

“Making Sense of Revelation”

Today we're starting a new series of messages that I'm excited about and I'm little afraid of. We start this series on the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. I have never preached a series on Revelation. In fact, I've never preached a single sermon just on Revelation in my 15 years of ministry. As I got ready for this I began to ask myself why. Why have I never done this before? Part of the answer is that every time I've read Revelation I seem to come away confused, mired in all the strange images and symbolism. And I also come away afraid. Some of the pictures that it paints are like a horror movie. I hate horror movies, because they horrify me! I've read the book of Revelation a number of times, but it just has never spoken to my daily faith life, like the rest of the New Testament, so for the most part I've avoided it.

It seems like there are two extremes among Christians about Revelation. One extreme is those who want to just rip it out of the Bible and get rid of it because it so strange, scary and hard to understand. The other extreme seems to be those Christians who obsess with it. That's what they spend all their time on, looking for the signs of the end times, trying to figure out who the beast is. They spend their time doing that and all the while completely miss doing what Jesus called us to do! Feed the hungry, protect widows and orphans, love the unlovable. Unfortunately most mainline Christians only know what other people say about it, they haven't actually taken the time to read it for themselves. So we're going to do that.

Over the next 3 weeks we're going to go on a journey into the book of Revelation. And I think that what we'll find is that we don't need to be afraid of this book, but we do have to use our brains, and good research, so we can glean the messages in this mysterious book. What I've learned is that there really are some very powerful messages for my life and yours.

When I was 12 years old I gave my life to Christ. I was the wild boy, but even wild boys can stand amazed by God in Jesus. That was me. And from that point on I wanted to soak it all up. I wanted to read my Bible and understand God, and live the life of a real follower of Jesus.

About that time, in the mid 70's, several books and movies came out about the end times, about Revelation. One of the movies was called "A Thief in the Night." And it followed the life of a young woman named Patty who was living for the moment with not concern for the future. Until one morning she wakes up to find that her husband and millions of others have vanished. I think it was a four-part movie we watched in youth group, and it scared the bejeebers out of me. It was a depiction of the book of Revelation where Jesus returns secretly and whisks away all the faithful followers and leaves behind the rest and they face this terrible time of plagues and destruction and evil. It was all about the cost of not following Jesus. People had to get the mark of the beast, a bar code, or they couldn't get a job or buy food. The tagline was "there will be no place to hide." It was traumatic.

One of the movies ends with, I think Patty, choosing not to take the mark of the beast and paying the price by being beheaded at a guillotine. You see that image, the movie ends, the lights come on and then the pastor stands up and gives people an invitation to receive Jesus Christ! So you could avoid that particular fate. I'd already given my life to Jesus, but I did it all over again that night! There is nothing like literally having the hell scared out of you! Like I said, maybe there's a reason I hesitate to do much in Revelation. That was my picture of the book of Revelation and it was burned into my brain.

That theme was reconstructed just recently by the *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. How many of you read one or more of these books? I read I think 7 of them in the series of 10. The idea behind the series is that it puts in modern day times and storylines exactly what's going to happen in the book of Revelation.

The question is, is that really what's going to happen according to the book of Revelation? What we're going to try to understand in this series is how do different Christians understand the book of Revelation and what is its power, and often misunderstood and confusing message for our lives today?

Today I want us to look at how the book of Revelation can be read. Then we'll focus our attention on the question, "What is its message for our lives today?" We'll look at one dominate message of the book of Revelation and then next week we'll look at the mark of the beast, Armageddon, and the terrible judgments

that Revelation talks about. Then in the last week we'll look at the millennial reign of Christ and the second coming of the Lord and how different Christians understand the scenario about Jesus' return.

Let's get started with some **Background information about Revelation**. First, when it was written. Most scholars believe that it was **Written about 95 AD** during the reign of Emperor Domitian who died in 96. Revelation was **A letter written to 7 different churches in Asia** in the Roman Empire. This is modern day Turkey, but at the time it was called the province of Asia in the Roman Empire. The seven churches that this was written to are highlighted and you might even be able to see the island that it was written from. Patmos, right here. The island of Patmos was Penal Colony where prisoners were sent. John was sent there for his faith. We believe that it was the same John who wrote the Gospel.

The churches that this was addressed to were the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These seven churches probably represent all the churches in Asia at the time. There were more churches than this in Asia.

The opening words of this book give it its title. **"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1, NIV)**. Notice it's "Revelation", not "Revelations". It's one revelation, not multiple. The word Revelation in Greek is "Apocalypse" so sometimes you hear this called the Apocalypse of John.

As we look at this book we see that it's written in an interesting literary style. **"Written in the style of apocalyptic literature."** It's not like very many other books of the Bible. In fact the only other book written in this same style of literature is in the Old Testament, the book of Daniel. And Revelation draws a lot of imagery from the book of Daniel. There are some other snippets of this kind of literature in Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah in the Old Testament. And few other snippets of this in the New Testament. But for the most part we see this type of literature in the book of Daniel and Revelation. We also see a few examples of this type of literature in books outside of the Bible.

