

The Apocalypse

Father, we gather here together as a people who are standing only on the solid rock of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior. It is in Him that we have been made complete. It is by Him that we have been qualified to receive an inheritance in the heavenlies. It is by His blood that He has made peace with You for us. And Father as we are now reconciled to You in the person of Your Son and His work, I come before You, and I ask that You'd look down upon us this morning. I ask that You would bless us with the ministry of Your Holy Spirit, that You would bless the ministry of the Word of God and that You would accomplish in an exact, great way the purpose for Your Word this morning. I pray that we would worship, I pray that we would be encouraged, our faith would be built up. I pray that, Father, we would meet with You and sense that You have spoken to us, You have paid attention to us, You know us, and You love us. So I ask for Your blessing because of Jesus and His work for us. For it's in His name we pray. Amen.

Well, this morning we are embarking on a journey that I have been mulling over and thinking about and preparing for literally years. I have approached the book of Revelation in the past with dread, with frustration, fascination, and even fear. But I can say of late as God has been working in my life, I am approaching this book with a great deal of excitement and am looking forward to the time that we will spend together on this journey through this incredible book. Three or four years ago I almost launched into this study. I thought I was prepared, and I aborted the mission at the last minute. I'm glad that I did, because in the last three or four years I feel like I have gained a better grasp of the text and what I believe about it. Anytime I start a new book of the Bible to preach from--you know you're in a book for so long and then you have to start a new book--I always approach the new book with a certain amount of trepidation. But when you're approaching a book like Revelation, the trepidation is just simply doubled, tripled and quadrupled. It's a big book to tackle, but I am looking forward to it, and I believe by God's grace that it will be good for me and for us as a body of believers.

Why preach the book of Revelation? That was really the question that I had; why do I need to preach this? I'm going to explain to you some of the personal reasons why I feel compelled to preach this book, and this isn't just "sermonic" material that I am plugging in here.

These are some of the reasons that really pushed me to preach from this book. One--and this really has become very significant to me, I've even experienced it in my study--this is the only book in the Bible that I know promises a blessing to those who read it and hear it and keep the words of this prophecy. You will notice in Revelation 1:3 the ESV says, "Those who *read aloud* the words of this prophecy." In translating it "reading *aloud*" the ESV is drawing out the significance of this word. This word is used in the reading - the corporate, public reading - of Scripture in the worship services. Thus, John expects that Revelation will be read in the corporate assembly of believers as they gather to worship. So the book of Revelation was meant to be read aloud to the churches, and it promises that when the book is read aloud, there will be blessing upon that church. And I tell you, I've been praying that way, and I will continue to pray that way, "Lord, You have promised a blessing from this book, this book that seems to cause more divisions in the church than blessings. But You have promised it, and Lord bring that blessing." And so one of the things we're going to do through this study of the book of Revelation is that we are going to read aloud the entire book of Revelation through the course of this study, so that by the end we will have read the entire book of Revelation corporately in our worship service. And I am looking for that blessing. I have experienced many blessings already in my study of this book, and I hope that those blessings will be conveyed to you, and that the Lord will be faithful to His Word. And I know that He will, and He's promised a great blessing to us.

Another reason that truly motivated me to tackle this book at this time in my ministry, I've been preaching for 15 years, I'm entering my 15th year of ministry, and as a pastor I have a charge to preach the whole counsel of God. Last time I checked, Revelation is still in the Bible. So I have a Biblical mandate to preach this book. All of you that work, you have jobs to do and you get up in the morning and you probably don't go, "Oh good! I get to go to work today, and everything that I'm going to do today is going to be fun." No, you have to do things you don't want to do. You have to do things that are hard. I realize as a pastor I have the same calling. Preaching in Revelation is going to be hard for me. It is going to require a great deal from me, but I don't have an option. And I realized in preaching--now my 15th year--that there are young men and young women in this church, there are new converts in this church that have never been to any other church other than Faith Community Church. And they've never heard, they've never sat under another pastor. I'm the only pastor they've had. How sad, right? How impoverished they must be. But I realized something. I don't want these young men, or young women, or new converts to move away, go off to college, or whatever, and be confronted about

the book of Revelation and they would have to say, “Well, my pastor never taught me from the book of Revelation. I don’t know anything about that book.” That has moved me very deeply and motivated me to tackle this incredible book.

I had an older woman come up to me after the first service and shared with me that in all her years in going to church, she’s never heard a pastor preach from the book of Revelation. Frankly, I think it’s because we pastors are afraid. I think it’s because this book will require a lot of hard work. And just as frankly, I think many pastors themselves don’t really understand this book. I don’t want to be afraid of Revelation or the hard work, and I desperately want us to understand it.

