

Session 4 - The Consequences of Ideas: ‘Was the Book of Revelation Fulfilled in History?’ & ‘Isn’t It Symbolic?’

In this session I want to argue that the events contained in the book of Revelation are meant to be understood as being future and literal in nature. And I want to show that any attempt to explain the contents of the book away as being historically fulfilled or intended to be understood symbolically is (1) altogether *nonsensical*, (2) extremely *dangerous* and (3) radically *inconsistent* with the hermeneutic¹ Scripture gives for eschatological passages and the hermeneutic that we use for all other areas of theology.

I. AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

A. The Four Parts

1. John’s Commissioning (1)
2. The 7 Letters to the 7 Churches (2-3)
3. The Throne Room (4-5)
4. The Transition Period Between this Age and the Next (6-22)

B. The Five “Acts” within the Fourth Part

1. 7 Seals (Then Explained by an Angelic Interjection)
2. 7 Trumpets (Then Explained by an Angelic Interjection)
3. 7th Trumpet: Rapture and Beginning of Second Coming Procession (Then Explained by an Angelic Interjection)
4. 7 Bowls of Wrath (Then Explained by an Angelic Interjection)

¹ The term “Hermeneutics” comes from the Greek word that means “to interpret.” In theology, hermeneutics is the method of interpreting a given passage correctly and faithfully.



5. Jesus’ March Into Jerusalem (Then Explained by an Angelic Interjection)

II. THE THREE MAIN “DISASTER VIEWS” CRIPPLING THE CHURCH

- A. The three views that we need to address are:
 1. The *Escapist View/Secret Rapture View* of the **Pre-Tribulation Rapture**
 2. The *Historical Fulfillment View* of **Preterism**
 3. The *Symbolic/Nebulous View* of **Amillennialism/Post-Millennialism**
- B. In the last session we dealt with the issue of the danger of the pre-tribulation rapture. We saw that the rapture is synonymous with the second coming and occurs at the 7th or last Trumpet (1 Cor. 15:51-52; 1 Thess. 4:15-17; Matt. 24:31; 2 Thess. 2:1-3).

“...and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10)

1. The day of vengeance, judgment and punishment is also the day He comes for the saints to relieve them of affliction and to be glorified in them as they marvel at Him.
2. The “blessed hope” of the church in affliction is not a secret rapture that can happen at any moment. According to Paul, our relief comes *only* when Jesus is revealed in flaming fire (not hidden in a secret rapture) to inflict judgment (not take people to heaven).
- C. The foundational mandate of the forerunner ministry is to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). And an integral part of make ready a people prepared for the Lord is stating clearly the nature and quality of His leadership in history.

III. THE HISTORICAL FULFILLMENT VIEW (PRETERISM)



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- A. One of the most damaging, dangerous and destructive views that is emerging within the Body of Christ in our generation ² is the idea that the events in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in 70 AD with the destruction of Jerusalem under the leadership of Titus. This view is growing immensely and is gaining considerable influence. This is the orthodox view for many seminaries and Bible schools in America.
- B. The view is technically called “Preterism;” those who hold it are called “Preterists.” A “Preterit verb” is a word that communicates that which is *past tense*. The book of Revelation is a *past tense prophecy* in their view; hence the term “Preterist.”
- C. There are **four primary reasons** that people feel compelled to embrace this view of historical fulfillment. They see our view as being:
1. **Too Irrelevant** – They think it strange for God to send a prophecy to 7 historical churches in Asia Minor about events that would occur at the end of the age. Why not address it to the end-time church? If it’s for them why was it addressed to the first generation church?
 2. **Too Loose** – The language of “nearness,” “imminence” and “soon-ness” alluding to the fact that the generation that Jesus was speaking to was the generation that would see the fulfillment of the prophecies forces them to take the texts at a ‘face-value’ level. They say that Jesus promised the end of the age was ‘soon’ and that therefore 70 AD must have been it.
 3. **Too Misleading** – They believe that anticipating an age-ending crisis averts our attention and energy from our mandate in the here and now. Many leaders of the “emergent church” ³ are now advocating this position in view of issues the church’s apparent disengagement with things like the environment and government. They feel that a futuristic interpretation of the book encourages a pessimistic mentality that fosters disengagement and negativity.

