



Unraveling the Mysteries of

Revelation

Taught by the Rev. Dr. Kent A. Webber
Parish Associate, First Presbyterian Church, Winter 2025

**Sundays, January 19 - March 2, 2025
10:30-11:30 AM, Room 113**

— OR —

**Tuesdays, January 21 - March 4
7:00-8:00 PM, on Zoom**

UNRAVELING THE MYSTERIES OF THE REVELATION TO JOHN

Sunday 10:30 am Class

Jan. 19 - Lesson One: Introduction; Genre, Author, Historical Setting

Text: Chapter 1

Jan. 26 - Lesson Two: Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia Minor

Text: Chapters 2 & 3

Feb. 2 - Lesson Three: John's Heavenly Vision

Text: Chapters 4 & 5

Feb. 9 - Lesson Four: Summary of the 7 Seals and & 7 Trumpets

Text: Chapters 6-11

The Church Confronts Evil Powers

Text: Chapters 12-14

Feb. 16 - Lesson Five: Summary of The Judgments of the 7 Bowl-Cups

Text: Chapters 15 & 16

The Reign and Ruin of the City of the Antichrist

Text: Chapters 17, 18, to 19:10

Feb. 23 - Lesson Six: The Revelation of Christ and the Parousia

Text: 19:11-20:15

Mar. 2 - Lesson Seven: The City of God

Text: Chapters 21 & 22

UNRAVELING THE MYSTERIES OF THE REVELATION TO JOHN

Tuesday 7:00 pm Zoom Class

Jan. 21 - Lesson One: Introduction; Genre, Author, Historical Setting

Text: Chapter 1

Jan. 28 - Lesson Two: Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia Minor

Text: Chapters 2 & 3

Feb. 4 - Lesson Three: John's Heavenly Vision

Text: Chapters 4 & 5

Feb. 11 - Lesson Four: Summary of the 7 Seals and & 7 Trumpets

Text: Chapters 6-11

The Church Confronts Evil Powers

Text: Chapters 12-14

Feb. 18 - Lesson Five: Summary of The Judgments of the 7 Bowl-Cups

Text: Chapters 15 & 16

The Reign and Ruin of the City of the Antichrist

Text: Chapters 17, 18, to 19:10

Feb. 25 - Lesson Six: The Revelation of Christ and the Parousia

Text: 19:11-20:15

Mar. 4 - Lesson Seven: The City of God

Text: Chapters 21 & 22

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INTRODUCTION TO THE REVELATION TO JOHN

Literary Genre – What kind of document is the Revelation?

Apocalyptic Literature – 1:1; “The revelation (Greek – *apocalupsis*) of JC”

John’s own designation for this document is as a revelation, from the Greek verb *apucalupto* meaning “the unfolding or disclosing of things previously hidden.” Therefore one way of viewing the Revelation is as apocalyptic literature.

Such literature was written to people undergoing persecution and suffering for their faith. Persecuted individuals undoubtedly asked themselves, “Is God faithful? What is the meaning of my suffering?” Apocalyptic literature answers such questions by assuring believers that God is guiding history to a final goal, which God will bring about in the near future. Apocalyptic writing emphasizes dualism, as angelic or demonic forces have rebelled against God and oppose God’s will. These forces have been allowed significant control and influence over the world. To deal with this situation, God will intervene, judge the world, and consummate God’s reign as king. In this kind of literature (see the Book of Daniel in the OT) salvation is pictured not as arising from immanent forces or human efforts, but by God’s radical intervention. Therefore the New Jerusalem is not constructed on earth, but descends from heaven above from God (21:2). At the end of time John sees a “new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (21:1).

The most obvious characteristic of apocalyptic literature is its heavy use of symbolism and vivid imagery. A modern analogy would be our use of images for political cartoons – Uncle Sam representing the US, the lion for Britain, the bear for Russia, and the dragon for China. In the Revelation we meet such symbols as “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes.” We also encounter “a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads,” and “a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.” This beast was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. If that’s not enough, we also

meet “another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. It also performs great signs . . .” We’ll unpack each of those images in our class along with some others.

Christian Prophecy – 1:3 “the words of the prophecy”

This document is also referred to as prophecy at 19:10, 22:7, 10, 18, 19. A biblical prophet functions as God’s mouthpiece or spokesperson, i.e., God’s press secretary. The authority of a prophet’s message speaks on the basis of a word or message given the prophet by God. That message is therefore not based on empirical observation, common sense, human experience, or religious tradition. Prophets were not so much predictors of future historical events as speaking a present word to their intended hearers/readers. While most OT prophecy was oral in nature, this “prophecy” in apocalyptic form was written in nature. So this prophecy was originally intended specifically for the seven churches in Asia Minor as they needed a word of encouragement and sometimes a warning from God and the Risen Christ. Since this book is both prophetic and apocalyptic in nature, some of the events described in it are oriented towards the near future rather than the immediate present. It is important to realize that this present-future tension is important, and that God’s central saving acts in the crucified and risen Christ (described in chapters 4 and 5) lie in the past, assuring God’s eventual and complete triumph over the forces of evil in the future.