We are living in a generation whose eschatology--(Now we’re going to be using words that may be unfamiliar to you and I’m going to do my best to define many of these words. We may spend some Wednesday evenings at times looking more in depth at words and eschatological systems). *Eschatology* is just a big word for “the study of last things” or the study of end times. We are living in a generation whose eschatology has, by and large, been defined and understood in terms of the pop theology of the wildly popular *Left Behind* series. People often won’t read their Bibles, but they read *Left Behind*. That book and the movies they spawned have helped shape people’s understanding of end times. And I will tell you we’re in bad shape if our theology and eschatology is going to be defined by Hollywood and mass-marketed movies. The *Left Behind* series--if you’re not familiar with it--is a story surrounding several central figures who “missed” the rapture and were “left behind.” The plot centers on these characters, who basically maneuver themselves into a second chance of salvation during the tribulation--a premise that I haven’t found in the Bible yet. Please listen. We need to have our eschatology informed by the Word of God and not by Hollywood or sensational movies about the end times.

Let’s be honest about one of the big problems, probably the biggest problem facing the study of Revelation. One problem is that there are many different interpretations of Revelation. That is a big problem, but the real problem is even bigger that. Not only are there many different interpretations of Revelation, but there are many different interpretations by *many different godly and intelligent men*. That makes it really difficult. I said in the first service, you can put up on this stage, here on our platform, five or six godly men that are very bright, godly men who have a faithful ministry of the Word of God. You could put men like D.A. Carson, Sinclair Ferguson, John Piper, John MacArthur, R.C. Sproul, Doug Wilson, and many others – get them up here, and you know what? They’re not going to agree on eschatology. There will be

some similarities, of course; but, by and large, they're going to have different - *sometimes vastly different*- interpretations of the book of Revelation. That's a problem. And I think it causes a lot of Christians to assume it is really impossible to understand this book.

Because of that problem I've had to ask myself why in the world I should stand up here and preach through Revelation, and why in the world you should listen to anything that I have to say! There's a certain level of credibility that I need to attain if you are going to listen to me. I want to just give you a couple of thoughts on my credibility in preaching through this book. First, I will tell you: #1- I do not have any intellectual credentials that bolster my credibility. I am not smarter than any of the above named men. I don't have any peculiar insights or knowledge of the Greek language that's going to bring to you any keys to understanding this book. Please understand that my intellectual capacities are not my credibility. That's not why I'm up here. You shouldn't listen to me because I've got it all figured out, and I'm so smart. You know, knowing Greek is very important, but it's not the key to unlocking the book of Revelation. There's a well-known Bible teacher, he's on the radio. I don't have anything to hide here, so I will go ahead and name names – I am referring to the “Bible Answer Man” as he is called. I've listened to him occasionally. Sometimes he's pretty hard for me to stomach, but overall he's probably a pretty good guy. I remember him distinctively making a very big deal about not commenting on the book of Revelation (I would hear people call in and ask him questions on eschatology), but he wouldn't answer their questions because he said he was in the process of memorizing the book of Revelation. After a period of time, when he finished memorizing the book, he actually proceeded to publish a book on Revelation. It was a little surprising to me in that it seemed to convey that since he memorized the book, he was therefore now qualified to be an authority on this book. I'll be frank here - memorizing Revelation is important and a very noble thing to do. I'm sure it's very helpful, but I can assure you that it is not the key to understanding the book of Revelation. You don't get any special magical key because you memorized this book. It would probably be more helpful to memorize an Old Testament book like Daniel, or Ezekiel, or Isaiah. And after I heard the Bible Answer man comment on Revelation, I'll tell you, many of his answers were wrong. Yes, he has some good thoughts, but he's wrong in a lot of things. I can tell you that I won't stand up here with any intellectual abilities to wow you with.

Secondly, I don't stand before you suggesting or pretending in any way that I completely understand everything in this book. I haven't figured it all out yet. I haven't done that yet. There are things that are still difficult for me. As a matter of fact, I was reading just yesterday - I

read through the book of Revelation again yesterday – and I came to a couple of different passages, and just scratched my head and said, “Lord, I just don’t know about that.” So in some sense, we are going to work through this book together, and there will be places where I will simply have to admit that I am not exactly sure on what it means.

I will tell you what I bring to the table, what I bring to the pulpit and that is this: It will be a genuine honest attempt to let the Word of God speak for itself. That is my driving passion, and it has been my driving passion for the last 15 years. That means I am not approaching the book of Revelation to prove a position. I’m not going to stand up here and have a position that I’m going to protect and make sure Revelation agrees with it. There’s way too much of that which goes on today. I have attempted to study this book by shedding, as much as possible, every preconceived idea and presupposition that I have had, with the explicit desire to let God speak to me as clearly as I can possibly understand. Now this is dangerous too. It sounds pious to some degree, but my point is, I have not approached the study of Revelation with an axe to grind. I grew up in probably what you could say is the typical eschatology of evangelical Christianity in the 20th century. It’s called Dispensationalism. I was taught Dispensationalism most of my life. I remember it taught in the Christian high school I attended. I knew all the charts and diagrams of the system.