This style of writing uses very vivid imagery and was usually used when people were facing persecution and very difficult times--when there was an evil or oppressive power that was in control and the people were oppressed and didn't know how that evil power could be defeated. The message of this type of literature is that God is in control, even though it may not look like it. And the day is coming where God is going to defeat the evil forces and there will be a time of great joy after that, so don't give up. Stay strong and faithful, even in the face of persecution. That's the message of almost all apocalyptic literature including the book of Revelation.

The language in apocalyptic literature is not meant to be taken literally. It's meant to be taken figuratively. When you take the imagery here too literally you find yourself in trouble. Jesus is a lion in one place and he's a lamb in another. We're told twice that he has a sword coming out of his mouth. Those aren't literal images. They figurative. Don't try to picture a sword popping out of Jesus' mouth! It means with a single word Jesus can destroy his enemies. It's not meant to be the picture of Jesus, it's about his power. We get into trouble when we try to read Revelation too literally.

So with that info as a backdrop, let's take a look at how to read the book of Revelation. There are four main ways that people read the book of Revelation. The most popular way of reading Revelation is what you see laid out in books like *Left Behind*. It's the most recent in Christian history, about 150 years old, and it's called **"The futurist perspective"**. The futurist school of thought on Revelation is that it's about what's going to happen at the very end of time just before the final return of Christ. Futurists are always looking for signs of the beginning of the end in current events. It's interesting that most futurists think that current events are pointing to the fact that the end is near. We have to remember that every generation has had people who thought that! The plagues in Medieval times, the conquests of ancient Islam, the rise of Hitler, Stalin, the creation of European Union. Futurists have seen all of these as signs of the end times in their own generation.

A second school of thought **"The historical perspective"** is that Revelation is really about everything that would happen from John's day to the second coming of Christ. This perspective was the dominant view of

Christians for about 500 years. So they get to Revelation chapter 9 and they believe it tells the story of the spread of Islam around the world. When it comes to the anti-christ they believe that's a picture of the Pope and the church of Rome. They believe that Revelation is ongoing history, some of which has passed, some of which is yet to come.

A third way "**The Preterist perspective**" to look at the book of Revelation is the preterist school of thought. This says that most of what we read in the book of Revelation is about what was happening in the time of John. The persecution he describes was not something that was going to happen, it was happening then. The preterist view is that we can learn timeless truths from Revelation, but the events it describes happened in the first century—they're not unfolding now, they're not going to happen in the future.

One other perspective is the "**The idealist perspective**" This says that the book of Revelation is not describing any actual events at all. It's not describing events in the past, or present, or future. The idealist view is that Revelation is describing the kinds of spiritual conflicts that happen in every generation, in every follower of Christ, in every time and place. They would say that it's more about our individual and communal struggles with evil. In every generation there is a beast, in every generation there is a temptation to take on the mark of that beast, in every generation there's a conflict between God and Satan, the forces of good and the forces of evil. And ultimately, God always wins. That's the idealist perspective of Revelation.

So which of these views do you hold? I would have to say that I'm a combination of three of these four. I'd say that I'm a preterist, idealist and futurist. I think that a big part of the book of Revelation is scenes of what was happening in John's day. That makes me part preterist.

At the same time I think Revelation describes the ongoing battle between God and Satan, the forces of good and the forces of evil that happen in every generation. That's why every generation can see itself in the book of Revelation. That makes me part idealist.

And at the same time I think the last three chapters of Revelation about the second coming of Christ have not yet happened but will happen in the future. That makes me part futurist.

I don't know how you see the book of Revelation but I would ask you to look at why you believe what you do and know that there are other ways to view it.

Just like we learned in the last series, if we can know the context of a book of the Bible, suddenly the letter makes more sense to you. If you understand what was happening when the writer wrote, you suddenly have a key to making sense of the rest of the book. "**The context for the book of Revelation**" So let's look at what was going on when John wrote this letter. One key thing to know is that every person in the Roman Empire was required to make a regular offering to the Emperor as a sign of allegiance. It was typically an incense offering and everyone was required by law to make this offering as a pledge of allegiance. To not make it, was death. Except for the Jews. The Jews were given special permission by the Roman Emperor that they did not have to make this offering to him because it was completely contradictory to their core identity and offensive to them. They were given special permission.

For most of the first century Christians were considered to part of the Jewish faith. But at the end of the 1st century, Jews were starting to say that Christians were no longer Jews. Christians were being pushed out of synagogues because the Jews said they were no longer true to the faith of Judaism. When that started to happen, the Roman government said, "Well, since you're no longer Jews, you have to make this offering to the Emperor." So Christians were now in a place where they were pushed out by the Jews and experiencing some persecution there. And then they were also facing this difficult decision of if they would make this offering to the Emperor or not and what would happen to them.

Some Christians did not accommodate and so they had to live life underground, persecuted by both the Jews and the Romans. And if they were caught, they were executed. Some Jews helped the Romans by leading them to Christians who were not making the offering to the Emperor.