A Series of Letters – 1:4 “John to the seven churches that are in Asia”

John’s scroll includes letters to seven particular churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Seven is the number for perfection in Judaism. Though these seven letters show great sensitivity to each’s unique struggle and challenge, the letters and the accompanying revelation are meant for the churches in Asia Minor and probably beyond, because we know of other churches in Asia Minor not included (for example Colossae and Troas). So the Revelation, though specifically addressed to seven congregations in Asia Minor, was meant to circulate and be of value to all Christian churches. This entire document was intended for public reading in the worship services of the churches in Asia (1:1).

As was the case with Paul, the writer has something important to say which he can't say in person because he is absent (actually exiled to the Island of Patmos, located off the Turkish coast in the Aegean Sea). This document is a substitute for his personal presence. As we read the Revelation we need to realize that it was written initially to seven specific congregations in Asia Minor late in the first-century A.D. and not specifically to us, though we may still greatly benefit from reading and studying it.

Who Authored the Revelation?

The writer describes himself at 1:9 as follows, "I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." It sounds as if he has been exiled to the small Island of Patmos due to his faith. It is miles long and six miles wide at its greatest width. The Roman historian Tacitus tells us it was among the places used for political banishment by the Romans. Some believe this was a penal colony where those banished worked in the rock quarries (Palmer, 1982, 120). Whether John's banishment was temporary or permanent we do not know.

Because John defines himself as a prophet and makes no apostolic claims or recounts no stories or sayings from Jesus' ministry and in fact distinguishes himself from the apostles (21:14), it is unlikely that this John is the Apostle John. Significant differences in writing style also set him apart from the presumed writer of the Gospel of John and the Letters of John. While the author of those New Testament documents writes with faultless Greek, this writer is by comparison a poor Greek writer. The nature of the Greek of the Revelation suggests that his native language was Hebrew or Aramaic. He was perhaps a Palestinian Christian prophet who had emigrated to the Roman Province of Asia as a refugee during or following the Jewish revolt of 66-70 A.D.

When was the Revelation Written?

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, who was probably born in Asia Minor (in Smyrna) and who lived in the latter part of the second century, dates the Revelation "near the end of Domitian's reign." Emperor Domitian reigned from 81-96 A.D., so Irenaeus' comments would suggest the writing of the

Revelation about 95 or 96 A.D. This was a period of social and economic and religiopolitical harassment of Christians.

Although Julius Caesar and Emperors Augustus, Caligula and Nero accepted emperor worship, the imperial cult escalated when Emperor Domitian decreed that all official government proclamations must begin – “Our Lord and God Domitian commands . . .” It was reported that Domitian had many people executed for “atheism” – failure to worship the gods of Rome, of whom he was one. Historians suggest that Domitian was the first emperor to both claim divine status (“Lord and God”) during his lifetime and also to require a loyalty oath (“Caesar is Lord” – Greek, *kyrios* = master, owner, and ruler), a title given YHWH in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. By one estimate Domitian may have ordered the deaths of as many as 40,000 Christians. In the Revelation, John refers to Antipas (2:13) from the Church in Pergamum “a faithful witness” who was martyred. From what we read in the Revelation, it also sounds as if Christians are sometimes subject to unofficial mob violence and the plundering of property. While some scholars dispute that Domitian’s persecution was empire-wide, it clearly extended throughout the Roman province of Asia.

The Structure of the Document (see the outlines of Revelation included)

First, notice in NT scholar Leon Morris’ outline of the Revelation that nearly the entire document fits into groups of sevens – letters to churches, seals, trumpets, significant signs, last plagues, leaving only chapter 1 at the beginning, and chapters 17-22 at the end out of this pattern.

Working through the book chronologically we meet John in chapter 1 and he receives a vision from the Risen Christ. Then in chapters 2 and 3 come the messages to seven specific congregations in Asia Minor. Chapters 4 and 5 provide a vision of heaven and the crucified and risen Christ who is found worthy to open the heavenly scroll, sealed with seven seals, which contains God’s redemptive plan.

In the mid-section of the book, chapters 6 through 16 are dominated by three judgment sections – the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls, with two important interludes interspersed. The question arises – “How are we to understand these three judgment sections? Are they to be understood as a continuous narration or as parallel ways of teaching the same essential judgment material? British NT scholar G.R.