I’ve shared this with you before—not necessarily in the matters of eschatology - but just after Lori and I got married, and I had my own home, and I became responsible for my own house-- I went through a period of intense examination. I intentionally decided to question virtually everything that I believed. I did not want to be a Christian just because my parents were Christians. I didn’t want to believe the Bible just because other people did...I wanted to know the truth and I began to just systematically go through things that I believed—why do I believe it, and do I really believe it? And in the last 10-15 years I’ve done that with eschatology. I set it on the table and everything was open for examination. I wanted to know what the truth is. And during that time, or at least during the last 7 or 8 years, I have read as many books as I possibly can on Revelation, on the various eschatological systems that are around, and I’ve tried to read with an open mind. There’s been some stuff that I’ve intentionally avoided. I call it the whacko stuff. There’s a lot of whacko stuff out there—highly sensationalized, always trying to grab something out of the headlines to sell their book. And when I think of so much that is going on today in eschatology, I think of something that Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:6-7 about the Law which I think could be applied to eschatology. Paul said certain persons in the church had wandered away into vain discussions, desiring to be teachers of the law (insert eschatology)

without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they are making confident assertions about. They're talking about things they simply just don't know what they're talking about, like www.princeharryantichrist.com. That's the kind of stuff that is out there where people are making wild speculations, selling their little wares and their little books. I have tried to read from good amillennial writers, good post-millennial writers, pre-trib, mid-trib, post-trib, pre-wrath, preterists, partial-preterists, etc. I have tried to read as much as possible with an open mind, because this is the thing that has troubled me for a long time: How can otherwise highly intelligent godly men come to so many different interpretations on the book of Revelation?

Can I tell you one of the surprising discoveries that I made in my journey during the last decade? I don't want to exaggerate, but it took many years just reading at my own pace, picking up books and reading where I could. And here was one of my surprising and amazing discoveries - as I read good solid arguments for these various positions, I saw something. In each system there was a measure, an element of truth. And that is why godly intelligent men attach themselves to it. If there wasn't any truth in their system, they would be idiots; they would be stupid, or false teachers, right? But they're not stupid, and they're not idiots, and they're not necessarily false teachers. They were godly men who have looked at Scripture, and there were elements of truth embedded within each of their systems. Now, admittedly, they may have attached too much emphasis upon one particular element of truth; but I began to see in each of these different systems that there were elements of truth within them, and any serious examination of eschatology requires that you consider those elements of truth. As I read, I began to develop an appreciation for many of these systems. I learned much from my amillennial friends and brothers. I began to see that, you know, they're right; there is a spiritual significance that many have missed. There are spiritual realities of the kingdom now, and if we relegate everything about the kingdom to the millennium and everything to the future, we're misreading the Bible. Here's one of my big ones discoveries. I was surprised that I even began to appreciate post-millennialism. Growing up they used to say that if you found a post-millennialist, you should get their autograph because they were so rare; they were a dying breed. Now that is not true so much anymore; post-millennialism is making a comeback. Many people today are unaware of the fact that the greatest missionary age in Western civilization came from missionaries who were post-millennialists. They had such a belief in the power of the gospel to transform and triumph that they traveled to the ends of the earth believing that the gospel was the power of God to transform entire civilizations. For example, William Carey,

the father of modern missions, was a post-millennialist. And he preached the gospel with the fervent belief that it would triumph and that India could be won to Jesus Christ. He didn't believe the world was going to hell in a hand basket. He believed that Jesus Christ had claimed this world and he went out to conquer it. It's true that many post-millennialists begin to get very discouraged in the slow progress of the gospel. As you move into the 19th and early 20th century, the gospel didn't progress the way they thought it would. Although many people did come to Christ, India or China didn't become "Christian" nations. And when World War I came about, many post-millennialists were incredibly discouraged. And by World War II, post-millennialism was almost dead because the world certainly wasn't getting any better. Establishing the kingdom of God on the earth looked like an extremely remote possibility, at least through human endeavors.

Well, I've learned a lot from these men and their particular systems, and I think something that D.A. Carson has said deserves to be repeated. He said that everyone (this pastor included) needs to approach eschatology with a "healthy dose of humility." Arrogance in the matter of eschatology is an extremely ugly disposition - and there's way too much of it, way too much of it.

