cover the whole present age, the latter part of the book deals with that final culmination of human events referred to in other places in the Bible as ‘the great tribulation,’ or ‘the time of the end,’ or Daniel’s ‘seventieth week’ – a period of seven years in which all that has been happening in the cauldron of human events suddenly sweeps to a startling conclusion. And that conclusion is traced for us here in the book of the Revelation. All the frightening turbulence of our own day is moving toward this event. And all that has been happening for twenty centuries of human history has been moving to produce this one event.

Now we will touch briefly on some of the highlights of this program.

First there were the letters to **the seven churches**: As I mentioned earlier, these churches were representative of individual churches of any given age, and furthermore, they represent a process in the history of the church.

1. The letter to the church in Ephesus, for example, is about a church which is outwardly successful, but was beginning to lose its first love, that underlying motivation that is so necessary for Christians.
2. The next church is the church in Smyrna, which means “crushed,” which exactly describes this church. And persecution would hang over the church during the general period from the 2nd century to the time of Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor of Rome, in 320 A.D.

3. Smyrna is followed by the church in Pergamum, which means “married.” The trouble in this church was that the church had married the world. The two were trying to get along together. There was an infiltration of all the attitudes and value systems of an unbelieving world into the processes of the church. And this well reflects that period in church history from the rise of Constantine, who made Christianity the popular religion of the day, up to the full rise of the papal church in about the 7th century.
4. That is followed by the church in Thyatira. In this church spiritual adultery was going on, and the letter is a very accurate description of what is now called the Dark Ages of the church – the period when the church lost its zeal, its purity, its doctrines, became infiltrated with a great deal of superstition and paganism, and lost most of its power. This dark age lasted from the 7th century to early in the 16th century, and the time of the Reformation.
5. Then there is the church in Sardis, which is a picture of a church which has recovered much of its truth, but seriously lacks in vitality. This is a picture of the period of the Reformation. Although the Reformation churches began in a flaming fire of zeal, they soon died down and whitened to the ashes of a dead orthodoxy.
6. This is followed by the church of Philadelphia, of which the Lord has nothing evil to say, nothing to correct. He commends it because it is true and faithful to the word. It has a little strength, he says, and this pictures the church age of the 19th century, when the church is awakened and thrust out into the far corners of the earth in the great missionary movement of the last century.
7. The last church is the church of Laodicea, the rich church, the church that says, “we don’t need anything from God at all. We’ve got money, influence, power; that’s all we need.” And God says, “You blind fools! Don’t you know you don’t have anything; that you are wretched and poor, pitiable and blind? I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire.” And he pictures himself standing outside the door of the church, knocking for admittance. If, as I have suggested, these letters outline the record of history, then it appears that we are in Laodicean times.

Now beginning at Chapter 4, a change takes place. Notice he says again what is a key word in this book. As he was “in the Spirit” in Chapter 1, so he says here:

At once I was in the Spirit and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! {Rev 4:2 RSV}

The scene shifts now from earth to heaven. Now that does not mean somewhere out in space. In the Bible, heaven is really the realm of the invisibilities – another dimension, if you like, wherein God reigns hidden from our eyes but present among us – a spiritual kingdom which surrounds us on every side, but which we cannot taste or touch or see. And yet it is very real.

This kingdom was opened to John and he saw a throne, the One who sat upon it, and immediately he knew who it was – he did not need to be told. It was the throne of God, and God was in control of all history. What John saw here is a remarkable vision of the powerlessness and the weakness of man, but the greatness and the might of God. John saw a throne, and then he saw a Lamb standing in front of the throne, a Lamb with its throat cut. That may seem a strange symbol for the Son of God, but it is a very apt one – a Lamb that had been slaughtered. And somehow, as John watched, that Lamb turned into a Lion, and John saw that the Lion, who was the Lamb who had been slaughtered, was also the King of all.

He stood before the One seated upon the throne, who held in his hand a little book, a book that is very significant in the book of Revelation; it is the program of God for the establishment of his kingdom on earth. In heaven he rules unchallenged; on earth his will is constantly being challenged by pigmy men who dare to lift their fists against the authority of God. But he is going to change all that, and he is going to do it by the Lamb who is the Lion, who alone has the right to take the book (actually, a scroll) and unfold it.

And as the seven seals of this book are loosened, the scroll unrolls until at last what is written on it is plain to all. John weeps as he first sees the scroll, thinking that no one has the right to open it, but then he sees the Son of Man and he knows that he alone has the right to unfold the scroll that will produce God’s kingdom on earth.

As the scroll unfolds, we see that there are **seven seals**. The number seven appears frequently in this book. We have already seen the seven churches, and now there are the seven seals, each one revealing a new power at work on earth. These are followed by seven trumpets, and then seven vials, or bowls, of the wrath of God. Let us look briefly at how these fit together:

1. In Chapter 6 we read about the beginning of this period of seven years which, the prophet Daniel tells us, is going to be the culmination of history, toward which all the events of our present day are moving. That seven years will be introduced by a worldwide preaching of the gospel (as we learn from our Lord’s talk to the disciples on the Mount of Olives).

In the book of Revelation, the church as a unit is viewed first, followed by historical events concerning the rest of the world. In light of this, I believe the church is caught up to be with the Lord prior to the period of seven years’ tribulation, and that the first event of that age is the worldwide preaching of the gospel, symbolized by the first of these seven seals:

And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. {Rev 6:2 RSV}

White is always the color of divine being, representing purity and holiness. And the bow speaks of conquering; here is the conquering of the gospel. Jesus had predicted this when he said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come,” {Matt 24:14 RSV}.