Beasley-Murray argues for the latter position. If we do so, what do we discover?

The first series of judgments, the seven seals end draw to a close in an interesting way. The opening of the sixth seal brings about shattering changes in the universe. Here is the writer's description at 6:12-17. "There came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'" Then comes the sealing of the one hundred forty-four thousand, twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Judah. Then a great multitude appeared from all peoples and nations, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white. They offer worship to God and the Lamb and the angels join in. When one of the elders around God's throne asked about the white-robed people, he is told, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." This apparently identifies them as martyrs for the faith. At this point, the seventh seal is opened and there is silence in heaven for half an hour. This leads into the seven angels who begin blowing their trumpets. So this first series of judgments leads up to the point of Christ's return after which will come final judgment and the gifting of salvation to the faithful.

The second series of judgments, the seven angels who blow seven trumpets brings us fully to the end of the age. At the sound of the seventh trumpet (11:15), voices in heaven proclaim, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever." With the words of Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" we have reached the end, with final judgment yet to occur.

The third series of judgments, the seven angels with their seven judgment bowls or "bowls of the wrath of God" are poured out. Immediately thereafter (16:17), "a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" What is still to come in chapters 17 – 19:10 is the return of Christ, the judgment of the great whore, Babylon the great, and

final judgment for all humankind. We are assured that the Risen Christ, imaged as the lamb, “will conquer” all God’s enemies. What comes next is the announcement of the marriage supper of the Lamb, the descent of Christ to the earth, final judgment of all people, and the descent of the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth.

Given the way each of the three great judgment sequences ends I think it’s wisest to view them as three different views or perspectives about the same events leading up to the return of Christ rather than a sequence of chronological events.

Between these three judgment sections are two interludes. Between the sixth and seventh seals are the scenes of the Sealing of the 144,000 and the triumph of the great multitude in chapter 7. A second interlude is found at 10:1-11:13 which focuses on the mighty angel with the little scroll and the two witnesses – the two olive trees and the two lampstands.

One change I’d make in Beasley-Murray’s outline corresponds with the outline offered by NT scholar Robert Mounce. He suggests a third interlude exists from 14:6-20, including an impending judgment announced, followed by the harvest of the earth, and finally the vintage of the earth.



- I. Prologue (1:1-20)
 - a. Introduction 1:1-3
 - b. Salutation 1:4-8
 - c. The first vision 1:9-20
- II. The Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)
 - a. To the Church of Ephesus 2:1-7
 - b. To the Church of Smyrna 2:8-11
 - c. To the Church of Pergamum 2:12-17
 - d. To the Church of Thyatira 2:18-29
 - e. To the Church of Sardis 3:1-6
 - f. To the Church of Philadelphia 3:7-13
 - g. To the Church of Laodicea 3:14-22
- III. A Vision of Heaven (4:1-11)
- IV. The Seven Seals (5:1-8:5)
 - a. The unopened book 5:1-5
 - b. The Lion of the tribe of Judah 5:5-14
 - c. The first seal 6:1,2
 - d. The second seal 6:3,4
 - e. The third seal 6:5,6
 - f. The fourth seal 6:7,8
 - g. The fifth seal 6:9-11
 - h. The sixth seal 6:12-17
 - i. An interlude 7:1-17
 - j. The seventh seal 8:1-5
- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)
 - a. The first trumpet 8:6,7
 - b. The second trumpet 8:8,9
 - c. The third trumpet 8:10,11
 - d. The fourth trumpet 8:12
 - e. The eagle 8:13
 - f. The fifth trumpet 9:1-12
 - g. The sixth trumpet 9:13-21
 - h. An interlude 10:1-11:14
 - i. The seventh trumpet 11:15-19
- VI. Seven Significant Signs (12:1-14:20)
 - a. The woman clothed with the sun 12:1-6
 - b. Satan cast out 12:7-12
 - c. War between Satan and the woman and her Son 12:13-17
 - d. The beast from the sea 13:1-10
 - e. The beast from the earth 13:11-18
 - f. The Lamb on Mount Zion 14:1-5
 - g. The harvest of the earth 14:14-20

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VII. The Seven Last Plagues (15:1-16:21)

- a. Preliminaries 15:1-8
- b. The first bowl 16:1,2
- c. The second bowl 16:3
- d. The third bowl 16:4-7
- e. The fourth bowl 16:8,9
- f. The fifth bowl 16:10,11
- g. The sixth bowl 16:12-16
- h. The seventh bowl 16:17-21

VIII. The Triumph of Almighty God (17:1-20:15)

- a. The judgement of the great whore 17:1-18
- b. The judgement of Babylon 18:1-19:5
- c. The marriage of the Lamb 19:6-10
- d. The final victory 19:11-20:15

