

# What Is The Book Of Revelation?

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Among the books of the New Testament, the book of Revelation is probably more widely debated than any other, due to its prophetic content, yet it is also the least understood.

People find it difficult to wrap their minds around it because in some places, it contains symbols that must be interpreted, and in other places, it contains literal descriptions or interpretations that must be taken at face value to be understood.

When a person turns to scholars for guidance, he finds as many interpretations as there are interpreters, and the areas in which they agree are rare. To complicate matters further, the timing of the various visions is uncertain. Even though the visions in general follow a linear progression, along the way there are insets and asides that are intended to clarify, yet they can also confuse if applied to the wrong time or context.

Even with these difficulties, though, the book states in its opening that it is meant to show the servants of God things that must shortly come to pass—that is, God intends it to be understood. Yet, because it is prophecy, much of its real value will be realized *after* the fact, for it is only after a prophesied event takes place that we truly understand it.

Thus, even if we rightly divide the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15), and let the Bible interpret itself, we still have only a rough outline of what is to take place. But after it happens, "*then* [we] shall know"—as the prophets say—all that was intended, and we can give glory to God all the more for His sovereign power in bringing it to pass.

But *what is* the book of Revelation? We will not have a chance of understanding the details if we cannot see the big picture of this controversial book. When we understand the book's scope and the intent, we will be in a better position to divide its contents rightly and catch a glimpse of the future.

## *The Apocalypse*

The book itself tells us, right at the beginning, what it is about, but because of the way it is translated into English, we can read right over it and miss the book's own declaration of its contents. Revelation 1:1-2 says:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.

We are immediately told that this book contains the *revelation of Jesus Christ*. This phrase is the title of the book. But what does "revelation" mean? It is the Greek noun *apocalypsis*, which is why this book is often called the "book of the Apocalypse." This noun comes from the verb *apocalupto*, which

literally means "to take away the veil," such as when a painting or statue has its covering taken away. Even though *apocalypsis* is most often translated "revelation," the best equivalent word in English is "unveiling."

In common usage, when someone refers to the "Apocalypse," or describes an event as being "apocalyptic," he is usually talking about widespread devastation or ultimate doom. Mel Gibson recently produced and directed a movie entitled *Apocalypto*, which portrayed the end of the Mayan civilization—and it was a very bloody end.

Using "apocalypse" this way derives from the content of the book of Revelation, not from the word's Greek meaning. Simply, *apocalypsis* and *apocalupto* refer to "taking away a veil" or "unveiling" rather than to cataclysmic events. However, in this specific instance of apocalypse, of a veil being taken away (when Jesus Christ returns), widespread devastation will in fact occur as this present age closes with wars and disasters.

In the Greek New Testament, *apocalypsis* appears in two senses. When used figuratively, it has the sense of "bringing someone to knowledge," as in the English phrase "remove the veil of ignorance." For example, when we say that a mystery is *unveiled*, we mean that the veil of ignorance is lifted so that the matter can be plainly understood. In terms of the book of Revelation, this is the sense that most interpreters and readers recognize in it. They see it as the unveiling of prophetic events to understanding.

However, when *apocalypsis* is used in a literal sense, it refers to "the visible appearance of one previously unseen," as a woman shrouded by a veil is revealed when her covering is removed. In Revelation's case, as the book of the Unveiling, *apocalypsis* literally refers to the visible appearance of One who is now hidden from human sight, and that One is, of course, Jesus Christ.

The New Testament consistently supports the literal sense of *apocalypsis* rather than the figurative, and that the "revelation of Jesus Christ" is not limited to His testimony or to His unlocking of prophecy. Instead, the "revelation of Jesus Christ" is, in fact, an advance record of His *visible appearance* in glory, to overthrow the spirit and human rulers of this world and to establish His Kingdom on earth.

A key to effective Bible study is to let the Bible interpret itself. Another key is to let the Bible's usage of a word determine its meaning rather than to rely solely on what it means in secular Greek or Hebrew. *Apocalypsis* appears in eighteen places in the New Testament, and in ten of those places—including Revelation 1:1—it is used literally, referring to a person or a thing. In every case, it denotes the "visible appearance" or "unveiling" of that person or thing, confirming how it should be understood in Revelation 1:1.

An example of this occurs in I Corinthians 1:7-8: ". . . so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation [*apocalypsis*] of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." In verse 7, *apocalypsis* is translated "coming" in the King James and "revelation" in the New King James. Paul clearly refers to the return or the second coming of Jesus Christ; he uses the word in relation to Christ appearing visibly at a specific time: His day.

This "day" of course does not refer to a specific day of the week, but rather to the period in which the misjudgment of man ends and the righteous judgment of God begins. Mankind, under the influence

of Satan, has been trying in vain to rule himself for 6,000 years, or six "days," using the principle in II Peter 3:8 of one day equaling one thousand years. The seventh "day" is when God intervenes and establishes His government, so that mankind can finally understand how to live. That day begins with the visible appearance of Jesus Christ, coming in the clouds in all of His glory (Matthew 24:30; Mark 13:26).

II Thessalonians 1:7-10 speaks of that same day, or that same time:

. . . and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed [*apocalypsis*] from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, *in that Day*, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed.

