

# Revelation: The Church Triumphant Through Christ the Lamb of God

*Based upon Jim McGuigan's work on the book of Revelation*

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## The Book of Revelation: Past, Present, or Future?

## Lesson One

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In this lesson, we will learn that ...

- Revelation is written in pictures rather than words and sentences.
  - Revelation is rooted in the Old Testament and a good grasp of OT history will help us to more easily understand the book.
  - Nearly 2000 years ago John said the events of the book of Revelation were to happen soon and that, back then, the time for fulfillment was near.
  - There are two major elements in the book of Revelation.
  - The central message is comfort to the Christians who were about to come into conflict with the Roman Empire.
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It seems that many who are interested in the Bible would like to know what the book of Revelation is about but very few want to take the time to get into it. I'm sure there are numerous reasons for that. To begin with, the book isn't written in plain speech like, say, the book of Acts or Genesis or the Gospels and that means more work for an already busy person. Secondly, there's so much disagreement about what the book means that many people feel, "If all the experts differ, how can we, the less experienced, hope to understand it?" So they leave it alone and concentrate on the books they can "draw lessons from." Take my word for it that the book isn't as difficult as the "experts" have made it. It's richer and deeper than all of their insights combined and they concede that, but it's not as obscure as they often give the impression it is. But if you insist on thinking you can't understand it this will undermine your ability to understand it. With God's gracious help, if you want a good working knowledge of its general thrust and a sense of its riches and you're prepared to spend a little time in getting it, you can do it.

### *Some helpful suggestions for understanding the book of Revelation*

1. Read a lot in the Old Testament because so much of Revelation's speech and thought is rooted there.
2. Tell yourself again and again that Revelation is written mainly in images and pictures that aren't supposed to be taken literally. Remind yourself, "That's what he *sees*, now what does it *mean*?"
3. Be content to get a grasp of the main drift and larger issues first before spending too long wrestling with the details. It doesn't matter that you don't know all the answers right now. When you're done you'll admit there's a vast amount that you've missed but you'll feel helped by how much you've learned.
4. Believe that God wouldn't have written it if it couldn't be understood and then prayerfully work away at the contents.
5. Credit yourself with as much common sense as the people who paint these wild pictures of what they say is going to happen in the very near future. (What they have been saying for many years is going to happen in the very near future.) We've heard from the "experts" that very soon hailstones will fall, each one weighing about 100 pounds. We hear that all the water on the earth—oceans included—will turn into blood and yet two hundred million warriors from the East will ride on horses into Palestine. All that, they warned, was going to happen and the Coca-Cola will run out. Yes! You can't butcher Revelation worse than that so get on into it and see what you can do.

### *Has the book of Revelation been fulfilled?*

This is a legitimate question but it leaves a false impression. It makes it appear as though the book of Revelation is more or less a series of predictions. It gives the impression that it is *essentially* a book that foretells startling events that will unfold in the near future. It would be a mistake to deny that there are events predicted in the book (there are!) but that's true of the Gospels, Acts and the epistles. The book of Revelation is a prophetic call

to loyalty to God who alone is worthy of service and praise. And it's an assurance that victory belongs to the people of God no matter who the enemy is. But there are predictive elements in the book that are wrapped up in the truths just mentioned. Have the predictive elements been fulfilled? You can be certain the answer is yes!

Bear in mind that John wrote the book almost two thousand years ago. When he wrote it he said it was "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place." (1:1) *What must soon take place*. Then in 1:3 he urged his readers to take to heart what is written, "because the time is near." *Because the time is near*. What do you think those two phrases mean? He said that two thousand years ago at the opening of the book. My suspicion is that if we had no special interests that we'd take the words at face value.

And he didn't change his mind as the book closes. In 22:6 the angel says, "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place." *Things that must soon take place!* And just to be sure that we get the message he says this again in 22:10: "Don't seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near." *Because the time is near*.