But some Christians did accommodate. They said, "The Emperor is no God, so what difference does it make if I go through the motions and burn a little incense. In my heart I know who the real God of this universe is; I know that I'm a follower of Jesus no matter what the Roman Empire makes me do."

So John's letter is written to both of these. He's writing to those persecuted Christians that are barely existing, barely getting by, living underground and living in fear for their lives. He's writing to them to encourage them, to cheer them on, to let them know that God has not forgotten them and that they'll be blessed for their faithfulness. He wants them to know that God will set things right in the face of evil. Part of the message of Revelation is for them.

But John's also writing to those Christians who had accommodated to Rome. He's telling them, warning them, to be very, very careful. He's telling them that accommodating to Roman society can lead to spiritual death. He's telling them to put a healthy distance between themselves and Roman culture. John's telling them to not be so concerned about their material wealth and physical well-being. He's telling these Christians to be more faithful and be ready to suffer for what they believe, even if it means martyrdom.

Look at what Jesus says to the church in Laodicea. Laodicea was the banking and commerce center of Asia. It was one of the wealthiest cities per capita in the entire Roman Empire. If you could find any of the churches that John mentions that relates most closely to the U.S. it would be Laodicea.

Let's take a look at what Jesus says to this Church, **"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm-- neither hot nor cold-- I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked"** (Revelation 3:15-17, NIV).

The people of Laodicea were feeling good about themselves. They were pretty well off, and proud about how they did things, they were some of the best and brightest in Roman Society. They were thinking, "We're rich, prosperous, and we don't need anything from anybody." But that's not how Jesus saw them at all. They had become repulsive--lukewarm. They thought they had it all, but they were living in an illusion. They were compromising with their culture.

One of the questions we ask when we look at the church in Laodicea and think about ourselves is this: Am I compromising with my culture? Am I more in love with my culture, my material stuff, than with God?" The bigger question to ask is, "Am I any different from my surrounding culture because I choose to follow Jesus?"

Are you any different from your friends you are not Christians? Do you spend your time any differently? Do you spend your money any differently? Do you entertain your friends or yourself any differently that your friends and neighbors do who are not followers of Jesus?

Do you vote any differently from your neighbors and friends because you're a Christian? Do you ever make clothing choices differently because you're a Christian? Or go different places because you're Christian? Would you be willing to wear a cross around your neck if nobody in your neighborhood did? Is there any price you're willing to pay for your faith? Or do you avoid every price?

When we accommodate to our culture too much we stop trying to change the world, and let the world change us. We stop being willing to take risks that might cost us something. We're no longer bold and courageous in our faith. We come to church if we feel like it and if we like the series we're in. We treat our faith like everything else, like consumers. We'll work on it when it's convenient or appeals to us.

The church becomes kind of like a country club there for my needs. "I'll go on a mission trip if it sounds like a cool place to go, but don't ask me to go someplace that's not very cool, or its too rough and the food might not be to my liking. I'll give money if I feel inspired, but if I don't, I won't. I'm not going to really show my faith by praying over meals with friends, or when we're out to eat, what would people think? Or telling somebody about my faith. That might make me uncomfortable, or face rejection, and I don't really want to do that so I just won't."

Somewhere along the way we find ourselves compromising with the culture. I'm guilty of it, and I don't want to be. I struggle with this all the time.

Let me ask you this: How do you struggle with compromising with our culture? There are two extremes you can go to. One extreme is saying, "OK, I'm going to look at everything in the culture as bad and I'm going to bash it all and I'm going to make sure that everybody knows just how bad everything is." Christians often do that. "You can't play cards, you can't dance, you can't go to movies, you can't have a glass of wine with dinner..." We end up missing the point if we go to that extreme. We make all these legalistic rules

and we act so obnoxious about it that nobody is drawn to faith in Christ by how we live. They're repelled from Christ! We miss the point; we forget that Jesus spent lots of time with sinners and tax collectors.

The opposite extreme is often what happens to the rest of us. We become so compromising, so afraid to act or be any different than our neighbors, or do anything boldly because of our faith, that nobody would even know we're Christians. And we quit trying to change the world. Somewhere between the extremes is the happy medium.

Revelation calls us to be different, not for the sake of being different, not for the sake of putting other people down, or making ourselves look better. Revelation calls us to be different so that we're simply faithful to God in Jesus Christ. To live in a world that marches to a different beat than we do, yet love that world.

In my own life I have compromised more times than I ever realized. There are times when we all accommodate to our culture and don't realize it. We compromise our faith. We lose our first love for Christ.

What Revelation does is that it calls us and challenges us to live faithfully and it offers us grace and hope for when we blow it. Jesus said this to the church in Laodicea, **"I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me"** (Revelation 3:19-20, NRSV).

Even though sometimes we have compromised our faith and accommodated, Jesus doesn't walk away. He's there, knocking on the door to our lives saying, "I want to walk with you and be with you, if you'll only let me in." We're all in need of hearing the word of Revelation. A word to stand up for Christ, to be bold and courageous, to stand firm in our faith in a culture that marches to the beat of a different drummer. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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