Revelation

Before we start just a couple of announcements mainly by way of reminder, both of them related to the exam. First of all is this Thursday, that would be tomorrow at eight o'clock in this room, there will be an extra credit review session. Hopefully I'll have a review sheet, a study guide up on Blackboard as well so that you can look at it. Hopefully I'll have that sometime before the review session. So that is this Thursday; that is, an extra credit review session. I'm still working on the possibility of a review session for the final exam as well. The second thing is, as I said, this Friday is your last class in here because I'll be gone, but on this next Monday will be exam number four which covers Hebrews through Revelation. Though I will not be here, I do have someone to come and proctor and monitor the exam during the period. So, you'll show up on Monday, as you would for any class, and you'll take exam number four. Then that is it until the final, which I think is Wednesday of finals week, the 17th or the 18th of finals week. I can't remember the exact time but. This Friday I will talk a little bit about the final exam. Just to mention a couple things and there will eventually be a study guide. I also would remind you too, if you want to look at copies of previous exams you can stop by my office and pick those up or if you just want to e-mail me and ask for them I can e-mail you copies. Of course, I can't give you exam number four yet because you haven't taken that, but I can give you the first three exams. But again, I'll be gone for all week so, if you're not able to stop by and pick up a hard copy by Friday, then please e-mail me and I can e-mail you copies of exams to look at and study because as I said, the final exam, although the wording may be different or the answer question portions may be swapped or something like that, the final exam covers the same material as the four section exams. There's no new material. So anything from the whole semester is fair game. But it will be material that appeared on the four section
exams. If it's, if there's material in your notes that was not covered from any of the section exams, you are not responsible for that. So, again, if you do want to see previous exams, as I said I don't care what you do with them, because I won't be here. So you can’t sell them or anything like that or pass them on because whoever's teaching New Testament next year will no doubt use his own exams. Tomorrow eight o'clock in this room.

Alright, let's open with prayer. And, what I want to do today and on Friday than with the time we do have Friday is to talk about the last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation. I'd intended to spend a little bit more time on, but for various reasons we won’t spend as much time as I thought we would, but still I want to give you a sense of what the book is and what it's about. Primarily, I’d like to leave you with a sense of how to read it in light of the kind of literature it is, in light of how it was functioning and how, what is a sensible way to read the book of Revelation. I will talk a little bit about that today.

Let's open with prayer, “Father thank you for sustaining us and keeping us particularly during this stressful time as we approach the end of the semester which means projects and looking forward to finals and all those other things. Lord we, we pray for continued provision of strength and endurance. Father I pray that that will not distract us from thinking clearly and sensibly about your Word now as we consider the last book of the New Testament and the Bible. Father, I pray that you will instill in us, a desire to read it and listen to it more carefully but also grant the ability to read it sensibly as you intended it to be understood and as you intended to communicate it. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.”

Alright, the book of Revelation, this is this is a picture of, I don’t know if anyone's ever looked at these or studied these but these are a series of woodcuts by Albrecht Durer. He produced a series of famous wood engravings, or woodcuts, on the book of Revelation. This is Revelation chapter 6 the so-called four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in chapter 6. When the seals of the scroll are broken with each the breaking of the first four seals a different colored horse with a Rider, rides out on to the scene of John's vision. But these woodcuts are one of the well-known and famous visual representations of Revelation that have been passed down to us and very influential.
But when you think about the book of Revelation and when you think about how it has been read and understood throughout history and how it has been treated, there have been at least two possible very general responses. One of the responses is to basically reject it or ignore it because Revelation is such a strange book to us and we’ll ask why that's the case, but because it’s such an odd and peculiar book because it's full of symbolism and images that simply sometimes don't resonate with us at all. We have nothing to relate them to and almost no way to identify with some of them. Some of them we do but others, I mean what in the world is John doing in describing this vision of locusts that have human heads and teeth like a lion and tails like scorpions. I mean, where in the world did he get that? And all these scenes of bloodshed and slaughter and just the uncertainty that has surrounded its interpretation and all the variety of ways it's been read. For some, it signals kind of a “do not enter” sign. It’s as if Revelation, although it claims to be unsealed, although John sees a book in his vision that’s unsealed, for most of us Revelation remains sealed. That is, it has a sign “off limits” or “Caution” or one of those yellow caution tapes wrapped around the book, so we tend to stay away from it and steer clear. As brilliant a scholar, thinker and theologian as John Calvin was back in the Reformation time. He wrote a commentary on every New Testament book except for Revelation because he didn't know what to do with it. In my opinion there are a lot of people who would've been done better to follow his advice and his lead. But that's one possible approach, is to simply neglect it and steer away and to go back to the safer ground of Paul's letters where we read about salvation, justification by faith and obedience to Christ, etc.

