

Revelation – Introduction

Tonight we start a series on the book of Revelation. I want to begin by reading a chapter from Joel Green's book, *How to Read Prophecy*. It's a fairly short chapter. It's part of his personal journey.

1. Can We Understand Biblical Prophecy?

Autumn, 1975. Texas Tech University, Lubbock. I was a college sophomore. The sun-baked days were reminiscent of July or August, but the mood was very much back-to-school.

Yet an air of expectancy pervaded the Christian community: The Billy Graham Crusade was coming to town, bringing with it spiritual refreshment and, for many of us, a break from the rigors of academia.

I dove headfirst into the whole affair, training as a counsellor and rehearsing for the choir. The much-anticipated opening night finally arrived. I was busily preparing to make my way to Jones Stadium, where throngs of people would soon congregate, when there was a knock at the door. Kevin, a friend from another town, had come early for the crusade and stopped by for a chat. I was pulling on my boots when he suddenly perked up, remembering his exciting news: "Joel, the Lord's coming back!"

I looked up and, seeing the anticipation written across his face, replied, "Yes. Amen. Maranatha."

"No, you don't understand," he went on. "This week. By this Saturday. Jesus returns sometime *this* week!"

I motioned at my watch – it was time to be off. We headed for the door. "Look, Kevin, I know Jesus is coming back, but don't start specifying dates. You know what the Bible says ... "

What the Bible says, of course, is that no one knows the day or the hour of Jesus' return. Apparently Kevin had noted that passage carefully. "Yes, I know what the Bible says. But remember, I didn't say what *time* or even which *day* – I just said sometime this week!"

"Kevin," I whined.

"I know. I know. I was skeptical too," he inserted quickly. "But I heard this tape. It was really convincing – right on target. It was so scriptural! Say, I know – I'll bring it tomorrow night. Then you can listen to it. I'm sure you'll agree with it."

I was not sure how to take that last comment. I was sure, however, that I had no time (or desire) to listen to that tape – on top of classes, papers, exams *and* Billy Graham. So I played my trump card: "Yes, do bring the tape. I'll listen to it on Sunday." Catching his look of disgust, I countered, "After all, if Jesus does come back this week, what better place to be than a Graham Crusade?"

At the age of nineteen I was already a cynic about predictions of the end times. Several years before, Hal Lindsey and company had penetrated our rural community with *The Late Great Planet Earth* and a horde of tapes (You've just got to listen to this one!) which seemed to appear out of nowhere. I even possessed a

bona fide Bible Map of Last-Day Events, given me by street evangelists at the State Fair of Texas. With these tools in hand I was fast becoming an expert on how Bible prophecy all hangs together, down to the most minute detail.

Alas, my "conversion" was not to be completed. The further I went, the more difficult it became to make it all fit. The more I read the biblical prophets and the less I read the current books about prophecy, the less I understood and the more confused I became. Some biblical texts simply refused to be funnelled into the preplanned schema that I had taken for truth.

Gradually I grew apathetic about prophecy. When asked about the rapture or Armageddon or the beast, I pleaded ignorance. As for the antichrist and the millennium, I was agnostic. Sure, the Lord was coming back, but who could say when? Pragmatist that I was, I forsook thoughts of the future in favour of more present-day concerns – like growing Christians, living in the presence of the Spirit, building relationships and so on. For me discussions of the future were a thing of the past.

Much against my design and good sense, a few years later I finally gave in to the insistence of a young adult fellowship to lead a study on Revelation and prophecy. As a result of that fresh interaction with biblical prophecy, I began to see how parochial my perspective on the faith had become. I was dismayed to discover how I had amputated discipleship from its significant context in the totality of God's purpose. New colours and texture were added to the mural of my understanding of God and life with him.

My pilgrimage could be diagrammed in circular fashion – to describe how I returned, finally, to belief in the import of prophecy. If so, I hope I have come home with a greater maturity in understanding and practicing biblical interpretation as well as with a deeper humility in presenting that interpretation.

The large number of Christian books discussing "things to come" currently on the market shows the widespread desire to know what the Bible has to say about these days and our future. I am sure I am not the only person left unsatisfied by all of this writing. I believe there are many persons like me for whom the many discussions on biblical prophecy have left more questions than answers. And I imagine I am not the only one to have been frustrated by the conflicting explanations offered by the so-called experts on the subject. Consequently, I am convinced that people need aids for unravelling the tangles of prophetic language, principles for interpreting the prophetic message. This book is an invitation, directed particularly to a nonscholarly audience, for Christians to learn how to read biblical prophecy for themselves.¹

Preliminary Potential Concerns

That raises several issues – some of which may concern you.