IX. A New Heaven and a New Earth (21:1-22:5)

- a. "God . . . with them" 21:1-4
- b. Separation between good and evil 21:5-8
- c. The holy city 21:9-21
- d. "No night there" 21:22-22:5

X. Epilogue (22:6-21)

Outline of the Revelation to John - G. R. Beasley-Murray

- 1:1-8 Prologue
- 1:9-20 The Call of John to Prophecy
- 2-3 Letters to the Seven Churches
- 3-4 The Vision of Heaven
-
- 6:1-8:5 The Judgments of the Seven Seals
Ch.7 *Interlude*: The Sealing of the 144,000 and
the Triumph of the Countless Multitude
-
- 8:6-11:19 The Judgments of the Seven Trumpets
10:1-11:14 *Interlude*: The Angel and the Little Scroll,
The Two Witnesses
-
- 12-14 The Conflict between the Church and the Evil Powers
-
- 15-16 The Judgments of the Seven Bowl-Cups
-
- 17:1-19:10 The Reign and Ruin of the City of the Antichrist
- 19:11-22:15 The Revelation of Christ and the City of God
- 22:6-21 Epilogue

LESSON TWO: LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Revelation chapters 2 and 3

This section of the Revelation, the seven letters to churches in Asia Minor, follows a pattern. Each of the letters includes these elements:

- Addressed to each specific congregation via its angel
- Prophetic message formula (“these are the words of . . .”) with a Christological ascription (some quality of Christ); many taken from the Christophany in 1:9-20
- The divine knowledge of each congregation, whether threat or reassurance.
- The “body” of the message praises and/or blames, promises and/or threatens. Only two churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia receive unqualified praise.
- The call to attention and obedience. The call to “hear” implies not only hearing but obeying. Words similar to Jesus’ own words in the gospels, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”
- A future-oriented or eschatological promise to those who “conquer.” NT scholar M. Eugene Boring (1989, 90) comments, “Conquering, winning the victory, is a key word in Revelation’s Christology and understanding of the Christian life. As the summary accomplishment of Jesus’ work on earth can be expressed simply that he ‘overcame’ or ‘conquered’ (3:21; 5:5), so the faithful Christian life can be summarised as ‘conquering’/‘overcoming.’ As revealed in Jesus, the meaning of ‘winning’ is dramatically reversed.”

Revelation 2:1-7 (The Letter to the Church in Ephesus)

Background: Ephesus, located at the mouth of the river Cayster, was the greatest city of the Roman province of Asia, competing with Smyrna and Pergamum for the recognition of its primacy. This populous and wealthy city served as the chief port and market city of Asia. It had the right of *cataplous*, or first landing; senatorial governors were required to land there

when they arrived to enter on their year of office at Pergamum, the seat of government. It was known for its Artemesium – the temple of Artemis (Diana, the fertility goddess), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. This temple was known as an asylum or place of refuge. Besides being the center of the worship of Artemis, the patroness deity of Ephesus, it was also a center of the emperor cult and hosted gladiatorial games. Later, a temple to Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.) was established at Ephesus. According to Acts 19, Ephesus had a strong Jewish community. Paul first visited Ephesus around 51 A.D. (Acts 18:19-20) and returned for a three year stay (Acts 19-20). Not only was Ephesus the base for all of Paul's work in Asia, it was also the center of Asiatic Christian literature (Gospel and letters of John). It was also the site of Apollos' teaching ministry and the home of a group of disciples connected with John the Baptist (Acts 18:19-19:10). In his parting words to the church at Ephesus, Paul warns them of false teachers who will try to lead them astray (Acts 20:29-31).

1. The letter praises the church in Ephesus for what characteristics?
2. Of what is the congregation called to repent?
3. How would you rate your home congregation compared with the church in Ephesus in the above two questions?
4. What "false teachings" are American Christians sometimes confronted with today?

Revelation 2:12-17 (Letter to the Church at Pergamum)

Background: The city of Pergamum was bequeathed by King Attalus III to Rome in 133 B.C., becoming the seat of the Roman Province of Asia. The first imperial cult temple in Asia was built in 29 B.C. in honor of the *Dea Roma* and Augustus. Pergamum remained preeminently the focus of the emperor cult in Asia. Pergamum was most noted for the cults of Zeus (the “top dog” in the Greek and Roman pantheons of deities) and of Asclepius, the god of healing. Both Zeus and Asclepius held the title of Savior with the serpent as their symbol. The senatorial governor of Asia (based in Pergamum) was a proconsul who possessed for his period of office an almost unlimited “power of the sword”, which was the power of capital punishment. The reference in v.14 to practicing “fornication” or “immorality” comes from the Greek verb *porneuein*, which means to fornicate. Its metaphorical meaning, common in the Bible, means idolatry. Pagan religions frequently involved sexual immorality, so it could mean both, although it is likely the metaphorical meaning in this passage. The reference to the teaching of Balaam refers to Jewish tradition, based on Numbers 31:16, that presented Balaam (Numbers 22-24) as a covetous man and one who enticed the Israelites into idolatry and licentiousness (see Jude 11; 2 Peter 2:15). Balaam serves John in his argument against the Nicolaitans.