I've noticed something in my reading over the years. I'm not trying to make too much out of it - I'm speaking in generalities here, and I think many would agree with me - Various systems [and we're going to try to spend some Wednesday nights for some of you who don't know what those terms are, and we're going to spend some Wednesday nights, trying to define those terms and what they believe, but right now I'm just going to call them systems] - I've noticed something peculiar about the various systems that have been held to down through the years. These various systems have been... I want to call it "cyclical" or "generational". You go to the Middle Ages up to the Reformation, amillennialism was virtually the dominant eschatology, if you will. You get into the 18th and 19th century, and you have post-millennialism as the dominant system. You get into the 20th century and you have pre-millennial Dispensationalism as the dominant system. What is interesting about the 21st century is that eschatology seems to be in something of a state of flux. I don't think Dispensationalism has the pre-eminence it once did. I meet people a lot, and we hold regular meetings in our home for new attendees to the church, and we usually spend a night talking about eschatology. Generally speaking, most of these people I meet are uncertain about their eschatological position. And if I were to ask you in this room right now, how many of you have a firm eschatological position, you know what I'm finding out? More and more people basically sound like "pan-millennialists" - that is the belief

that it will all just “pan out” in the end. Now I’m not sure—but I think that part of that confusion is because they hear one godly, intelligent preacher say this, and they hear another godly, intelligent preacher say that, and they say—“I don’t know, I guess we will just have to let it all work out in the end!”

When you read the Puritans you definitely see this generational/cyclical thing. The Puritans and the Reformers—they knew who the antichrist was. It was the Pope. The Pope was the Antichrist. They were sure of that. The whore of Revelation 17 was the Roman Catholic Church, who like the Antichrist and the Beast were “drunk with the blood of the saints”. And you see the generational influence in eschatology when you come to the predominant thinking of many evangelicals in the 20th century, who were sure that the Beast was nothing other than communist Russia. Of course, Russia had to be the great beast who was going to fight against Israel. If you were to read most of the prophetic books written by Dispensationalists in the 1980’s it was definitely Russia that fit the bill. Interestingly, I was looking at eschatological books on Amazon the other day and noticed that in the 21st century, as Russia is no longer the dominant nation that it once was and seems kind of out of the picture, there seems to be a new beast in town. I noticed one particular book called *The Scarlet Beast*, and I was intrigued by its subtitle which said, “Extensive investigation resulted in astonishing discoveries that show conclusively who the seven heads of the beast is.” It’s Islam—don’t you know, it’s Islam! Of course it is; it’s not Russia. It’s Islam—that’s the great Beast. Ironically, even though this particular book talked about “extensive investigation,” the book itself was only 40 pages! 40 pages? And in those 40 pages the author claimed that he was also going to solve the riddle of 666! I thought, “Wow, that’s very concise writing, 40 pages to solve the mysteries of the book of Revelation.”

Let me share with you some dangers that are very prevalent, and I want us to be aware of them.

1. As I look at the generational or the cyclical nature of eschatology, we need to be careful that the *spirit of the age* doesn’t define our eschatology. I don’t want to be a Dispensationalist just because Dispensationalism is popular. I don’t want to be an Amillennialist just because, well, Amillennialism is really stealing the show today. No, I don’t want my eschatology defined by the spirit of the day. I want my eschatology defined by the Word of God. Now it sounds like a wonderful proposition, but I think it’s going to be very hard to buck the spirit of the day. We need to be very aware of this danger.

2. The second danger I think is very prevalent today, and it's probably most prevalent among Dispensationalists. And really, Dispensationalists have become their own worst enemy. But it's extremely dangerous and often misleading to study eschatology with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand; that is, always reading the Bible in the lens of current events. That's what called sensationalism. That's what sells books. That's what people capitalize on because there is interest in end times. Even unbelievers are interested in end times. Oh, it's so titillating, it's so exciting. I want to know—tell me, who's the antichrist? And so the next Joe Blow comes up and makes some confident assertion, and it sells books. That is not the study of the book of Revelation. It's not that Revelation doesn't relate to current events – it does! - but you don't look at Revelation through the lens of current events. We have to be so careful here, or our eschatology will only be a fad.
3. The third danger, and again this is not insignificant, the third danger is to have a system of eschatology and make the Bible fit it. Unfortunately, this happens all the time, on all sides. I've read it, I've seen it. I've seen it in every camp. You develop your "system," and now the Bible is going to fit it, one way or another. I can tell you what my approach to this study has been and is--as far as is humanly possible—my approach is to let the Word of God speak. I don't want the Bible subservient to my system. I want my system subservient to the Word of God. That means it's going to challenge me. It means I may not have an answer for everything, but I'm going to sit under the Word of God. I'm going to use Charles Simeon as my personal model. Although Charles Simeon didn't really get into the area of eschatology, overall he eschewed labels. He didn't want to be known as a Calvinist or an Arminian. He didn't like labels precisely because labels tend to color your interpretation. He aspired to preach the Word of God. And that is my personal goal and mantra. I don't really care about labels. I'm going to preach the Word of God, and that's going to be my mantra, and that is how I want to approach the study of this book. Unfortunately, that approach may run the risk of offending everyone, but that will be the risk that I have to take.