- Revelation is a difficult book – some rather weird things are in it, many of which aren't easy for us to understand at this point in time.
- There's considerable disagreement over Revelation – we aren't likely to all agree over every bit of it.

¹ Joel B.Green, *How to Read Prophecy* (Leicester: IVP, 1984) 11-14.

We may not even agree over its general thrust. We may start fighting with one another over it.

- Some people are very dogmatic over their particular interpretation of Revelation and very forceful in how they express that. Often those forceful people disagree with one another – yet they each continue to insist they're right when it's quite apparent they can't all be right.
- Plenty of people have made fools of themselves as they made definite predictions based on their particular interpretation of the bits of Revelation.

So, you may be a bit hesitant about getting into the book of Revelation together.

A couple of introductory comments. **First**, a reminder of what our constitution says about *The Future* in our doctrinal statement.

The Lord Jesus Christ will return. He will execute God's judgement on all who have not turned to God through Jesus Christ, consigning them to hell, and He will welcome his people into a life of eternal joy in fellowship with God in heaven. On that day all sin, suffering and death amongst Christ's people will be completely destroyed, creation will be renewed, and God will be glorified forever.

That's what we believe in common. That's important. Those two beliefs are common to evangelicals.

Yet, that statement leaves plenty of room for variation among us. For example:

- It doesn't say anything about a belief in the rapture or whether the rapture will be before, in the middle of, or after the tribulation.
- It doesn't say anything about a belief in the second

coming of Jesus that includes one, two or three different stages.

There are plenty of other things it doesn't say anything about. That's deliberate. We know people hold different beliefs about those things – but those different beliefs don't stop them being Christians or being evangelicals.

Secondly, we must be patient and loving. Let's suppose you believe in a mid-tribulation rapture and I believe in a post-tribulation rapture. How should we treat each other?

- We should listen to each other carefully – trying to truly understand the other person's beliefs and the reasons for those beliefs.
- We should listen to each other with humility – it's possible the other person's right in their interpretation and I'm wrong.
- We should remember that we both can hold our beliefs and still be true-blue, evangelical Christians. If at the end of our patient and loving discussion we both still disagree, that shouldn't affect our Christian fellowship and our Christian mission.

This is an area where the way we conduct our discussion may be more important than the conclusions we reach. Lack of fellowship is a bigger problem than disagreement over these particular beliefs.

There are limits. If you wish to deny Jesus' return altogether, then you've moved outside true Christian beliefs. But within those limits, there remains plenty of room for variation among Christian brothers and sisters.

Thirdly, a reminder of what Revelation itself promises. Turn to Revelation 1:3

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this

prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

To avoid Revelation is to avoid that promised blessing. No blessing is promised to those who ignore the book!

The Type of Literature

We're going to deal with a number of preliminary issues before we get to the actual text of Revelation itself. This will take several weeks. By dealing with these preliminary issues, I hope to avoid some of the arguments people often have over the details of the text – or at least help us understand where the real argument is. People can think they're arguing over the particular details of a text when the reality is they're arguing over the assumptions and presuppositions they bring to the text.

Tonight, we'll think about what sort of literature Revelation is. We know there are different types of literature. We learned that as we grew up. If you go to a library, the first big distinction you notice is between fiction and non-fiction. That's the obvious one. Yet, within both those big categories, there are other smaller categories.

As we grew up, we also learned we interpret the different types of literature in different ways. Each has its own characteristics and those characteristics influence the way we interpret it. You don't read a novel the same way you read a science textbook. Perhaps most of us don't read a science textbook at all! We're used to reading different types of literature and often we make the adjustments between the different types without even thinking about it. It's become something of a habit.

We even find different types of literature in the one pub-

lication. Have a look at the following examples from *The Western Advocate* in the week before last. The first couple are examples of articles:

- An article from towards the front reports the result of a court case – a man sentenced to six years in gaol for a glassing attack in a hotel.
- An article from towards the back of the paper reports on the upcoming round of local Aussie Rules. We know sports articles often appear at the end of the local paper.
- Another article from towards the front reports the rising level of the Macquarie River in Bathurst – and supports it with a picture.

How do we read each of those articles?

- We recognise that articles are intended to be read as fact. They are supposed to report accurately actual events.
- We know from experience that the accuracy and truthfulness of articles varies with the author. Some authors have considerable bias. Some have their own particular axes to grind.
- We also recognise there are sometimes inaccuracies because of human error – typing mistakes, poor reporting, not checking out the facts sufficiently.

