

THE STORY
CHAPTER 31
STUDY 31

Revelation: a book that scares people because we hear it is difficult to understand. Of course there have been some really fanciful interpretations of it over the years but really, the overall message is clear:

Jesus is going to win!

There is no doubt to any serious interpreter that this is the message. Nevertheless, the details are often less clear. But if we understand the kinds of literature with which we are dealing, it will protect us from obvious mistakes.

Three kinds of literature are found in this book. Right at the beginning we see that it is a letter:

This letter is from John to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Grace and peace from the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come; from the sevenfold Spirit before his throne; and from Jesus Christ - Rev. 1:4

The Revelation was written by someone to 7 known and named churches living in a known period of history facing identifiable circumstances. And we know it was written by Pastor John to the churches he was pastoring and that he was writing to encourage them.

They needed encouragement. Domitian was emperor. He required that he was declared "Lord". Those refusing to were punished – in fact John was in prison on Patmos for refusing to declare that Caesar was Lord. He, and all Christians knew, that Jesus was Lord. But that raised a problem. If that were so, Christians wondered, why were they suffering? Why did it seem as though Caesar *were* Lord? Why was immorality invading the churches? Why were Christians compromising their standards? Where is Jesus in all of this? John writes to real churches facing these real problems. Revelation is first and foremost a pastoral letter.

But, it is also a prophecy. Most will think "predicting the future" when they hear the word "prophecy. Certainly biblical prophecy does at times involve that. But biblical prophecy is not so much: "Look what is coming". It is more "thus says the Lord" – prophets declare God's will, prophets declare what others are unable to see, prophets take the word of God and apply it to a particular situation. John will be encouraging Christians by declaring God's will in those tough times. But, also in the way of all prophets, he will be requiring a response of obedience.

Finally the Revelation is also what we call an *apocalypse*. That is a Greek word meaning an unveiling, or a revealing. That's where we get the name of the book – the Revelation. God wants to reveal something to his people. A characteristic of apocalyptic literature is its symbols, so we find symbolism in this book. We will see people represented in the form of animals; historical events will be seen as natural phenomena – earth quakes etc. And numbers become significant. And yet these things are not impossible to interpret because most of the symbols have their origin in the Old Testament.

But here is the most important aspect of apocalyptic literature: Apocalyptic literature reminds us what we know about the future, and then challenges us to make present life

choices based on that. For example, if we know Jesus is coming again – future event – therefore we should be living now, making choices now which reflect that knowledge. We know that judgment is coming – future event – therefore we should be making life choices now which reflect that knowledge of the future. Apocalyptic encourages that.

But also, apocalyptic wants us to tune into things that are happening now but which are not immediately obvious. For example, in Chapter 4, John, sitting on the prison island of Patmos, sees a door open in heaven, and sees a throne in the centre of the universe, and God – the “All ... Mighty” – is sitting on it. Looking at life on earth it is not immediately obvious that God is on the throne ruling. Apocalyptic literature wants to remind us of that truth so that that unseen reality can positively impact our day to day lives.

The book of Revelation opens with a description of Jesus who is the major player in the book. John sees Jesus and falls at his feet as though dead. John sees a picture of Jesus walking among his churches. And from that place of being among his churches, Jesus writes letters to his seven churches. Each letter to the different churches deals with challenges, strengths, and weaknesses of that church. For example, Jesus commends the church at Ephesus. But He also has it against them that they have forsaken the love they had at first. He warns them to repent otherwise He will remove their lampstand from its place. He tells the church at Sardis that they may have a reputation for being alive but in fact they are dead. If they do not wake up, Jesus will come like a thief in the night. He will come in judgement. Jesus’ most severe rebuke is reserved for the church at Laodicea. He tells them that they are neither cold nor hot. He warns them that He is about to spit them out of His mouth.

Having described who Jesus is, having written the letters to the seven churches, John is now shown a vision of the reality of heaven as it exists right now. As we have seen, there is a throne in the centre of the universe and God sits on the throne and rules and will do so until the consummation of all things. He also sees that amazing picture of the one who is worthy to open the scroll. He sees a lion looking like a lamb that was slain. That is a beautiful picture of Jesus who is the Lion of the tribe of Judah who was also the Lamb of God slain in our place.