When I decided to preach Revelation I really didn't tell anybody. I didn't want to make a big deal about it with a bunch of fanfare. But somehow it got out to a few people...and I need to find who that mole is...but upon learning what I was about to do someone said to me, "Are you crazy? Are you seriously going to do that? Don't you know that you could start World War 3 doing something like that." Well, I can tell you this that I'm not going to offer a polemic for or against every major system. I'm not going to do that. We would be in Revelation for 10 years if

I tried to do that. We may take some Wednesday nights to explore certain systems more thoroughly and contrast their beliefs to other systems. But Sunday mornings won't be used for that. And frankly, there's going to be some places of Revelation where I'm only going to be able to set out before you a few of the main ways of understanding it, and you're going to have to make the tough decisions. But as it stands, we're going to go through this book and I hope and believe that God is going to bless us through it, as we let His Word speak to us.

I think from the outset, though, that it is only fair of me to disclose to you my interpretive approach to this book. When I read books on eschatology I want to know where they are coming from. I'm going to define my interpretive approach by using some technical terms that some of you probably won't understand - maybe never even heard of - but that's intentional because that way I have wiggle room, and you won't be able to pin me down on one particular way or another. But I'm going to share with you presuppositions that I think have been established from this text and from my understanding of how to interpret the Bible. I call myself -- and you know it's funny when you read a lot of eschatology, I think people kind of make up words at times -- and so some of this is probably just made up, systems that I have put together. But if you want to know my interpretive approach, I am a *futuristically modified idealist*. OK? A futuristically modified idealist. I'll explain a little bit, but not too much to have you pin me down too closely.

By *futuristic*, I mean that I believe Revelation is written essentially as a testimony of God's plan in Christ for the world in that it represents the eschatological fulfillment of our salvation both on earth and in heaven. Thus, I believe that when you read the book of Revelation you are still reading, by and large, that which is yet to take place, that which is future. As far as I can tell, unless I've been asleep, the end has not come. This means that Revelation is not just a history lesson. This stands in contrast to other systems like Preterism which basically looks at Revelation as history. Preterism approaches Revelation as a book that has primarily been fulfilled, but it still gives us principles and lessons to live by. Of course, I believe there is history in this book. There is some truth to that. But, by and large, the book of Revelation is futuristic in that it does describe for us God's ultimate end plan for this world. It shows us the fulfillment of our salvation on earth and in heaven. So I don't read Revelation simply as a history book or a history lesson.

But when I call myself a *futuristically modified idealist*, I mean that, at the same time, Revelation speaks to or addresses the people of God in relationship to their present situation as much as to their future. This means that I don't just read Revelation to drum up charts for

what's going to happen in the future. If you do that, I believe you are misreading Revelation. John writes for a people, and his passion is as much for their present situation as it is for disclosing the future existence. In disclosing the future there is to be a pertinent application to the present. That is seen most dramatically when you look at the first three chapters of this book; they're not apocalyptic; they are letters; they are epistles addressed to the church—how believers should live *now* in light of full disclosure of what is going to happen. In many ways the purpose of Revelation is similar to Hebrews in that as the future is disclosed, it is disclosed in such a way as to build the faith of God's people and to call them to perseverance in the face of great Satanic opposition which takes place in every generation.

Let's talk about some of the distinctives of this book. Some of these distinctives, I believe, are keys in how you're going to interpret this book. I believe that the author of Revelation is the Apostle John. He's the same author as the fourth Gospel and the three epistles that bear his name. That fact has a fairly large consensus among conservative scholarship. And I believe, again probably with the consensus of conservative scholarship, that this book was written between 79-95 AD, sometime after the fall of Jerusalem.

Now, let me just share with you at least three unique distinctives of this book: First of all, **the use of the Old Testament**. As far as I can tell, in this book there is no direct quotation of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation. Now in the first service, I threw a lot of people off because I said there was no reference to the Old Testament. I misspoke. There are *hundreds* of references to the Old Testament, but there is no direct *quotation* of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation alludes to and references the Old Testament probably more than any other book in the New Testament! One writer aptly stated that John was "soaked" in the Old Testament. That is important...use of the Old Testament.

Secondly, it is **full of symbolism**. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure that one out--full of symbolism and figurative language. There is more symbolism in Revelation than all the New Testament books combined! There is probably more symbolism and figurative language in Revelation than any other book in the Bible, which makes interpreting it so difficult. The main genre of Revelation is apocalyptic, and yet you can't completely limit it to the apocalyptic. It is also epistolary, prophetic, and figurative all wrapped in one book.