The next example is a column by Gerard Martin – the local state parliamentarian. It looks like an article and has similar content, but we recognise it's likely to have a political bias. We read it with a slightly different mindset from the articles. Our own political bias influences how we read it – or perhaps even if we read it.

Many papers have letters to the editor. I couldn't find any

in this edition of the paper. When we come across those, we take other things into account.

- We recognise anyone can write them for whatever reason they like – although we also hope the editor displays some sense in which are published.
- We know these letters can vary greatly in quality and in the accuracy of what they say.
- They're more likely to express opinion – usually very strong opinion. The person has been sufficiently moved emotionally to take the time to write a letter that may be made public.
- They often express a very strong bias.

The next two examples are advertisements:

- A section of the classifieds.
- A paid ad by a business.

We know a certain level of truthfulness is required – but we also know people want to sell what's on offer and will present it in the best light possible.

Then there's the comic section. They have a different format. That format tells us – this is not truth; this is entertainment. We read it differently.

Just below the comics, is the Daily Stars. We recognise this as fictional rubbish and so don't bother reading it. Unfortunately, not everyone's that discerning.

We could look at other examples as well – but that should be enough to provide the general idea.

The Bible also consists of different types of literature – and each of those types of literature should be interpreted accordingly. What types of literature are in the Bible?

- Laws
- Historical writings.
- Parables.
- People's opinions.
- Prophecies.
- Poetry.
- Hymns.
- Letters.
- Gospels.
- Conversations.
- Proverbs.
- Love songs.
- Sayings.

That's quite a variety. We don't interpret them all in the same way. Let me illustrate by example. First, Exodus 14:29-30

But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore.

How do we interpret that? It's an unusual event – almost unique – and yet we interpret it as being historically accurate. This is what we believe actually happened.

Look at the next chapter – Exodus 15:4

Pharaoh's chariots and his army

He has hurled into the sea.

*The best of Pharaoh's officers
are drowned in the Red Sea.*

Is that intended to be historically accurate? Was the army thrown into the sea or did the sea come tumbling down on top of them? Because it's a song, we allow a certain amount of poetic licence in the way the historical events

are expressed. Or look at verse 6:

*Your right hand, O Lord,
was majestic in power.*

*Your right hand, O Lord,
shattered the enemy.*

Does God, who is Spirit, literally have a right hand?

We know the parable of the Good Samaritan. Does that report history? It could be – that exact story could well have happened on occasion. Yet, the context in which it's told and the nature of parables tells us that's not the focus. Jesus shows He doesn't intend to tell a true story – He intends to make a particular point through the means of a story that relates the events of life.

Or turn to Psalm 98:8

*Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy.*

Now, I've never seen a river with hands – it may be I just haven't been in the right place at the right time, but I suspect it's something more than that. Is the psalmist saying that in his days the rivers literally had hands?

Or what about Isaiah 55:12

*You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.*

Will this prophecy only be fulfilled when I see trees with literal hands? Does a literal fulfilment of this prophecy require something of a fundamental change in the nature of trees?

We learn to recognise the different types of literature and interpret them accordingly.

What Sort of Literature is Revelation?

What sort of literature is Revelation? Here we can come up with three different answers. **First**, have a look at 1:1

*The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to
show His servants what must soon take place.*

The word used at the opening is *apokalupsis*. The NIV translates it *revelation*. It means unveiling. It's the idea of something hidden being uncovered – of the covers being peeled back to reveal what is underneath. The term also came to be used for a particular style of literature – *apocalyptic*. This sort of literature flourished between the two centuries either side of the year 0 – yes, I know there was no such year, but you know what I mean. Because it's a style of literature we aren't very familiar with, we'll talk about it in more detail next Sunday evening.

Secondly, look at verse 3 again:

*Blessed is the one who reads the words of this
prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take
to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.*

That identifies it as being in the style of prophecy – that long tradition we find at the end of our Old Testaments.

Thirdly, look at verse 4:

*John,
To the seven churches in the province of Asia:
Grace and peace to you ...*

What's that remind you of? It's just like the beginning of the New Testament letters. It's the standard way they wrote their letters – the three traditional elements:

- Writer;
- Recipients; and
- Greetings.

When does the letter finish? Some people think at the end of chapter 3 – after the seven separate letters to the churches. Yet, have a look at 22:21

*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people.
Amen.*

That's like the end of other New Testament letters. A strong case can be made that the entire document's a letter to the churches.

To conclude. Two main appeals tonight:

- Be willing to check your underlying assumptions.
- Be willing to listen to and love those you disagree with.