Another approach is to become so obsessed with it that it becomes the center of all our thinking and our activity and all our energy. So that again, it's interesting, if you were to go back to your computer and Google “Revelation” or “Apocalypse,” you would find entire websites, entire ministries devoted to understanding and interpreting the book of Revelation. Most of you are familiar with this. If you haven't read them, you've seen them at one point: The “Left Behind” series produced by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Although they are clearly fictional they are still meant to portray precisely how these
writers think the book of Revelation is going to play out in the end. So that the idea is this,
as you read these books there's a sense that things are moving in this direction. You can see
how things could easily arrive at the scenario that these two authors paint. So you find
books, you find ministries, websites almost obsessed with the book of Revelation in trying
to understand it and trying to squeeze it into the mold of the 21st century. So we look at the
21st century and what is going on in the Middle East and in Europe and then in the United
States, and then we try to ask how that fits in with what we read in a book like Revelation.
Again, almost an obsession trying to figure that out.

So those are two extremes that are not unique in the 21st century. They’ve in fact
categorized interpretations of Revelation not long after the book was written and came
into the Christian canon. Again, either rejecting it, or neglecting it out of uncertainty what
to do with it, or becoming so obsessed and enthralled with it, that one can think about little
else than the book of Revelation and how events in our own day seem to be playing out as
a kind of script that was already written in advance in the book of Revelation.

Now what I’m going to suggest to you, if I can kind of tip my hat, as far as my
approach of the book, out front, in my opinion we need to first of all treat Revelation, and
hopefully I’ll be able to demonstrate this, like any other book in the New Testament. That
is, we need to ask the main question: “What in the world was the author trying to
communicate?” “What situation was the author most likely addressing?” One thing
hopefully you will come away with understanding is in the same way that Paul wrote,
although they're still the Scriptures of God's people that continue to reveal God and speak
to us today, the book of Galatians to a very specific crisis and problem in the church and a
very specific readership; Revelation, I think, is the same way. The author is writing a book
that is addressing a very specific problem and set of circumstances in the first century. So,
in the same way that we try to reconstruct and understand what was going on and behind
Galatians or behind 1 Peter or any other book, so that we can understand it better today, I
think we have to do the same thing with Revelation.

I'm always perplexed when I hear some persons that should know better, that will
treat all the New Testament books like that, that is, what did the author intend? What most likely did he intend? What was the original situation and circumstances that Paul or Peter or John and whoever was addressing, but then they get to the book of Revelation and they completely abandon that. They start trying to read Revelation again as kind of a script of the 21st century written in advance. So we kind of throw caution to the wind and start asking what in the world is going on in our day that seems to match up with what we read in Revelation. We fail to ask the question: why might this book have been written? What problem in the first century could have this been addressing? What most likely did the author who wrote this book and had this vision that’s recorded in this book, what was he trying to communicate? So I think that has to be our starting point like any other New Testament book before we can ask the question how does this book continue to speak to my situation? How does this book resonate in the 21st century? We need to first ask, what were the original circumstances in which this book was produced? What was that the problem or issues that it was addressing? What was the author trying to do and trying to accomplish in writing this book?