² The view has gained credence and momentum in the last 10 years in an unprecedented way.

³ Men like Brian McLaren have openly criticized the idea of a future literal second coming in hopes that the church would engage with issues like global warming.



4. **Too Embarrassing** – They find it too costly to embrace the idea of a coming hour of global crisis that culminates in the literal splitting of the skies and a violent battle procession from heaven’s courts through the Middle East and into Jerusalem. The stigma attached to the book of Revelation makes it easy for them to “believe” that it has already been fulfilled. It’s too embarrassing to hold to a literal return and a literal Millennial reign.

- D. ***No one reads the book of Revelation and concludes that it must have been fulfilled in history; you need to be indoctrinated to believe that.*** And so, very rarely will you find an ignorant and unlearned person affirming preterism. It is almost always advocated by someone who has been taught the system.

- E. The issue of relevance (point 1) is important to understand. One of the intellectual hurdles that people can’t get over is the question of “If this vision was intended for the final generation in church history, why was it given to the first generation in church history?” The assumption is “If it was a revelation that was meant for the final generation it has no relevance to the first generation or any generation in between.” The problem with this view is that the book of Revelation isn’t the only book that moves from history to prophecy seamlessly.
 1. George Ladd explains the invalidity of this assumption by saying: “This...argument [***of relevance***] which cannot be pressed too far, or else it will *empty many of the Old Testament prophecies of any relevance*. The prophets spoke not only of contemporary events; they constantly related contemporary historical events to the last great event at the end of history: the Day of the Lord when God will visit His people to redeem them and to establish His Kingdom. This brings us to a characteristic of Old Testament prophecy which is also characteristic of the Revelation and which solves this problem of distance and relevance. As we have just pointed out, the prophets had two foci in their prophetic perspective: the events of the present and immediate future, and the ultimate eschatological event. *These two are held in dynamic tension often without chronological distinction, for **the main purpose of prophecy** is not*



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to give a program or chart of the future, but to let the light of the eschatological fall on the present (2 Peter 1.19).”⁴

2. The prime example of the use of prophecy in history is the book of Isaiah.
 - a. Historical crisis of chapter 1 blends into the eschatological crisis of chapter 2
 - b. Assyria in chapter 10 becomes Antichrist by chapter 11 by virtue of the fact that Isaiah shifted from prophesying about Assyrian invasion to the second coming of Jesus.

F. *The greatest flaw of this view is the fact that none of the events contained in the book of Revelation were even remotely fulfilled in the first century.*

1. **The scope and impact of the judgment events** – “the whole earth worshipped the beast,” “1/3 of the earth was killed,” “every eye will see Him,” etc. The scope and impact cannot be ignored or explained away. John saw the impact and heard the numbers of casualties on many occasions. It’s too serious and too dramatic to explain away as historical when nothing fits.
2. **The dramatic nature of the rise and fall of “the beast”** – The beast emerges from the bottomless pit and receives the worship of the whole earth. Nero was another Roman whose name wasn’t even widely known until modern times. The beast implements religious and economic sanctions on the whole earth and then kills the saints and the Jews for not obeying. Nero’s persecution was brief and, according to most scholars, was limited to one family in Rome. It wasn’t worldwide persecution, it wasn’t even empire wide. In fact, it wasn’t even city-wide. The beast is killed by Jesus’ literal physical appearing. Nero stabbed himself in the throat because he was afraid of being caught by men on horses. He quoted a line from Homer’s ‘Odyssey’ and then died saying “The world is losing its greatest artist.” Nero was a pathetic historical leader. The beast is an unprecedented eschatological tyrant.