5. What praise does the Risen Christ give the church at Pergamum?

6. For what do some of the members of the church at Pergamum need to repent? What is the warning for those who refuse to do so?

7. What two things does Christ promise for those who “conquer”? What do you think they mean? What hope and courage might those promised rewards give us today?

*Some commentators think that the white stone is a reference to white stones given as entrance tickets to trade guild dinners, at which pagan gods were honored. Christians who followed the words of this letter might be excluded from such events, possibly threatening their commercial livelihood.

Revelation 3:14-22 (Letter to the Church at Laodicea)

Background: Laodicea, forty miles north of Philadelphia in the Lycus Valley, was founded between 261-246 B.C. Roman rule developed it into a prosperous commercial city. It was a center for banking, the home of a medical school known for its development of “Phrygian powder” used in the making of eye salve, and as a manufacturer of clothing and carpets from its local, glossy, black wool. After the devastating earthquake of 60 A.D., Laodicea’s pride in her financial independence led her to refuse customary imperial aid to rebuild the city. Geographically close to Hierapolis, whose hot-springs flowed over to mix with Laodicea’s water supply, Laodicea’s water was lukewarm with a sulphureous odor that was nauseating to drink.

8. This is a letter devoid of any word of praise. For what sins do some in the church in Laodicea need to repent?

9. Ironically, what three items does the Risen Christ instruct the Laodicean Christians to purchase from him?

10. Christ reminds the Laodiceans, "I reprove and discipline those whom I love." Do you think of repentance as a "once and done" act to begin your discipleship journey or an ongoing practice?

11. Verse 20 seems to speak of a eucharistic meal. What place does the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper have in your life?

12. What amazing promise does Christ offer in v.21 for "those who conquer"?

LESSON THREE: WORTHY IS THE LAMB!

Revelation chapters 4 & 5

In these chapters, John “is in the spirit on the Lord’s day” and receives a vision of heaven. In my view these chapters set the stage for all that follows and might be termed “the center of the document”, though the ultimate goal of God’s plan is yet to be revealed.

1. How would you describe the quality, style, and content of the worship offered God and the Lamb? How might our worship today be “informed” or “guided” by the model of worship in these chapters?
2. How is God Almighty or God’s surroundings described?
3. Who and what surround God’s throne?

7. Take a look at the four hymns in this section; 4:8; 4:11; 5:9-10; and 5:12. Do any sound familiar? Where have you heard them before?

8. What is your favorite Christian hymn or song? Why do you like it?

One of my mentors, the late Earl Palmer writes (1982, 167), “It is the conviction of every New Testament writer that the whole of human history finds its meaning, its convergence point, in this Lion-Lamb who is Jesus Christ. He is the critical center from which all of the parts make sense and toward which all of the parts converge.”

This section is central to everything that follows since the crucified and risen Christ is the only one worthy to open the scroll and doing so reveals what is to happen in the future. His death and resurrection make all the difference and it is in light of his redemptive acts that the decisive victory over sin, evil, and death has already been achieved. That is, the decisive battle in the war has been fought, guaranteeing future success. However the war continues on. So whereas the Revelation says a great deal about future events, it is rooted in a critical past event: Jesus’ death and resurrection.

SUMMARY OF THE SEVEN SEALS & SEVEN TRUMPETS

Revelation Chapters 6-11

This large section includes two of the three judgment or plague sections in the book. In the minds of Christians who hold to a dispensationalist understanding of Scripture, since the seven churches in Asia Minor are mentioned in chapters two and three but no other mention of any church is made until 22:16, these Christians believe that sometime prior to chapter 6 in this narrative the Risen Christ has invisibly returned to earth to "rapture" (send) them to heaven, sort of like being in the transporter on the Starship Enterprise and being "beamed up." Therefore, all Christians have suddenly disappeared from planet earth. To support that teaching, they say the rapture is taught at Matthew 24:40-41; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; and implied at Revelation 3:7-13. How does that strike you?

It seems to me that nowhere does the New Testament teach two future comings of Christ - only one visible coming at the end of history to consummate God's kingly reign.