It looks like everyone knows what these words mean until they come to the book of Revelation. Certain teachers keep telling us that the end of the world is near or that Armageddon is to take place soon. They know what it means in their best-selling books and in their tapes. They know what it means everywhere else in the Bible, but when it comes to Revelation the phrases become all mystery.

If John walked into your presence *today*, showed you a scroll and said to you, "This is about what must soon take place!" what would you think? If he repeated, "Take this to heart, because the time is near!" what would you think? If he read the whole Revelation to you and then said, "These things are true and must soon take place!" would you think they might be hundreds or thousands of years away? And then he hands you the scroll and as he turned to leave you he says, "Don't seal that revelation up because the time is near!" would you even imagine that it related to *centuries* from now?

The truth is, the book of Revelation deals with things that related to the Roman Empire, the fourth beast of Daniel 7, when it came into conflict with the New Testament church back in the first centuries. Revelation presents Rome as the tool and instrument of Satan in conflict with Christians who are the body of Christ, the army of the white-horsed rider whose name is The Word of God (Revelation 19:11-16). It comes to focus in a particular Roman emperor (Domitian) who stands for all that the Roman Empire stood for.

If we can't understand plain phrases that are like an envelope that encloses the whole of the book (scholars call phrases that function in that way an *inclusion*) how do we imagine we'll understand symbols and images that are left without explicit explanation? Whatever the signs and images mean we are to understand this: *Two thousand years ago John said the coming events were to happen soon*. So when you hear popular writers assure you that they haven't even begun yet you've just been warned.

People have said that with God time didn't matter and that with him one day is like a thousand years so "at hand" or "soon to happen" may mean anything. It's true, of course, that God isn't bothered by time, but his creatures are. If God had been talking to himself this would have been relevant. But God was talking to puny little people. He takes our humanity into account as Ezekiel 12:21-28 and Daniel 8:26 shows us.

In Daniel 8:26 God says the vision there "concerns the distant future." There is no distant future for God but he wasn't talking to himself. When he spoke to limited humans he spoke of "the distant future" so he knows what words like that mean. The ungodly mocked God's message in Ezekiel chapter 12. At first they said, "These threats are empty. They won't be fulfilled." Then they said, "Well, maybe they'll be fulfilled but the vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future." And how did God answer them? He answered them in the words we find in Revelation. "Say to them the days are near...it shall be fulfilled without delay..." They said, "Don't worry it's a long way off" and God said, "Worry, the time is near."

Finally, on this point: Compare Daniel 8:26 with Revelation 22:10 and let common sense rule. Here's what the two texts say:

Seal up the vision for, it concerns the distant future.

Don't seal up the prophecy, because the time is near.

You can see they're told to do opposite things. But notice *why* they were told to do opposite things. Daniel is told to seal up the vision because it deals with the distant future. John is told to leave it open because the time is near. God knows what a short time is. Why do people argue against this? Well, for one reason or another they've drawn conclusions about what the images in Revelation mean and they settle for that. When they're reminded of truths like the above they don't want to receive them because it makes a mess of their whole futuristic scheme. And when you go public, write a lot of books, construct a whole eschatological system based on your interpretation of these images it's hard to back away. It isn't easy to admit we've been wrong especially if a lot is riding on it.

The safest approach to Revelation is to let *John* tell us what its time frame is rather than us telling John.

### ***The central message of the book of Revelation***

The central message is that God alone is to be worshiped and served and that that truth is to be maintained when the Roman beast rises against the people of God. The central message of the book is that the Roman Empire is the expression of the world spirit (the Dragon, Satan) that opposes God's kingdom purpose as it shows itself in Jesus Christ and his followers. The central message is that when the smoke clears it's the followers of the Lord Christ that are triumphant and that his Lordship is made concrete and local here on the earth. The Roman Empire claims dominion but it's a satanic claim. They "prove" it by brutality and cruelty. The church insists that Jesus has dominion and they prove it (as followers of Christ) by outliving, out-suffering and out-lasting Rome.