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*



3. **The global sifting of the people of God** – The book of Revelation clearly depicts the context of the hour of fulfillment as being the bloodiest hour in the church’s history. This 42 month period will be a global blood-bath. Nothing in history remotely resembles the carnage that we see in the 5th Seal of chapter 6, the innumerable multitude of chapter 7, the Satanic persecution of chapter 12, the Beast’s oppression in chapter 13, the patience of the saints in ch. 14 and the Babylonian aggression in chapters 17 and 18. Jesus said that if the hour were not cut short by His return no flesh would survive (Mt. 24:21-22).
4. **The second coming of Jesus** – The book concludes with the physical and literal return of Jesus. Anyone can figure out that this has not occurred yet. Even if one could make a case for the book of Revelation being symbolic (which they can’t), they would have to explain away the dozens of passages that speak of a bodily return and a physical reign on the earth.
- G. ***The next greatest flaw with this view is the fact that it changes the book’s genre from being prophecy to being history (and poorly recorded history).*** The book was written in the 90’s during the reign of “Domitian.” This is decades after the rise of Nero in the 60’s and the fall of Jerusalem in the 70’s. Not only would that make it historical and not prophetic but it would also mean that the book demands far less respect; because the discrepancy between what happened in history and what John saw is incalculable.
- H. ***What about the apparent immediacy of the prophecies to the first generation?*** If we impose immediacy on Revelation we must also impose it on the other dozens of passages that use language of nearness. The point wasn’t **immediacy** but **surety**. (See Haggai 2:6 and the author’s use of it in Hebrews 12:26 [and not the rough 580 year gap]) The immediacy factor comes into play only in the generation meets the conditions for the events to occur. Until then the people of God are to hold to the surety of the events – not the immediacy. Think: with no Jews on any Jewish soil there exists no possibility of immediacy. That was Paul’s point in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3. Conditions must be met.

(Isaiah 10: 25) “For yet **a very little while**, and the indignation shall cease, and my anger in their destruction.”



(Isaiah 13: 6) “Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is **at hand**; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty.”

(Isaiah 56: 1) “Thus saith the Lord, keep ye judgment, and do justice: for my salvation is **near to come**, and my righteousness to be revealed.”

(Jeremiah 51: 33) “For thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel; The daughter of Babylon is like threshing-floor, and it is time to thresh her: **yet a little while**, and the time of her harvest shall come.”

(Ezekiel 30: 3) “For the day is **near**, even the day of the Lord is **near**, a cloudy day; it shall be the time of the heathen.”

(Ezekiel 36: 8) “But ye, O mountains of Israel, ye shall shoot forth your branches, and yield your fruit to my people of Israel; for they are **at hand** to come.”

(Joel 1: 15) “Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is **at hand**, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come.”

(Joel 2: 1) “Blow ye a trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain; let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, it is **nigh at hand**.”

(Zephaniah 1: 14) “The great day of the Lord is **near, it is near, and hasteth greatly**, even the voice of the day of the Lord: the mighty men shall cry there bitterly.”

(Haggai 2: 6) “For thus saith the Lord of Hosts; Yet once, **it is a little while**, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the Desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of Hosts.”

IV. PRETERISM’S ATTACK ON THE NATURE OF GOD AND THE QUALITY OF HIS LEADERSHIP



To affirm that the events contained in the book of Revelation were fulfilled in the first century is also to affirm these four statements:

- A. ***God is Inaccurate in His Predictions of the Future*** in that Christ did not return, the oppressive empire was not overthrown, the Kingdom of God was not established “on the earth,” and none of the events described in the Seals, Trumpets or Bowls can accurately, sensibly, logically or indisputably be linked to ***any*** historical or current event. In a sentence, if this is the Lord’s prophecy concerning the first century, *He missed it.*
- B. ***God is Ineffective in Strengthening His people*** in that church history unanimously tells us that the Book was written between 81 and 96 B.C. This means that God gave the “prophecy” some 20-30 years after the so called rage of “Nero the Beast from the Sea (A.D. 64)” held sway over “every tribe and tongue” during his tyrannical reign. This then puts God two or three decades late in telling His people about what was about to happen. The argument that it was written primarily and even solely for these 7 historical churches as a warning to strengthen and encourage the church going through the persecution led by Nero is a faulty one in that it was written decades after the events occurred serving no purpose for those under the rule of Nero the alleged “Beast” of chapter 13.
1. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul in the second century wrote, “It (The Revelation) was seen not very long ago, almost in our generation, at the close of ***the reign of Domitian (81-96 A.D.)***.”
 2. Victorinus wrote in the third century, “When John said these things he was on the island of Patmos, condemned to the mines by ***Caesar Domitian.***”
 3. “Another ***serious difficulty*** to the earlier dating (60’s A.D.) is the earthquake that destroyed Laodicea, one of the seven cities addressed in Revelation, in A.D. 60 or 61. Evidence indicates that the earthquake had long-term effects on the area. Laodicea was deeply involved in reconstruction for the rest of Nero’s reign and shortly thereafter. The possibility of the existence of a city, much less a relatively degenerate church in that city, during the 60s is highly questionable. Gentry’s (*a scholar who is of the few to challenge the historical dating of the book*) attempted rebuttal of this argument (pp. 319-22) is again far-fetched.”⁵