It is also clear in the Revelation that if indeed this is a precise chronological ordering of future events (which I doubt it is), then at 12:17 the dragon makes war on the woman's children who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus. In addition at 13:7 we read that the beast from the sea "was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them". Finally at 14:12-13 we read, "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." So the evidence from the Revelation itself is that Christians at that point in the narrative have not in fact been "removed" from earthly life.

Another critique I bring to the teaching about the Rapture as a secret, invisible coming of Jesus, is that it disincentivizes Christians to work for societal transformation or care about creation care, social justice and peace. Because we are only short-timers on the planet and it is destined for destruction, our efforts in those areas would be short-lived and of limited value. Yet we never see that attitude in any New Testament writing!

In chapter seven, prior to the full display of the "wrath of the lamb" (6:16), John says 144,000 "of the people of Israel are sealed." There were 12 tribes of Israel and 12 disciples in Jesus' inner circle who were called to become apostles; the number 144,000 is created by 12,000 cubed. After seeing the 144,000 John says, he saw a multitude no one could count. This is an image of the future size and influence of the church.

Just before the Lamb opens the seventh seal at 8:1, an angel explains to John that the people he sees robed in white are martyrs "who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Immediately after the Lamb opens the seventh seal, "there was silence in heaven for half an hour." Have we reached the end? If not, it is at least an anticipation of the end because much of what was promised the martyrs is reiterated in the final scene in chapters 21 and 22.

Tragic consequences occur as the first six of seven trumpets are blown with horrible plagues and events unleashed that kill untold masses of people. It is announced before the seventh trumpet blows that "the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets." When the seventh angels blew his trumpet, there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." We seem to have arrived at the end with this heavenly worship scene. Chapter 11 ends on this note, "Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within the temple; (this means God was seen) and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail."

So it seems in these first two series of judgments, the end is anticipated at the end of both.

LESSON FOUR: THE CHURCH CONFRONTS EVIL POWERS

Revelation Chapters 12-14

In this section of the Revelation we meet some strange symbolic figures, one of which is a positive figure - the pregnant woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown on her head of twelve stars. However we also meet three evil figures, a sort of Evil Trinity - a red dragon from the sea, and then beasts from the sea and from the earth. One way of thinking about these apocalyptic figures is a bit like modern political cartoonists who represent the U.S. with an eagle or the figure of Uncle Sam, Great Britain as either a bulldog or a lion, Russia as a bear, China as a dragon, and France as a poodle or a rooster. The difference is that in apocalyptic writing there is nothing humorous about the evil figures presented.

1. Whom do you identify as the pregnant woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, who gives birth to a son, "who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron"?
2. Within chapters twelve, what do we learn about the "great red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and seven diadems on his heads?" By what other titles or names is this figure known?
3. What happened with the woman's newborn son and the woman?
4. Please describe the war which broke out in heaven and what took place as a result?

*In an earlier lesson we talked about the "rapture" - the doctrine taught by dispensational Christians that there are two future comings (returns) of the Risen Christ. First is the secret, "invisible coming" when Christ removes the faithful and a second, visible coming when he comes to consummate God's reign as king at the end of time. However, a clear problem with this viewpoint is the fact that at Rev. 12:11 we read, "for they (Christian martyrs) did not cling to life even in the face of death." Further Rev. 12:17 asserts there are still Christians present at this stage of his narrative who are harassed by the dragon "who makes war on them" and in 13:17 some of those are "conquered" and killed by the dragon.

5. Please describe the background, appearance, claims, and activities of the "beast from the sea." Notice that this beast reflects the powers of the four beasts described in Daniel chapter seven. Daniel has seen four beasts rise - a lion with eagle's wings probably representing Babylon; a bear, representing Media; a winged leopard with four heads representing probably Persia, and a grim nameless beast with ten horns representing the Greek kingdom of the Seleucid successors of Greek, Alexander the Great. Who do you think this "beast from the sea" is intended to represent?

LESSON FIVE: SUMMARY OF THE JUDGMENTS OF THE SEVEN ANGELS WITH THE SEVEN BOWL CUPS OF PLAGUE

Revelation chapters 15 & 16

Chapter fifteen introduces these judgments. It is only at 16:2 when the first angel finally pours his plague-filled cup on the earth. This continues in the sixteenth chapter. After the sixth angel pours out his bowl cup of plague, the forces of evil assemble to battle God the Almighty. They gather at a place called Harmagedon, the Mount of Megiddo, which actually marks a pass through a set of hills on the south side of the Jezreel Valley. That battle is not really described. Chapter sixteen ends with God giving Babylon the seventh wine cup of his wrath. At this point islands fled and mountains disappeared and hailstones in the form of huge boulders dropped from heaven until people cursed God for the hail.

