



# READING RESPONSIBLY

Correctly Handling the Word of Truth

## LESSON 09: REVELATION

Signs & Symbols

### I. Introduction

Read Rev 22:12. What does “soon” mean?

→ [Read Revelation 22:12](#)

*Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.*

### C. Quotes

- “They are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. This is just the same as if we did not have the book at all.” – Martin Luther
- “the curious visions of a drug addict” – George Bernard Shaw
- “no other part of the Bible has provided such a happy hunting ground for all sorts of bizarre and dangerous interpretations” – M. Eugene Boring
- “though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.” – G.K. Chesterton
- “Few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results.” – Luke Timothy Johnson

### II. Overview of Genre & Context: Apocalypse

- Genre
  - Revelation is actually a mix of letter, prophecy, apocalypse
  - “A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” – John Collins, part of SBL’s 1979 “Apocalypse Group.”
    - In other words, someone divine tells someone human about a new reality where things are different.
  - Words of comfort and encouragement; not predictions about ages long in the future.
  - At the tension between brilliant hopes and bleak realities (Isa 59:9).
  - Characteristics (Fee & Stuart, 251-252)

- Literary works
- Cryptic language, presented as visions and dreams
- Images are fantasy rather than reality
- Symbolic use of numbers
- Context
  - Looking for end of the *empire*, not end of the *world*
  - Resistance literature
  - Christians begin calling Rome “Babylon” after the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70).

### III. Big Issues

#### A. Approaches to reading

##### 1. Predictive

- Focus on future
  - Mainly western history
  - End times
- Left Behind
- Can be very political

##### 2. Preterist

- Limited to 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century
- A specimen of ancient literature

##### 3. Poetic/Theopoetic

- Timeless
- Message not for or limited to a single context
- Broad messages vs. specific predictions

##### 4. Political/Theopolitical

- Comfort and protest
- Criticizes injustice and oppression, especially by an empire

##### 5. Pastoral-Prophetic

- Calls the church to faithfulness in the face of conflict with hostile powers
  - If we believe that Babylon is not *only* Rome, and is not some new Roman Empire in modern Europe, then we can see Babylon wherever it shows up and respond accordingly.

→ Read Revelation 1:1-3

*<sup>1</sup> The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup> who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. <sup>3</sup> Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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.*

- Emphasis on keeping the words of prophecy reminds us that book isn't mainly an abstract prediction/depiction of things to come just to satisfy our curiosity. It is a call to faithfulness.

## Problems with the Predictive Approach

- Treats the Bible as a puzzle to be pieced together
- Assumes rapture/tribulation is imminent, and that's all that matters.
- Misunderstands "end times"
- Reason for conversion is mainly fear
- Sees Middle Eastern wars as part of God's plan and a force for good

## IV. Specific Examples

### A. 7 Churches, 7 Eras (Gorman, 84)

Text	Church	Type	Era
2:1-7	Ephesus	Apostolic church	to ca. 100 or 150
2:8-11	Smyrna	Persecuted church	ca. 100-312 (Constantine)
2:12-17	Pergamum	Compromised church favored by empire but judged by Christ	ca. 312-606 (election of Pope Boniface X)
2:18-29	Thyatira	Worldly, lax medieval church dominated by papacy and characterized by superstition and paganism	ca. 606-1500/1517 (Protestant Reformation), but also continuing until the tribulation
3:1-6	Sardis	Reformation churches, still too much like the medieval church, more dead than alive	ca. 1517-1750, but also continuing today
3:7-13	Philadelphia	True church, loved by Christ, characterized by revival and missionary activity	ca. 1750-early 20 <sup>th</sup> century, but also continuing until rapture
3:14-22	Laodicea	Lukewarm, apostate, anti-supernatural church	ca. 1900-tribulation

### B. 666 (Gorman, 126)

- A parody of 777 (perfection)

#### Past Candidates

- Adolf Hitler (A=100, B=101, etc.)
- Henry Kissinger (Hebrew value of 111)
- Ronald Wilson Reagan (6 letters in each name)
- Bill Clinton (Hebrew and Greek value of 666)
- John F. Kennedy (666 votes at 1956 Democratic convention)
- Ronald & Nancy Reagan (house number 666)

#### Likely Solutions

- Greek for Nero Caesar (neron kaisar) – Hebrew NRWN QSR – 666
- Alternate readings give 616, which appears in some other Revelation manuscripts
- Overall, an imperial figure who is ungodly but thinks himself to be a god.
- Nero is already dead, but is a stand in for all such people.
  - "If you've seen one pharaoh, you've seen them all." – Walter Brueggemann

## V. Reading Revelation Responsibly: Strategies/Encouragement

### A. Assume a first century fulfillment

- Don't *limit* to first century, but start there, and see what connections you can make.

### B. Read with a global perspective

- If about 1900s-2000s United States, then what about Christians in India? People living in 1500? Very arrogant to assume America-centric with no evidence. Speaks more about American's founding beliefs and myths.

### C. Make connections – broadly!

- Don't press the details too far.
- Like parables

### D. Think blueprint or template, not puzzle.

- See what timeless lessons emerge.
- What are instructions for the church?
- What modern characteristics of empire do I see around me?

## VII. Next Lesson: Tips & Tricks for Reading Responsibly