There's one other distinction that I will dwell on a little later which I think is fascinating to study. Although Revelation is a literary composition, it is really the Word of God in picture, isn't it? Constantly giving us pictures. There are some scholars out there, one guy by the name of Stephen Smalley, he's written a commentary on the Greek text of the apocalypse, graduated

from Cambridge, and overall just a brilliant man. But he has a very significant hypothesis that the book of Revelation was written as a drama, replete with acts and scenes and interludes. You have scenes in heaven, scenes on earth, and scenes from history. You even have “intermissions”. And if it is same writer/author as the Gospel of John—how many of you have seen *The Gospel of John*, the movie? How many of you have seen that? How many of you haven’t seen *The Gospel of John*? You need to see that. There’s a movie out; it’s called *The Gospel of John*. It came out maybe five, ten years ago. There are many New Testament scholars who suggest that the Gospel of John was also written as a drama. Well, some people took the Gospel of John and they made a movie out of it, and guess what they did? The only dialogue in the movie is the text of Scripture, the English text itself. No other dialogue, no other text. It is only the Scripture, and they have made a dramatic presentation almost seamlessly. You just the Word unfold right before your eyes. In my mind, it really bolsters this theory that John (and Revelation) was, indeed, written as a drama. So Stephen Smalley and others have suggested that Revelation was also written as a drama. And the Word is literally played out right before our eyes.

Now let me show you how these have distinctives - and I’m looking at the clock here – I have to hurry. These distinctions hold keys to interpreting Scripture:

1. If we’re going to understand Revelation, we are going to have to understand the Old Testament. We’re going to have to understand books like Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. And this is what I wanted to say earlier. I am convinced that when we look at some of the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament, some of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, and we see how it was fulfilled, it becomes a model and a pattern for how the apocalyptic and prophetic literature of Revelation will be fulfilled. So we learn a great deal how to interpret Revelation by how the Old Testament apocalyptic literature was fulfilled. And we will have to understand those Old Testament texts if we are going to understand Revelation.
2. The symbolism, the figurative language is also a key to interpreting this book. And this is one of the reasons why there are so many different interpretations on Revelation, because there’s so much symbolism/figurative language in the book of Revelation. And the interpretation of Revelation has fallen basically into two categories. There are those who say, “We take must take Revelation *literally*.” And there are those who say, “No, we have to take Revelation *spiritually*.” Both in their own rights sound fairly pious—we take the Bible literally, well that sounds good. Well, what about when John sees a lamb

standing as though he has been slain with seven horns and seven eyes? That's rather a grotesque literal translation. Is that really what John intends to convey, or is it symbolic? Of course, that must be interpreted symbolically. At the same time, John speaks about certain facts and certain things, like earthquakes and such, and there are those who say, well no that's not a literal earthquake. That is only a symbolic representation for the dissolution of the created order. Really? I suggest to you that if you approach the book of Revelation and say, well I'm going to take this literally, or I'm going to take this spiritually, you're already off on the wrong foot. The goal of the exegete is not to come to the text with a interpretative presupposition like that. *The goal of the exegete is to determine the meaning the author of Scripture intended to convey.* And he may speak literally, and he may speak spiritually. My goal as an interpreter, then, is to determine what is the author is attempting to convey to his original audience. That is the meaning of Scripture. And I will tell you this - as I have read and reread the book of Revelation, except for a few exceptions, by and large, when John is symbolic, it's pretty clear it's symbolic. And when John is literal, it's pretty clear it's literal. It's amazing. It's like the people that have their systems to protect, go and mess it all up because it doesn't fit with their system. Let the Word of God speak. Sit under it. Don't impose meaning to it

3. One other thing that will affect the interpretation of Revelation is the understanding of it as drama. I really do see, and I hope to kind of share with you, Revelation as a drama. One of the dangers in interpreting Revelation is to read the book of Revelation and to assume in your interpretation that it is laid out in a chronological order. John will often say, "Then I saw this, and after that I saw this" and the temptation is to think, "Ok, this happens, and then this happens, then this happens." But that's not how dramas play out. The old movies--when they wanted to convey scenes that are happening at the same time, have you even seen this? They split the screen down the middle. Maybe a scene of a phone call between two parties. As the characters talk on the phone, they split the screen to show that what is happening is concurrent. They're carrying on a conversation, and it's to let you know that it's happening at the same time. Well, you can't split the screen in a literary work, can you? There are times in the book of Revelation when there is one scene, maybe in heaven, and then there's another scene on earth. It doesn't mean the scenes are in chronological order. They may be concurrent. This is what's going on in heaven. This is what's happening on earth. There

are times in the book of Revelation where the events are chronological, but there are also times in Revelation where there are flashbacks. One scene is portrayed from heaven, then the next scene is a historical flashback. For example, Revelation 12 is a flashback; it is not in any chronological order. So again, these are some of the keys to interpreting this book. We have to understand that you can't necessarily interpret Revelation in chronological order because the scenes in various places take place at different times.