First of all then, what I want to do is address a series of issues very briefly related to the background that gave rise to Revelation like we have on other books. We try to construct a scenario of what most likely was going on that caused John to sit down and write this book in the first place. First of all, as far as the author and date, I don't want to say a lot about that, it's beyond dispute that someone named John wrote this book because he identifies himself as John, in the very first chapter. The problem is that we know of a number of John's in the first century. And, in fact the early church as well as modern evangelical Christian scholars are sometimes are divided as to exactly who this John was. Was it the same John that was the apostle of Jesus Christ that may have written the fourth gospel and First, Second and Third John? Is that the same John? That's a strong possibility and there’s strong tradition behind and it comes very early. But it's interesting when you read the book carefully the author never claims the authority of an apostle, like Paul did in writing his books.
One thing we’re going to see, Revelation is also a letter. It's not just this prophecy or a wild vision. Revelation is also a letter where the author identifies himself, but it's interesting. He doesn't identify himself as an apostle and he doesn't claim the authority of an apostle like Paul often did. That doesn't mean he's not one but what I want to point out, is the author claims the authority of an Old Testament prophet. We’ve said before that a number of New Testament documents appear to be written without any inclination on the part of the author that he was writing Scripture. And again, go back and read Luke 1:1-4. You don't have any hint. Luke doesn't seem to think that, or even realize, he's writing Scripture. He’s just writing a narrative of the life of Christ because he saw fit to do so. With Revelation I'm convinced that the author John, whoever he was, whether he was the apostle John or some other John who was a leader in the early church, the author did, think he was writing Scripture. He was writing something that rivaled the Old Testament or was to be taken on the same level of authority as the Old Testament prophets did. So I think Revelation is one book where the author did think he was writing Scripture. Maybe he didn’t think well this is going to be included in the canon of the Old or the New Testament or maybe he didn't think it was going to be included in the Old Testament, but clearly he seems to think he's writing something on the same level of authority as the fulfillment and completion of the Old Testament prophetic witness. So whoever this John is, whether again it’s John the apostle, or another well-known John in the early church, he's writing a book with the authority of an Old Testament prophet, not apostle.

When it was written? There are a number of suggestions and I don't want to go through all of them. The most common suggestion today for the date of Revelation is that Revelation was written sometime in the last half of the last decade of the first century. That is around 95, 96 A.D. during the reign of the Emperor Domitian. If you go to the very end of your notes for this class the New Testament notebook, I have a list of emperors. You can scroll up starting with the very first one down into the second century. If you scroll down you'll find Domitian’s name reigning in roughly 95 to 96 A.D. That would have probably been the time when Revelation was written. It doesn't tell us, but again there's some early
church testimony from the second century or so that locates Revelation during that time. There are other indications in the text that it certainly fits what we know about the reign of Domitian, the Roman emperor ruling during this time. So most likely either Revelation or the gospel of John or maybe first John one of those three books could lay claim to being the very last New Testament book written. But Revelation clearly, again it comes at the end of the New Testament not because of its chronological order but for a number of other reasons, but probably it could been the very last book written, most likely sometime around 95, or 96 A.D. towards the very end of the first century when Rome was ruled by the Emperor Domitian.

But when you think, before we look at a couple issues related to his background, one thing related to his background is more related to its literary type. But one of the most characteristic features of the book of Revelation is it’s symbolism. Revelation is a book that is shot through with very unique and graphic symbolism. You have seven headed dragons and beasts running around the visionary landscape of Revelation. You have, as I said, you have locusts that have human heads with hair like a woman, teeth like a lion gold crowns and their heads, tails like scorpions and when they fly it sounds like rushing wind. I mean, what in the world is that? So you have, it's full of all kinds of colors, it's full of all kinds of numbers and measurements. It's just kind of a feast for the eyes, as far as it's visionary quality is concerned. We'll talk more about how we understand that but it's important to realize the most characteristic feature of Revelation is it’s symbolism. This means that when we interpret Revelation we will not interpret it with a strict literalness that we might other kinds of literature. Instead, we are going to respect its symbolic value and were going to ask: “how do we understand these symbols? What are they trying to communicate?” Rather than simply interpreting them like we would a scientific formula or discovery or some news report or something like that. So the most characteristic feature of Revelation is its symbolism.

