A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF REVELATION
You Can Understand Revelation – Week 1
By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTON

1. If you want to know God, then you need to get to know His word.
2. Unfortunately, there are parts of Scripture that are hard to understand, so many Christians avoid them.
3. For example, the book of Revelation. Revelation is hard to understand because it is filled with figurative and symbolic language – dragons, and mysterious beats, and falling stars. And since the meaning isn't immediately obvious, many Christians avoid it. But if the way to know God is to know His word, then we shouldn't avoid books like Revelation.
4. Therefore, I'm going to devote two weeks to helping you understand Revelation.
5. Look at verse 1 with me.
6. **Revelation 1:1** The revelation of Jesus Christ….
7. This is where the title of the book comes from.
8. The Greek word for "revelation" is apocalypse. It means to reveal, to uncover, to open up, to unveil for the purpose of understanding.
9. Keep this in mind as you read Revelation. God wants you to understand it. It's not called "they mystery of Jesus Christ," it's called the revelation of Jesus Christ. The purpose of the book is not to confuse you, but to reveal certain things to you.
10. Now, I admit that Revelation is hard to understand. But it's not impossible. And this morning I'm going to give you a brief overview that, I believe, and I hope, will make Revelation much easier for you to understand. Then, next week, we will look at Revelation 20, the most controversial chapter in Revelation. Let's begin with some background information.

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. **Author: The apostle John.**
    i. **Revelation 1:4** "John: To the seven churches in Asia."
    ii. It is believed that John was exiled to the island of Patmos off the coast of Turkey for preaching about Jesus (Rev 1:9).
2. **Audience: The seven churches in Asia.**
    i. **Revelation 1:4** "John: To the seven churches in Asia."

ii. Asia was one of the ten leading provinces in the Roman empire in the first century.
iii. The seven churches are mentioned by name in Rev 2-3: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.

3. **Purpose: To comfort first-century Christians who were experiencing persecution.**
   i. **Revelation 1:9** I, John, your brother and partner in the affliction.
   ii. If John is their partner in affliction, then that means they are suffering affliction as well.
   iii. At the end of each of the seven letters, they are encouraged to overcome, to prevail, to conquer, to be victorious (e.g., Rev 2:7). In fact, the Greek word he uses is the word *nike*, meaning victory, where the shoe brand got its name. So the purpose of Revelation is to comfort persecuted Christians in the first century.
4. **Genre: Epistle, prophecy, and apocalypse.**
   i. Revelation is the only book in the Bible that is three different genres.
   ii. Epistle (letter):
      1. **Revelation 1:4** John: To the seven churches in Asia.
   iii. Prophecy:
      1. **Revelation 1:3** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy.
      2. Prophecy can take two forms – foretelling and forthtelling. Foretelling is predicting the future; forthtelling is preaching, often in the form of denouncing sin. In Revelation both of these forms are present. There are predictions throughout the book, but also there is preaching, or exhortation, when, for example, John tells the church in Ephesus to repent, and return to their first love (Rev 2:4-5).
   iv. Apocalypse:
      1. Remember, this is the Greek word for apocalypse.
      2. Apocalyptic literature was very common among Jewish and Christian writers between 200 BC and 100 AD.
      3. Features: 1) Written during a time of intense persecution. 2) The use of symbols such as monsters, dragons, and figurative numbers.

4. An example of apocalyptic literature from that time period is the book of Esther. Centuries after it was written, an unknown author added a prologue and an epilogue. These can be found in the apocryphal section of the Roman Catholic Bible. The author writes about two dragons going to war, and a little spring that became a river. Then it explains that the two dragons are Mordecai and Haman, and the river is Esther. In other words, the book is highly symbolic.
5. Knowing that Revelation is apocalyptic is helpful because since other apocalyptic books are figurative and symbolic, it is highly likely that the original audience of Revelation would have recognized its apocalyptic style and would have interpreted it symbolically rather than literally.

5. Date: AD 66.

i. The date that a biblical book was written is not always that important, but with the interpretation of Revelation it is.
ii. There are two main views. We know that Revelation was written during a time of persecution. Therefore, it is believed that Revelation was either written during the reign of Emperor Nero (AD 66), or Emperor Domitian (AD 96).
iii. Why does it matter? During His ministry Jesus prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed (Mt 24:1-2; Mk 13:1-2; Lk 21:5-6, 20-24; Lk 19:41-44). This was fulfilled in AD 70, when the Romans completely destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. One million Jews were killed, and one hundred thousand were taken into slavery. If Revelation was written before AD 70, then it is very possible that the prophecies are about that war in AD 66-70, and not the end-times thousands of years later. But if it was written after AD 70, then it must be referring to something else, possibly events in the distant future.
iv. I subscribe to the early date – AD 66 – which would mean that Revelation is mostly about the war in AD 66-70, and not the end times.
v. Why the early date?
    1. The temple is still standing (Rev 11:1-2).