Here again, *apocalypsis* refers to the person of Jesus Christ, and it plainly describes His visible revelation—His unveiling—when He returns from heaven with His angels to take vengeance on those who do not know God and disobey the gospel. When He is revealed in that day, not only will He appear in glory, but He will "be glorified in His saints." At that time, His saints, people He has separated to Himself, will be resurrected and exchange their earthly glory for heavenly glory (*cf.* I Corinthians 15:40-49).

### **Revelation's Good News**

Notice that II Thessalonians 1:8 says that God will take vengeance on those who do not *obey* the gospel of Jesus Christ. This idea has a strong tie to the book of Revelation, as the gospel of Jesus Christ is the "good news" that He brought. His good news is not primarily about Himself, but rather it is the message that He brought from His Father about the Kingdom of God being established on earth (Malachi 3:1; Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16-17). After the gospel is preached in all the world as a witness to all nations (Matthew 24:14), God will be justified in punishing all of those who reject it. The end of this present world will come when God takes vengeance on those who have heard the gospel message—which, at that point, will be everyone alive on earth—but who refuse to repent and submit to God's rule on earth.

The tie to the book of Revelation is that the unveiling of Jesus Christ, when He removes man from governing the earth and takes that responsibility to Himself, is the fulfillment of the gospel message that He brought. When Christ is revealed, the Kingdom of God will be at hand. Revelation fills in the explosive details of how the governments of this world will come under the rulership of God.

Even though the word *gospel* means "good news," people typically do not think of the book of Revelation as being encouraging or uplifting. For most professing Christians, the gospel that Jesus preached is *not* good news. They prefer a gospel that is limited to the forgiveness of their sins. When they hear that God's Kingdom includes repentance and obedience to His laws, they cannot tolerate it (Romans 8:7). For those who will not obey the gospel, the book of Revelation is not *good news* at all, because it foretells their judgment for idolatry and disobedience.

For true Christians, though, this book is wonderful news! It may not be "good" news in the sense of being pleasant, enjoyable, or attractive. Instead, its news contains a zealous, righteous goodness—an

active pursuit of what is good for mankind, a deliberate and forceful bringing to pass of those things that will make life good for everyone. The entire creation will rejoice when the present principalities, powers, and broken governments of men are replaced with a King who will powerfully impose all that is good upon a sin-sick world.

As we have seen, both I Corinthians 1:8 and II Thessalonians 1:10 refer to "the day" or "that day," and this is also a necessary piece to understanding what the book of Revelation is about. John says in Revelation 1:10 that he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." He had a series of visions, not of any specific day of the week, but of that period referred to as "the day of the Lord" (Psalm 110:5; Isaiah 2:11-12; 13:6, 9, 13; 22:5; 34:8; 61:2; Jeremiah 46:10; Ezekiel 7:19; 13:5; 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14; Amos 5:18; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7-8, 14, 18; 2:2-3; Zechariah 14:1).

This reiterates what we have already seen with regard to the book being about the unveiling of Jesus Christ. The time element for the entire book is the day of the Lord and those events immediately preceding His revelation. While there are a few references to earlier events—such as the symbol of ancient Israel in Revelation 12:1 (compare with Genesis 37:9), or the birth of Jesus in Revelation 12:2—the near-complete majority of the book is about the end time. It concerns itself with "that day," when this present age is wrapped up and the new one begins.

### **Salvation Revealed Too**

The usage of *apocalypsis* can be seen three more times in I Peter 1:3-9, 13:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed [*apocalupto*] in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation [*apocalypsis*] of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls. . . . Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation [*apocalypsis*] of Jesus Christ;

These verses link the unveiling of Jesus Christ with our future and all that the Father is working out. Verse 3 recalls to us our status as children of God, reminding us that our hope lies in the resurrection from the dead, when we will be composed of spirit, able to inherit the Kingdom (see I Corinthians 15:50). God Himself safeguards this perfect inheritance, which can never be diminished, for all those who are regenerated and endure to the end.

Verse 5 reminds us that our salvation will be revealed "in the last time." This gives us reason for great rejoicing, even though various trials may grieve us. Those trials are necessary, Peter tells us in verse 7, so that the genuineness of our faith—the tried and proven character of our faith—may be found when Jesus Christ is unveiled to the entire world (*cf.* Luke 18:8).

Verse 8 points out the contrast that, at this time, we do not see Him with our eyes because He is still veiled, hidden from the world. His revelation has not occurred yet. Even though we cannot see Him now, we still love Him and can still rejoice because we know that the Father *will* soon send Him back to this earth. Then, every eye will see Him (Revelation 1:7).

Verse 13 summarizes what we should be doing as a result of this understanding. We need to brace ourselves mentally, and think, plan, and act seriously and circumspectly, setting our hope wholly on the divine favor that the revelation of Jesus Christ will bring to us. For concurrent with the *apocalypsis* of Christ is the salvation of the saints, both living and dead.

So, when we next study this unique book, it will help to remember that it is almost entirely focused on the Day of the Lord and the events surrounding the triumphant appearance of Jesus Christ, when He returns to intervene in human affairs and to establish His Kingdom on the earth.