### ***Two major elements in the book***

*There are some predictive elements* and these have been fulfilled. They are summarized and focused in the emperor Domitian who stands for all that is the brutal and bestial Roman Empire. On his tomb, so to speak, Jesus stands and proclaims the kingdom of God. And so aspects of Daniel 2 and 7 are demonstrated as "done!"

*There are timeless truths.* For example, God alone is Lord and worthy of praise and service. Note how large sections of praise for God occur in chapters 4-12 and 14-19. Sandwiched in between are chapter 13 and the worship of the Beast. Twice John is told to worship no one but God himself. Other major timeless truths are developed in the book.

But if the predictions of Revelation have been fulfilled would that mean Revelation is of no real interest or relevance to us today? Indeed not. Nahum prophesied the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC but to call it useless or irrelevant would be silly. Old Testament prophecies of the birth and suffering of Christ or Christ in his earthly ministry have been fulfilled but we know they aren't useless. ***There's profoundly more about life with God than having a calendar of future events in our pocket.***

## Exercises for Lesson One

Complete the following statements.

1. The safest approach to the book of Revelation is to let *John* tell us what its time frame is rather than us telling *John*. \_\_\_\_\_
2. The truth is, the book of Revelation deals with things that related to the Roman Empire, the fourth beast of Daniel 7, when it came into conflict with the New Testament church back in the first centuries. \_\_\_\_\_
3. It's true of course that God isn't bothered by time, but his creatures are. \_\_\_\_\_
4. "Seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future." \_\_\_\_\_
5. If we can't understand plain phrases that are like an envelope that encloses the whole of the book (scholars call phrases that function in that way an *inclusion*) how do we imagine we'll understand symbols and images that are left without explicit explanation? \_\_\_\_\_
6. It seems that everyone who's interested in the Bible would like to know what the book of Revelation is about but very few want to take the time to get into it. \_\_\_\_\_
7. And just to be sure we get the message he says this again in 22:10: "Don't seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near." \_\_\_\_\_
8. There is no "distant future" for God but he wasn't talking to himself. \_\_\_\_\_
9. The central message that when the smoke clears it's the followers of the Lord Christ that are triumphant and that his Lordship is made concrete and local here on the earth. \_\_\_\_\_
10. If he read the whole revelation to you and then said, "These things are true and must soon take place!" would you think they might be hundreds or thousands of years away? \_\_\_\_\_

Check off each pair of references after you have read them.

Distant future verses shortly, soon

\_\_\_\_ Daniel 8:26 with Revelation 1:1,3

What God has prophesied has been fulfilled

\_\_\_\_ Ezekiel 12:21-28 with Revelation 22:6,10

True or False?

1. "The time is near" really means nothing. F
2. Revelation is written just like any other Bible book. F
3. Daniel and John were told to do opposite things. T
4. The reason they were opposites is clearly given. T
5. Revelation can't be understood. T
6. If the predictions of Revelation have been fulfilled then the book is of no use to us. F
7. Nahum's predictions have been fulfilled and it's still useful to us. T
8. So many of Revelation's images are rooted in the Old Testament. T
9. Two thousand years ago John said the events of Revelation were to take place shortly. T
10. There are two major elements in the book of Revelation. T

Briefly list the five helpful suggestions for understanding the book of Revelation.

1. Read a lot in the Old Testament because so much of Revelation's speech and thought is rooted there \_\_\_\_\_
2. Revelation is written mainly in images and pictures that aren't supposed to be taken literally. That's what John sees, now what does it mean? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Be content to get a grasp of the main drift and larger issues first \_\_\_\_\_
4. Believe that God wouldn't have written it if it couldn't be understood and then prayerfully work away at the contents \_\_\_\_\_
5. Credit yourself with as much common sense as the people who paint these wild pictures of what they say is going to happen in the very near future \_\_\_\_\_