2. The second seal means war; John said,

And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword. {Rev 6:4 RSV}

Might not that great sword symbolize the terrible power of the nuclear bomb, released upon humanity?

3. This is the second thing to come, John says, followed immediately by the third horseman,

symbolizing famine, which is inevitable in the wake of worldwide war.

4. The fourth horseman is calamitous death – death by four means:

And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth. {Rev 6:8 RSV}

Death was on the horse, and Hades followed with the hearse, right behind.

Now what John is seeing in these seven seals are the forces at work in humanity to produce the events of history in these last days. Human power is therefore prominent throughout this time, and we see what God allows to happen by the force and power of human beings.

5. The fifth seal is an expression of the inward power of mankind, the prayers of the martyrs.
6. This is followed by cosmic disturbances, which provide a key to the entire book:

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. {Rev 6:12-14 RSV}

The earthquake here gives us a clue to understanding this book. The final event previewed here in the sixth seal, is always marked by the great earthquake, hail, and fire. That is the end of the seven-year period, described by Jesus when he said, “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven,” {Matt. 24:29b RSV}. This will happen just before the return of Jesus Christ with his church back to earth.

7. The seventh seal summarizes the events of the last half of this seven-year period, unfolded in Chapters 10 and 11, where we again encounter the earthquake when the seventh trumpet sounds:

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his

temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. {Rev 11:19 RSV}

Chapters 12, 13, and 14 introduce to us the great actors in the scene on earth:

First of all, *a woman* who is recognizable as Israel brings forth a manchild, whom history has already informed us is the Son of God. Against him in a great conflict are arrayed the angels of the devil and the great dragon called Satan. As John watches, a beast rises up out of the sea, and John was given to recognize that the beast was a form of human government linked to Rome, the fourth great world kingdom spoken of by Daniel. In some form, the Roman Empire is to exist until the end of time. (If you look at our western world, I think you can see how true that is. Every nation of the western hemisphere was settled by a member nation of the Roman Empire. We are Roman to the core; the whole western world is Roman in its thought, philosophy, and attitude.) Associated with this beast out of the sea is another beast, or religious leader, which rises out of the earth and whom many link with the antichrist.

Chapters 14, 15, and 16 by and large contain the description of *the vials* of the wrath of God, which are exactly the same as those terrible judgments of which Jesus spoke when he said the sun would be darkened, the moon turned to blood, and God's wrath would be poured out upon the earth.

And in the latter part of Chapter 16 and continuing on through Chapters 17 and 18, you find the judgment of the great religious harlot called “mystery Babylon the great.” Now, Babylon was the source of ancient idolatry, and it is a picture of what we might call religious godlessness – that which looks godly but in its essence is actually godless; a religion which outwardly commands the power and attention of men, but which inwardly is devoted to trying to exercise political power by use of religious authority. Now if you read this through carefully I think you will see that this mystery Babylon is not any one system, or denomination, but rather an attitude that permeates the entire church. Wherever you find anyone acting religiously, trying thereby to gain political power or authority, you have Babylonianism, and it is found in all churches. As

Jesus said, referring to the tares sown among the wheat, "Let both grow together until the harvest," {Matt 13:30a RSV}.

And in Chapter 19 you have *the harvest*, which was predicted in Chapter 14:

Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, "Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." {Rev 14:14-15 RSV}

That harvest actually occurs, as described in Chapter 19, when Jesus Christ returns to earth:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; {Rev 19:11-15a RSV}

By this time all the nations of the earth have gathered together in that battlefield called Armageddon, in the land of Israel, and it is there that the son of God appears with the armies of heaven. Now at last, all the supernatural forces, which men have long denied, suddenly reveal themselves to human eyes in such a way as to eliminate all the opposition of entrenched evil against the will and authority of God.

The book closes as the Son of God sets up his kingdom on earth, as he had promised. After the judgment of the dead there comes a new heaven and a new earth, and the city of God coming down out of heaven, where God makes his habitation with men. Remember the prayer? "Thy kingdom come, ... on earth as it is in heaven," {Matt 6:10 RSV}.

This city can only be described in negative terms. John saw no temple in it, for it did not need a temple, nor did it need the sun or moon to shine upon it. The light within it was the presence of God himself. And its gates shall never be shut by

day or by night; a whole universe is at last cleansed of the rebellion of man, and there is nothing to be feared. All the beautiful dream of the prophets is to be fulfilled, where men shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and never make war anymore.

Finally, we are admonished to wait for the coming, to work for it, to be diligent and faithful and obedient until the Son of God comes. This is a book of extreme optimism. Although it paints a dark, dark picture, it does not stop there; it looks on beyond to the final victory of God, even more sure than tomorrow's sun.

C. S. Lewis has written these significant words:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what's the good of saying you're on his side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else, something it never entered your head to conceive comes crashing in. Something so beautiful to us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left. This time it will be God without disguise; some-thing so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love, or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down, when it's become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realize it or not. Now, today, in this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever; we must take it or leave it.

There is a great deal of encouragement in this book. It is a book that will stiffen your back when things are happening in human history that frighten you. It will give you great comfort and encouragement, if you know the Lord of it. But it is also a solemn book, designed to make us understand that the One who is unrolling the scroll is the One who was once here and died on Calvary's cross, a lamb led to slaughter, so that he might win the right to be King of all the earth.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for telling us the truth, revealing it to us through John. Help us in these days to hold high the vision of this blessed One who is to come into the very world which his hands have made, and in which he once died upon a cross, and claim it for himself. What a day that will be for him when he who once was rejected shall be acknowledged everywhere as the rightful Lord of earth. We thank you in his name. Amen.

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