2. The sea beast is still alive, and it appears to be Emperor Nero who died in AD 68 (Rev 13:18; 17:9-10).
3. The prophecies fit nicely with the description of the wars in Israel and Rome in AD 67-70. A Jewish historian named Josephus was an eye-witness, and he wrote down a detailed description of these events. For example, Rev 16:21 mentions 100-pound hailstones, and Josephus said that the Romans used catapults to hurl 100-pound stones at Jerusalem, and painted them white to make them hard to see.

vi. This leads to the next subject – the approaches to Revelation. There are four main approaches, or views, or ways of interpreting the book of Revelation. All of them are reasonable and are held by conservative evangelical scholars.

III. FOUR APPROACHES

1. Historicism: Revelation reveals the events that will span all of church history.

i. Not popular today, but very popular during the Protestant Reformation (e.g., Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli).

ii. Examples:

1. The seven seals (Rev 6) represent the barbarian invasions that brought down the western Roman empire.
2. The seven trumpets (Rev 8) represent the fall of the eastern Roman empire.
3. The serpent-tailed horses (Rev 9) represent the Muslims who invaded Constantinople.
4. The beast (Rev 13) represents the pope and the corrupt Roman Catholic Church.

2. Idealism: Revelation is about spiritual principles rather than historic events.

i. The prophecies don't point to specific events in history, but rather point to spiritual principles that will unfold during the entire church age, such as the battle between good and evil, the triumph of Christ over Satan, of the victory of the martyrs, and of the sovereignty of God.

ii. This approach is popular among amillennialists, although I am an amillennialists and I do not subscribe to it.

iii. For example, the scholar William Hendriksen has popularized a form of idealism called progressive parallelism. Accordingly, Revelation consists of seven sections that run parallel to each other; they repeat, or recapitulate, each focusing on the same thing from a different perspective. All of them focus on the spiritual principles and realities that are happening during the church age – the entire period between Christ's first and second comings.

3. Futurism: Revelation predicts events still in our future.

i. The most popular form of futurism today is Dispensationalism. It believes that Revelation 4:1 represents the rapture of the church, and that Revelation 4:2-19 represents the Great Tribulation, the seven-year period between the rapture and the second coming.

ii. So, according to this view, almost everything in Revelation will happen far into the future, at least from the perspective of the original audience, after the church has been removed from the earth.

4. Preterism: Revelation predicts events that are primarily in our past.

i. The word "preterism" comes from the Latin word for "past." Preterism is the view that the bulk of Revelation has already been fulfilled. To the original audience in AD 66, it was predicting future events. But those events were fulfilled shortly after Revelation was written, which is in our past.

ii. This is the view that I hold. More specifically, I believe that Revelation was written in AD 66, during the reign of Emperor Nero, just before the start of the Jewish and Roman war (AD 66-70). Most of the prophecies, from Rev 4-19, are about that period of time. Even more specifically, my view is partial preterist because I view the middle of Rev 20 through the end of the book as talking about the future – the second coming of Christ and the events that happen along with it.

iii. Why do I hold to the preterist view? There are several reasons. The first is because I believe in the early dating of Revelation. But let me go further. There are three insights that help you to understand Revelation.

IV. THREE KEYS TO UNLOCK REVELATION

1. John stated <u>when</u> his prophecies would be fulfilled: Soon.

i. **Revelation 1:1** The revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.
    1. Jesus is revealing to John things that will "soon take place."
    2. What did John mean by "soon"? Some people think it can mean "quickly," as in fast. So, it may not happen for 2,000 years, but when it does, it will be quick, or fast. But that's not what the word means. The Greek word means near in time or in distance. Let's look at how the same word is used in different contexts
    3. **2 Timothy 4:9** "Make every effort to come to me soon."
        a. Paul didn't mean, "If and when you decide to come visit me, travel fast." Instead, he meant for him to come as soon as possible. Don't delay any more than necessary.
    4. **3 John 14** "I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face."
        a. Do you think John meant to say, "When we see each other, I hope it will be a fast visit"? Or perhaps, "When I find time to visit you, I'll travel as fast as possible"? No. He meant that he wanted to visit them in person as soon as possible; with as little delay as possible.
ii. But don't you worry! To make sure that you don't misunderstand what John means? He uses a different word two verses later.
iii. **Revelation 1:3** Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it, because the time is near.
    1. So, in verse 1 Jesus is revealing things to John that "must soon take place," and in verse three he says, "the time is near."
iv. And this is not the only place we find these time indicators. You also see them both in the last chapter.
v. **Revelation 22:6** Then he said to me, "These words are faithful and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place."

vi. **Revelation 22:10** Then he said to me, “Don’t seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.”
vii. This last verse is interesting because it points to the book of Daniel. Daniel was a prophet in the Old Testament who was given a vision, and then the angel told him to seal it up because the fulfillment was far off in the distant future (Dan 12:4). But here, John is given the prophesies of Revelation and told not to seal it up because “the time is near.”
viii. These time indicators are extremely important. They tell us that Revelation is not primarily about events that wouldn’t happen until thousands of years in the future. It was written about things that would occur shortly after it was written.
ix. This adds weight to the view that Revelation is about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