Well, I have six minutes to get into the text, and that's pushing it. But I have to get into the text; I cannot just leave it at this. I know it's been a lengthy introduction, and I hope, it will be somewhat of a helpful introduction to you. But let's look at Revelation 1 for a moment. "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John." The first three words of the Greek text are, "the *apokalypsis* of Jesus Christ." Apocalypse, it means to unveil, to uncover, to uncover that which is hidden. You get to the first three words of the Greek text, and do you know you already have to stop because there's a major debate? Isn't that amazing? First three words of the book of Revelation, and there's this big debate. Is it a Revelation *from* Jesus Christ, or is it a Revelation *about* Jesus Christ? It's a big debate. You say, well what does the Greek say? Well the Greek is ambivalent; it's an interpretive decision. You have to decide, is this a revelation *from* Jesus Christ, or is it a revelation *of* Jesus Christ? Some say it's both. The reason this has become something of an issue is because there are those who want to lessen the prophetic content of the book of Revelation, that it's not so much about the future. So they come to this phrase and try to press their point. They say this is not a revelation *from* Jesus Christ, but this is primarily a revelation *about* Jesus Christ. This is about the gospel. This is not about the end times. Now, on one hand, that sounds pious, and in many ways it's right. The central character of the book of Revelation is God, is Jesus Christ. The gospel is all throughout this book, but is this what John is intending to write? Is he simply writing another gospel? What are the gospels? Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They are revelations of Jesus Christ. They are presentations of Jesus Christ. Is Revelation intended simply to be a presentation of Jesus Christ? And the answer by the context says, no, that's not what the book of Revelation is about. It is not just presenting to us a message about Christ, but rather it is clearly a revelation *from* Jesus Christ. The language in Revelation is so amazingly similar to the language that John used in his Gospel. In the Gospel of John, how does Jesus convey Himself? He is the revealer of God. Jesus only speaks the things that His Father tells Him to speak. He will only do the things that the

Father does. He reveals to us God. And in Revelation, this is a revelation which God gave to Jesus Christ, which Jesus Christ gives to us. And in Revelation we have the content of that revelation, notice in verse 1, “To show to His servants the things that must soon take place.” Thus, we have a description of the unveiling. The unveiling is not of Christ (that has already been done in the Gospels); the unveiling is the things that must soon take place. This whole debate is just a perfect example of how we have to be so careful when coming to the text of Scripture. Even when our agendas are pious and good and wonderful – like saying Revelation is primarily about Christ – they must be governed by the text, not by our agendas. We have to let the text of Scripture speak for itself. Verse 1 is clearly an unveiling of Jesus Christ which pertains to that which must soon take place.

Now, let’s look at that phrase, “things that must soon take place.” If you have a King James Version it says, “must shortly take place.” Then you look at verse 3, the last phrase, “for the time is near.” If you’re a futurist like I am, and maybe some of you are, you better have an explanation for this. There are those (i.e. Preterists) who say that this is primarily a historical book, and these phrases are something of a proof text for them. They say this book is about things which “must *shortly* take place.” And here it is two thousand years later, and the futurist believes it still hasn’t happened. How can this be? Where’s your credibility for being a futurist, Juhnke? The text says the time is *near* and these things must *shortly* take place. How can that be true two thousand years later?” The word “soon” in Greek is *tachos*. We don’t get the word *taco* from it, we get the word *tachometer*. It’s an instrument that measures the speed of rotation. That’s where this word comes from. It is translated in other places “*quickly, shortly, speedily*”. How can this be true, if it hasn’t happened yet after two thousand years? Well, if you’re a futurist, you better have an explanation. I’ve often heard people say that we are living in the last days. Have you heard anybody say that before? I got to thinking that most of my life, most of my cognizant life, I’ve heard people say that they believe they were living in the last days. I think I could go back as early as the 70’s, and I remember that sentiment firmly entrenched in many believers’ thinking—that we’re living in the last days. In the 1980’s there was a book out, *88 Reasons Why Jesus is Going to Come in 1988*. And then the same author wrote another book in 1989, *89 Reasons Why Jesus is Going to Come in ‘89*. Fortunately, he quit writing after that. But I think it aptly demonstrates that this expectation has been prevalent at least in my life time. An older woman came up to me after the first service and said, “I was five years old in 1939 sitting in church, and I remember the pastor saying, ‘Jesus is coming very soon.’” 1939! So this expectancy of Jesus’ return has been around for quite awhile!