⁵ Robert L. Thomas, *Commentary on the Book of Revelation*



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4. The theory associated with an early dating of the book assumes and concludes that there was foreseen “...an imminent world-wide persecution of the church by Rome (Rev. 13-1-18). The church was about to face practical annihilation (Rev 12-13); to steel God’s people in the face of their trials, John wrote to assure them that though they must expect to suffer, the coming of the Lord was at hand to overthrow Rome and to deliver his church. **The problem with this theory is that there is no evidence that during the last decade of the first century there occurred any open and systematic persecution of the church.....**It is true that widespread persecution was promoted by Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian, but earlier persecutions were local in character or relatively mild in execution. Nero did indeed instigate a vigorous if brief persecution on Christians, but only in Rome and on a single occasion. **The alleged persecution by no means was empire-wide but was directed against a few families in Rome.**” (George Eldon Ladd)
 5. Clearly the message of the Book was meant to strengthen the believers in the 1st century. The issue though is over the nature of that encouragement. The reality of the ultimate and final world crisis was to encourage them in their regional, local and historical one.
 6. It’s interesting that no one challenged the dating of the Book until recent times. This does not mean that church leaders have been extremely gullible for 2,000 years but that it has been historically documented as being written in the 90’s.
- C. **God is Extremely ambiguous, vague and unconcerned with specificity in His communication.** That is, definitive terms, phrases and realities were shown to John that spoke of world-wide events that would have impact on the entire earth in an ultimate way. To say that the events took place already is to say that God cares not about communicating truths in any sort of sensible, logical, or understandable manner. Instead He has chosen to speak of isolated historical events of an un-ultimate kind by using completely different language that in no way resembles those historical events. In other words there is nothing in the chronological sections or the parenthetical sections that can be obviously linked to anything in history (without completely manipulating and distorting the text to fit fringe and obscure events like the sinking of the Titanic and the existence of certain diseases) making God a horrible communicator.
- D. **God is guilty of excessive exaggeration.** Some people would call this “lying.” Why? - Because He employs radical language to speak of events that do not match up in any way shape or form on a historical plane. For instance (*Just one example*):



5 And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. 6 Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. 7 It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. 8 All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (Rev. 13.5-8)

1. There is a clear period of 42 months – *it is either historic or prophetic*.
2. In order for it to be historic we must then say with confidence that the Roman Emperor Nero waged war on “every tribe, tongue and nation” as well as received the “worship of all who dwelt on the face of the earth” for 42 months. No one can honestly say this without willingly ignoring the text and history altogether.
3. In Revelation 19 the Beast is destroyed *at the Coming of Jesus* forcing us to conclude its sure future fulfillment. Nero died alone and pathetic; not at the splitting of the skies at the return of Jesus.