THE REIGN AND RUIN OF THE CITY OF THE ANTICHRIST

Revelation chapter 17-19:10

1. How is the great whore/Babylon described at 17:1-6?

At 17:9-14 Babylon the Great is identified. John tells his readers, “This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads (of the beast from the sea) are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living and the other has not yet come; and when he comes he must remain only a little while.” At 17:18 we are told, “The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.”

The battle is described at 17:13-14 where allies of the beast, the ten kings “will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and

faithful.” At the same time at 17:15-18 it appears as if the beast and his allies hate the whore and rebel against and destroy her. Perhaps the teaching here is that evil is ultimately self-destructive.

2. What do you think is the intended identification of Babylon the Great in the above paragraph?

3. What sense do you make of the “seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while”?

To illustrate how challenging it is to answer that question, below is a list of Roman Emperors beginning with Julius Caesar and extending to Domitian.

The obvious question is, where does one begin counting and who should be included and who should be excluded? The list below is chronological. Those with an * are those the Roman Senate proclaimed divine.

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| 44 B.C. | *Julius Caesar (died) |
| 31 B.C. – 14 A.D. | *Augustus |
| 14-37 A.D. | Tiberius (during Jesus’ ministry/death) |
| 37-41 A.D. | Gaius (Caligula) |
| 54-68 A.D. | Nero (suicide) |
| 68-69 A.D. | Galba |
| 69 A.D. | Otho |
| 69 A.D. | Vitellius |
| 69-79 A.D. | *Vespasian |
| 79-81 A.D. | *Titus |
| 81-96 A.D. | Domitian |

There is no obvious way of understanding the reference to seven kings because the number of Emperors since and including Julius Caesar numbers twelve up to and including the reign of Domitian. NT scholar G.B. Caird writes (1966, 2219), “The one point John wishes to emphasize is that the imperial line has only a short time to run before the emergence of a new monstrous Nero, an eighth who is one of the seven. If we compare verse 8 with verse 11, it is plain that the emergence of the new Nero, and therefore the onset of persecution, is the time of the monster’s Parousia, when it is to rise from abyss.”

Chapter 18 continues the narrative of the “fall of Babylon.” That city is identified as the woman at 17:18 – “the woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.” This is a sort of funeral dirge over the city as her sins are recounted.

4. In chapter 18, who weeps for and mourns the destruction of the great whore and why?

5. At 18:21-24 an angel pronounces the final doom on Babylon the great city. What is the sentence rendered against Babylon? What crimes are mentioned at that point?

Finally Revelation 19:1-10 celebrates the destruction of the great city.

6. How is the consummation of God’s reign as king and the return of Christ pictured at 19:6-9?

7. What do the Old and New Testament passages below suggest about the above theme?

Old Testament – Isaiah 54:1-8; Ezekiel 16:7-14; Hosea 2:19

New Testament – Mark 2:18-20; Ephesians 5:21-33; Matthew 25:1-13

8. What feelings characterize most wedding receptions and parties?

9. If you've ever been married, what feelings and memories do you have about your wedding?

LESSON SIX: THE REVELATION OF CHRIST AND THE PAROUSIA

Revelation 19:11-20:15

This initial section in the remainder of chapter 19 is about the victory of Christ and his heavenly armies over the beast and his allies.

1. Please describe the rider on the white horse. Whom do you believe he represents?
2. Two different battles are described at 19:17-20:3 and another at 20:7-10. Who are the combatants in each and who is victorious? What is the ultimate fate of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet?
3. The Great White Throne judgment comes next, described at 20:11-15. In that passage books are opened, including the book of deeds or merit or works and also the Book of Life (Luke 10:20). People are judged according to their works or deeds according to the first of the books. However the decisive factor seems to be the Book of Life, because anyone whose name was not found in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire. How might we integrate this teaching with the NT Pauline idea that we are saved by God's grace in Christ through faith? Further, for those who trust in Christ, does God

remember or decide to forget our sins? (in that connection see Psalm 25:7; Isaiah 64:9; 65:17; Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12; 10:17)

4. What is the poetic description of the defeat of death? What is the “second death”? (Rev. 20:6, 14)

The idea of the 1000-year millennium reign of Christ after which Satan is again released briefly has been a point of controversy all of church history. One of the problems is that it is not mentioned in any other NT document. Another is that the millennium raises the question whether we should we take it literally or symbolically? A variety of views are reflected today:

Post-millennialism says Christ returns at the end of the millennium. This is a naïve view that the world community can work towards God’s kingdom and achieve it ourselves, at the end of which Christ returns. That view seems arrogant to say the least!