You know the truth is that we have been living in the last days since Jesus Christ ascended into heaven. You read Paul, and I think he truly believed Jesus was going to return in his day. If you follow his epistles, you can almost mark the moment when he realized he was going to die and Jesus wasn't going to come before his death. I believe there has been this expectancy throughout the last two thousand years. Now, I haven't gone through the literature of every period of time during the last two thousand years to prove that, but at least during my life time there's been this expectancy, that these are the last days. And it is the last days, but how can this square with what John said in the 1st century that these things will "shortly" take place and the time is "near", but here it is two thousand years later? We need to have an explanation for this, and I want to give you a picture, a visual illustration that I think accurately describes the reality of the last days. I want you to picture time as we know it, the last two thousand years, as a great highway going across Kansas, ok? Flat, looking at nothing, just a highway, and you just go year after year after year – or mile after mile. And I want you to picture the last days, the Day of the Lord, the coming day of God's wrath, the consummation of the end, as a massive storm brewing on the horizon to your west. You're driving along and there's this massive storm cloud wall. You just keep driving down the highway in your car, and there it is. It's so close, you hear the thunder, and it rattles your car. You can see the lightning flash from the clouds. You might even start to see some of the rain starting to hit your windshield. The storm is so close to you that can almost taste it. You can smell the rain. I submit to you, that is the reality of the last days. They have been "near" to us for the last two thousand years (or miles!). It has been so close that believers can smell it. The fury of the last days could break out upon us at any time. Remember the word *tachos*? Yes, it can be translated "shortly" or "quickly," but did you know that it could also be translated, "suddenly?" The time could be upon you suddenly. It's so close, it could happen at any moment. If that is true, then John's words could be true for any period of time during the last two thousand years.

I think that illustration helps a lot in our understanding not only of the text, but of the expectancy that has been found down through the ages. I have no doubt that when the readers of the first century read this book they thought, "Nero's the antichrist," or "Domitian, that's the antichrist," and "Rome, that's the beast. Look, they are destroying, they are eating up the people of God; they must be the antichrist or the beast." It's not surprising, then, that when you come to the period of the Reformation, when they endured some persecution from the Catholic church, that the Reformers and the Puritans looked at the Catholic church or the Pope and assumed that they had to be the antichrist or the beast. And when you move further down

the “highway” into the 20th century, you have believers wondering if Hitler is the antichrist, or Russia or Islam is the beast. I remember people suggesting that Bill Clinton was the antichrist. And others are sure that the European Union is the reconstitution of the Roman Empire.

Let me share something with you—think about this with me. Jesus said, “No one knows the day or the hour, not even the Son of Man.” If that’s true, then not even Satan knows the day or the hour. And I submit to you that in every generation the people and the scenarios are in place for the last days to be upon them, for the Day of the Lord to come. What I mean is that there are many antichrists in every generation, and there is one that could be *the* antichrist in every generation. It’s kind of what John said in 1 John 2:18, “Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore, we know that it is the last hour.” I submit to you that this generation has an antichrist in place should that Day truly be upon on us. And the next generation, there will be an antichrist. We are living in the last days, folks. The winds, the storm...you can smell it, you can see it.

We recently just had a real big reminder again of the last day, of the Day of the Lord—200,000 plus Haitians lost their lives in an earthquake. In Matthew 24, Jesus said, “You’ll hear of wars and rumors of wars. Don’t be alarmed for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pangs.” You know when you think of a tachometer, as you move along as it revs up, it speeds up faster, faster, faster, faster. I believe when the Day of the Lord comes it will come in lightening speed. Things will happen so fast. And it’s interesting that Jesus says when He talks about earthquakes and famines He says, “These are the beginning of birth pangs.” I don’t know a whole lot about pregnancy, but I know enough about it that when you start having contractions the baby gets close. Mommy starts getting these contractions, birth pangs, ouch. And then you start timing them, “Oh, that one was seven minutes.” Then it’s, “Honey, the contractions are only four minutes apart!” Those contractions become closer and closer and closer together until your wife screams, “Get me to the hospital now!” I believe that is what Jesus implies as He looks at the end. There are these birth pangs, and they’re going to increase, increase, increase, and increase in intensity, and the time in between the “birth pangs” will get shorter and shorter—and then the Day will be upon us! Peter says, “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming Day of God?”

Is Revelation futuristic? Yeah, it's futuristic. Idealistic? Absolutely. This has to do with us right now as well. If you're just fascinated with the end times, just looking at charts and trying to figure who the antichrist is, you're missing the whole point. How are you living now? And the *Left Behind* series notwithstanding, if the Day of the Lord comes upon you, and you are not found in Jesus Christ, there are no second chances. If you're playing games with God now, you're a fool. Today is the day of salvation. Trust Christ. Live with expectancy of this day. It can be any day, and it's been that way for 2,000 years.

I trust that the Lord will bring great blessing upon us as we look at this great book. I don't promise to answer all or even some of your questions, but I do promise that I will be as faithful to God's Word as I possibly can.

Copyright © 2010 Timothy P. Juhnke

You are encouraged to distribute free copies of this material as long as the wording has not been altered in any way.

·Faith Community Church

·3500 NE Prather Road

·Kansas City, MO 64116

·www.faithcommunity.com