V. THE SYMBOLIC/NEBULOUS VIEW (AMMILLENNIALISM/POST-MILLENNIALISM)

- A. This view can be summed by saying that those who hold it end up saying that the book of Revelation is fulfilled by anything from the Titanic sinking to 9-11 to the Anthrax scare to “global warming.” Most that advocate Reformed Theology fall into this pit of exegetical disaster. I advocate Reformed Theology just as these men do. The error though in many Reformed circles is to project a bunk hermeneutic onto literally *hundreds* of chapters to keep consistent with the fathers of their tradition. Men like Augustine have done incalculable damage to the studying of eschatology. I love Augustine! His soteriology is brilliant! But o how he distorted eschatology for so many.
- B. This camp is adamant that a straight forward approach to the book is lunacy and that there are no literal realities behind the apocalyptic imagery.
 1. The greatest weakness of this theology is ***flaming inconsistency***. They employ a literal hermeneutic to every other area of theology (soteriology, ecclesiology, etc.) while attempting to use another one for eschatology.



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2. They will often say things like “You don’t read an Atlas or a history book like you would read Shakespeare – they’re different genres.” While that is true, the analogy runs aground in that the imagery and poetry of the apocalyptic books and passages are all interpreted by Scripture as being literal events that precede the Day of the Lord at the end of the age.
 3. So while we don’t approach a book however we want, and while we need to take genre into consideration, it’s clear from the prophet, apostles and Jesus that the imagery and symbolism isn’t meant to be ethereal and ambiguous to us but is designed to help our hearts connect with the literal realities that will break out at the end of the age.
 4. Let’s remember that there are only 7 symbols in the book that need to be interpreted. And let’s remember that the 7 are interpreted by the angel in the text itself.
 - a. **Dragon:** Satan
 - b. **Woman with a Male Child:** Elect Remnant of Ethnic Jews and Jesus
 - c. **Beast:** Antichrist
 - d. **Another Beast:** False Prophet
 - e. **Harlot Babylon:** A Global End-Time Demonized Religious and Financial network
 - f. **Seven Heads:** Seven Empires that Persecuted Ethnic Israel
 - g. **Ten Horns:** A 10 nation confederacy of nations in the Middle East (Ez. 38-39)
- B. This is a haphazard approach to the book where any past or current event can be what is meant in the book. I use the word “Nebulous” because the method of interpretation is vague, hazy, undefined and unarticulated. **Because the book is “symbolic” and “allegorical” the interpretation of those symbols are open to any and all to decide what they think it mean.** That’s why virtually no Amillennialists agree with each other.
- C. The result of this view is widespread disagreement. One commentator says that the fact that there is no sea in the age to come means that there is “no denominations in eternity” whereas another says that “it is symbolic of national boundary lines” whereas another says “it is symbolic of the Gospel going forth to all nations at the end” whereas another says “it means in the age to come there



will be no ocean.” Nearly every verse in Revelation is defined differently by those who say that no literal reality is behind the symbolism.

- D. The book of Revelation mustn’t be defined as being “literal” or “symbolic.” That’s very unhelpful. Here’s why: If God speaks to His people through a symbol, they can and must be sure that that symbol points to a literal, cold, hard reality. There is no symbol in Scripture that does not point us to a literal reality.
- E. Therefore, we shouldn’t call the book “literal” or “symbolic.” We should say “we approach the book at face value.” That is, every symbol points to a reality. And every reality can be spoken of by a clear symbol.
1. Example: In Revelation chapter 4 we read that God the Father sits on a Throne that is surrounded by an “emerald rainbow.” We read that He looks like “a sardius and a jasper stone.” Now, we aren’t meant to teach people that God is a sardius and a jasper stone. Those stones came into John’s mind to help describe what he literally saw. The literal reality that is behind that radiant diamond looking “jasper stone” is the transcendence of God in all His holiness as He sits surrounded by light. The literal reality that is behind that fiery red “sardius stone” is the burning heart of God. The stone looks like fire. And the Scriptures compare God to a “jealous husband” who has “fire in His eyes” and who is a “consuming fire.”
 2. Every symbol in the book of Revelation is **either interpreted in the same context,** OR is **interpreted by Scripture elsewhere** OR **common sense.**
- F. The amillennialist camp is guilty of some of the most horrendous distortion of the Scriptures in church history. We do not honor the book of Revelation by rendering the symbols “unknowable” and so nebulous that the common believer cannot conclude what they mean.