Pre-millennialism is the way most readers understand this text from the Revelation. Christ returns before the millennium begins. For Dispensationalist Christians the millennial kingdom will be a real, visible, terrestrial, and material kingdom of the Jews, the restoration of the theocratic kingdom, including the re-establishment of the Davidic kingdom and the resumption of the temple cultus, including the sacrificial system (which I find contrary to the finality of Christ’s high priestly work as taught in the Letter to the Hebrews 7:23-28).

Amillennialism views the millennium symbolically rather than a literal thousand year period. Remember that 2 Peter 3:8 reads, “But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.”

NT scholar M. Eugene Boring, in his commentary on the Revelation, explains that the millennium brings together two different forms of eschatology, teaching about the end of all things. He notes that prophetic eschatology viewed the end as a this-worldly fulfillment of God's purpose. In other words salvation in the end meant experiencing bliss in this present world. In contrast, apocalyptic eschatology saw this world as already too overwhelmed with evil for redemption to occur from within it. The present world must therefore pass away to make way for a new heaven and a new earth. Boring argues that by John's time these two views had been combined into a scheme in which a this-worldly messiah brought this-worldly salvation during a transitional kingdom (the millennium), which was then superseded by "eternal apocalyptic salvation in the new world." Boring believes that a key influence on John was the story line in the Prophet Ezekiel. In other words, by adopting teaching about the millennium he affirmed both traditions about last or final things.

*Ezekiel tells of an invasion from the north of "Gog in the land of Magog", where Gog is the prince and Magog the name of a people (Ezek. 38:1f; 39:6). As early as the Tell el-Amarna tablets (14th century B.C.), Gog was used as a name for the nations of the earth. As Ezekiel (chapters 38 & 39) sees in Gog's invasion the fulfillment of earlier prophecies of Gentile attacks on Israel, so John in the Revelation sees in the hosts of God and Magog a symbol of the evil in the world of nations which resists the rule of God. For John, the attack of Gog comes not only from the north, but from all corners (directions) of the earth. Dispensationalist Christians have often identified Gog and Magog as a symbol for Russia or the former Soviet Union.

5. Two different resurrections are described within the confines of chapter 20. (20:4 and 20:11) Who is included in each?

6. While this section of the Revelation is sobering and even chilling, what hope and encouragement do you find here?

7. How is the Gospel preached in this section of the Revelation?

LESSON SEVEN: THE CITY OF GOD

Revelation chapters 21 & 22

1. When the writer John informs us at 21:2 that the “New Jerusalem” descends from heaven to the “new earth”, what does that tell us about the nature of the kingdom of God? Is it something humans produce, create, or manufacture or somehow cause to happen?
2. What do you notice about the measurements of the New Jerusalem? Was there something in the old earthly Jerusalem of a similar shape? Why do you think it is that John sees no temple in the Holy City? How is the city illumined? (see 21:22 & 21:23,25)
3. Sometimes in theology because we can't define the essence of God we speak in negative terms that God is not finite, time-bound, and so forth. In addition to the temple and night, what other ingredients of life as we now know it will be eliminated in this new City of God which descends upon the “new earth”?
4. Of what is the city made?
5. Revelation 21:3 reads, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” Have you read similar passages elsewhere in Scripture? What is our destiny according to this passage and according to Revelation 22:4?

6. Revelation 22:1-5 is the final part of the description of the City of God, the New Jerusalem on the “New Earth.” What is said of the activities of the faithful in verses 3-5?

7. At Revelation 22:1, 3 John speaks twice of the “throne of God and of the lamb.” What is implied by that descriptive statement?

G.B. Caird (1966, 290) writes, John “therefore portrays at his first appearance in all the attributes of deity (1:12ff); he is the Son of Man of Daniel’s vision, but he has assumed the snow-white hair of the Ancient of Days, as well as the eyes, the voice, and the countenance of the Lord of glory. Like the throned figure before whom the elders lay their crowns, he is Lord of lords and King of kings (17:14; 19:16). He can lay claim to God’s own title, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end (22:13; cf 1:8; 2:8; 21:6). The heavenly choir addresses to him the same words as they have addressed to the Creator, ‘You are worthy’, and unites the Lamb in worship with him who sits on the throne (v.7-9). Thereafter the names of God and the Lamb are regularly coupled (7:10; 14:4; 21:22), until at the last the very throne of heaven is called ‘the throne of God and the Lamb’ (22:1,3). Now

we may hold that John is using all these devices to say something about Christ, invested with the insignia of Godhead; and so no doubt incidentally, he is. But the more important fact is that he is saying something about God, once hidden from human sight, but now revealed in the known person of his Son.”

8. How does a person gain entrance to the “New Jerusalem” according to chapter 21:6-7 and 22:17?

9. What do you find compelling and comforting about these final two chapters of the Revelation?

10. How do you think this document was received by the seven churches in Asia Minor to whom John wrote?

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