The book of Revelation speaks about happenings which will ultimately end in all things being consummated. The battle with evil, which started in the garden of Eden, will finally be won at the end of all things. Jesus, who is King of kings and Lord of lords, will finally and universally be acknowledged as such. The judgement of all things will take place. Those whose names were not found in the Book of life will be eternally banned from the presence of God. They will be thrown into what is called the lake of fire and this event is called the second death. After this there will be a new heaven and a new earth. After this, God will dwell for ever among His people. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death. He will then make everything new.

Heaven is described in terms of the New Jerusalem. The book of Revelation is a series of visions. John is doing his best to describe what he sees using words which are inadequate for the task. We should read some of his descriptions and simply understand that it will be glorious without trying to attach significance to every single word. They are wonderful images. For example, there will not be sun or moon because God’s glory will

give light. There will be no gates which need to be shut, because nothing impure will be there to enter the city/heaven. We see again the Tree of Life, not seen since Eden. We see that there will no longer be any curse.

“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy is written in the scroll.”

“Soon” does not necessarily imply “in the near future”. It can also mean “unexpectedly”. In other words we must always be ready for it because it can happen any time.

1. What was John’s response when he saw Jesus in the vision? Why did he respond this way?

When John saw Jesus he fell at his feet as though dead. In the Old Testament we are told that no one can see God and live. God’s glory is just too overwhelming. When the disciples walked with Jesus, His glory was veiled in humanity. When John saw Jesus in his vision he saw the glorified and risen Christ. Jesus would have looked very different from the way they saw him on earth. It is easier for us to relate to Jesus in his humanity. We must not forget however, that Jesus is also God and therefore glorious and therefore worthy of praise and adoration. John’s response to Jesus gives us some insight as to what he experienced when he saw Jesus.

2. What were the warnings Jesus gave to the churches? In what way do these warnings apply to your life?

Jesus warned the church at Ephesus that they had forsaken the love they had at first. In other words their love for Jesus had grown cold and this was obvious by the way they were not as committed nor devoted to Jesus as they were when they first accepted Him. Are we?

Jesus warned the church at Sardis about having a reputation of being alive but that they were actually dead. The question is sometimes asked: if God’s Holy Spirit were withdrawn from the church would the members notice His removal? If we are doing things in our own strength then we too may seem to be alive but are in fact dead. The only way we can be alive in Jesus’s work is to be operating in the power of the Holy Spirit. Are we?

Jesus warned the church at Laodicea that they were neither cold nor hot. They were tepid, lukewarm. When one considers the greatness and glory of Jesus it is really an insult to be lukewarm in our response to Him and in our service for Him. The thought is that we either serve Jesus fully or not to bother at all. What are we?

3. What do you learn about God from His actions and descriptions in this chapter?

The biggest thing we learn about God from His actions in this chapter is that He is All Mighty. We learn that He will have the final say. We learn that even though things may not appear to be moving in a particular direction, yet God is controlling events and bringing them to the consummation of all things. The bottom line for this book is: Jesus is going to win. Everything we learn about God from the book of Revelation supports this contention.

4. *What does this chapter reveal about what heaven will be like?*

If all we knew about Heaven was written in this book, whilst it would still be something to which we can look forward, it would not be a complete picture. John is struggling to find the language that describes the beauty and glory and desirability of heaven. He sees something enormously desirable and puts it in language which would have conveyed that to his first century audience. When we put the full teaching of the Bible together, then we get a fuller picture. We see creation restored to its pristine pre-fall condition. We see human beings in perfect relationship with one another – pure fellowship. And our relationship with God is also restored to what we had a glimpse of in Eden – pure worship.

5. *Why is it important to think about and seek your hope on heaven?*

We saw in the introduction that one of the purposes of an apocalyptic literature was to encourage us to make choices now in the light of what we know to be true about the future. It is therefore important to have as wonderful a picture of Heaven as scripture allows. It is true: we will not desire what we cannot imagine. Heaven has to be something we desire. If we desire it, then that hope can sustain us through really tough times on earth. If we desire it, then that hope will help us make God honouring choices on earth. Our doctrine of heaven is critical to our life on earth.

6. *What steps can you take to set your hope more fully on what you know about eternity from this chapter?*

I think a study of Heaven and what it is like becomes foundational to being able to set our hope more fully on eternity.