2. John stated how his prophecies should be interpreted: Symbolically.

i. Some interpreters of Revelation insist upon on a literal interpretation, but in the very first verse John tells us that visions are meant to be interpreted symbolically.
ii. **Revelation 1:1** “The revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John”
iii. “He made it known” can be translated “signified.”
iv. **Robert Mounce** (a historic premillennialist) “The revelation is said to be signified to John. The Greek verb carries the idea of figurative representation. Strictly speaking it means to make known by some sort of sign. Thus it is admirably suited to the symbolic character of the book. This should warn the reader not to expect a literal presentation of future history, but a symbolic portraying of that which must yet come to pass.”
v. So, when John writes about a fiery red dragon, and a beast with ten horns and seven heads, and a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, and locusts that look like horses with human faces, and a woman with wings standing on the moon, he is writing symbolically. And if John is writing symbolically, then that means his use of number is probably symbolic too. For example, in Rev 19 John describes 200 million horses who kill a third of the human race. Some would say we should take that number literally.

However, those same horses are described as having the head of a lion, they breathe fire like a dragon, and their tail is a snake that can bite people. Most people would agree that this description is symbolic; and if so, then there's a good chance the number 200 million is also symbolic. And that means there's a good chance that when John uses the number seven over fifty times, and when he writes about the 144,000 servants of God, and the 1,000 years in Revelation 20, he is likely being symbolic.

3. **John stated the theme of his book: Christ's coming in judgment against Israel in AD 70.**
    i. Remember that the purpose of the book is to comfort Christians who were being persecuted in the first century, primarily by the Jews. How does he comfort them? By predicting the soon-coming destruction of Israel. The theme verse is Revelation 1:7.
    ii. **Revelation 1:7** Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. So it is to be. Amen.
    iii. At first glance, you might assume this verse is talking about the second coming of Christ, but it's not. Remember, in 1:1, 3, John said that he is writing about things that "must soon take place" "because the time is near." That is a huge clue that we should consider alternate interpretations. And there is one that makes a lot of sense. Let's take it line by line.
    iv. "Look, he is coming with the clouds."
        1. The word "coming" doesn't always refer to Christ's second coming at the end of history. For example, in Rev 2:5 Jesus told the church in Ephesus that if they didn't repent, He would "come" and remove their lampstand. He was talking about metaphorical coming in judgment, not a literal bodily coming.
        2. What about "coming with the clouds"? That sounds like Jesus coming back from heaven to earth. That was common judgment terminology used by the Old Testament prophets to describe God coming in judgment on a particular people.
        3. **Isaiah 19:1** "A pronouncement concerning Egypt: Look, the Lord rides on a swift cloud and is coming to Egypt. Egypt's

worthless idols will tremble before him, and Egypt will lose heart."

4. Isaiah wasn't prophesying a literal coming of God to earth, but God's coming in judgment against Egypt. This was fulfilled in 671 BC when the Assyrian army invaded and destroyed Egypt.
5. So Christ "coming with the clouds" is referring to His coming in judgment against Israel in AD 70.

v. "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him"
   1. This sounds like every person in the whole world will witness this coming. But the word "every" isn't always all-inclusive. Sometimes it is hyperbolic – an exaggeration to make a point. For example, Jer 2:20 says that Israel sinned against God on every hill and under every tree. He didn't mean literally every hill and under every tree in the whole world. He meant that Israel's sin was rampant; the land was full of sin.
   2. But the second part of this phrase tells us whose eyes will see Him. "Even those who pierced him." Who pierced Jesus? The Jews. The Romans helped, but reluctantly. Pilate tried to release Jesus, but the Jews insisted that He be crucified. They said, "His blood be on us and our children (Mt 27:25)!"
   3. The word "even" doesn't have to mean "also." It can mean "that is." So the phrase can be translated, "every eye will see him, that is, those who pierced Him."
   4. So this phrase means that this judgment will be a public event witnessed and experienced by the Jews.

vi. "And all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him."
   1. The word "tribes" points to the Jews, the twelve tribes of Israel.
   2. And the Greek word for "earth" can be translated "land," as in the land of Israel.
   3. So this phrase means that tribes of the land of Israel will mourn because of what Christ is coming to do.

vii. So what is the theme of Revelation? Christ is coming soon in judgment against the Jews, and this was fulfilled in AD 70. This

would have been a huge encouragement to the Christians in the first century who were being persecuted by Jews.

viii. When you put all this together, it means that everything before Rev 20 is about the war between Rome and Jerusalem in AD 66-70. Then, as we'll see next week, in Rev 20 John jumps ahead, far into the future, to talk about the return of Christ and the final judgment.

ix. If you are interested in learning more about Revelation from a partial preterist perspective, I recommend the works of Kenneth Gentry, who has written several books on Revelation. For a shorter commentary check Douglas Wilson's book, *When the Man Comes Around*. Also, I highly recommend Steve Gregg's commentary called *Revelation—Four Views*. You can also listen to my sermon series on the book of Revelation on our website.