Now, this brings us to the question: “why would John write a book like that?” The first thing to recall is if it's correct to place Revelation towards the end of the first century,
one of the things that, and this goes back to the first week or so of this class, we talked quite a bit about the fact that politically and religiously during this time Rome basically ruled over everything. Rome was the dominant Empire and the superpower of the day. Furthermore, especially towards the end of the first century, there was still nothing like an empire-wide or officially sanctioned persecution of Christians. There certainly was a context of Roman domination and Imperial rule that often made it uncomfortable for Christians to live in, especially with the increase prominence of Emperor worship.

Virtually everywhere you went in a Greco-Roman city, whether it was in Rome itself or in Asia Minor or even Greece, you would have not only seen temples dedicated to various gods. It was becoming more common, though at first it was usually only acceptable or dedicate a Temple to a dead Emperor, but it was becoming more common to deify and set up temples to living emperors. For example, the city of Ephesus, one of the cities to which Revelation was addressed contained a Temple erected in honor of the Emperor Domitian. Most of the major cities in Asia Minor modern-day Turkey and elsewhere, would’ve, along with temples dedicated to pagan gods, would have also had temples dedicated to emperors. Once in a while, the Emperor himself would sanction the building of these temples, but more often than not, the Emperor really had nothing to do with them. It was more the local officials in the town, the wealthy persons, who wanted to show their gratitude and their loyalty to Rome. They would establish these temples in honor of the Emperor. It was expected then that you participated at certain events, or in certain locations, you would participate in certain locations to show your gratitude and your honor and even worship to the Emperor and Rome to show them that everything you own, your well-being, your physical well-being, spiritual well-being, you owed a debt of gratitude to the Roman Empire. So there were numerous opportunities to express that. Even the cities of the first century, there would have been a number of visual reminders in the form of statues, temples and engravings even on the coinage, a reminder of the significance of the Emperor and everything that Rome had done for you. To fail to show gratitude, to fail to show loyalty and allegiance to the Emperor and to Rome, would have been treated as a sign
of extreme disrespect and disloyalty.

Now the book of Revelation is often associated with persecution. That is, we often see Revelation as a source of comfort to Christians who are being persecuted. Yet when you read the book carefully, let me back up and say, most of the information that we have about the readers of Revelation, come out of chapters two and three. The seven letters are seven messages to seven churches in Asia Minor or modern-day Turkey. A couple of those you recognize. One of them is, Pergamum. Remember *The Lost Letters of Pergamum*? The other one is Ephesus, but there's a number of letters that are addressed to churches in Asia Minor and this is where we get much of the information. When you read those letters, there's something interesting that emerges. Out of those seven letters only two of those churches or two of those letters are addressed to churches who are suffering any kind of harassment or persecution. Remember again, I would emphasize, Domitian is not on some quest to wipeout Christians. There's not some officially sanctioned Empire-wide attempt to destroy Christians. Most of the persecution came at the local level. It wasn't necessarily Domitian that was doing this. Most of the persecution and the mistreatment and the harassment would've come at a local level from those authorities that wanted to make sure that Christians and everyone showed proper respect and loyalty to Rome. So, what is intriguing is when you read those seven letters that tell us most of the information we know about the readers, only two of those seven churches were suffering any kind of mistreatment and persecution. The other five, the main problem is that the cities of Asia Minor, out of those seven cities, most of the Christians living in those cities of Asia Minor were more tempted with compromising with Roman rule or Imperial rule. That is, they thought that one could worship Caesar and worship Jesus Christ at the same time.

So it appears that the main problem behind Revelation is not persecution. Although, there are some who are being persecuted, and one person by the name of Antipas, do you remember that name? One of the fictional characters in *The Lost Letters of Pergamum*? One person by the name of Antipas, has in fact lost his life. But you don't yet have this wide scale persecution of Christians being drug out in the streets and being beheaded and put to
death and things like that. But that isn't quite happening. But again, most of the persecution is more at a local level in the form of harassment, and one person has in fact died for his faith, this person named Antipas in Pergamum.

But otherwise, the main problem in the cities in Asia Minor, are all of these cities were affected by Roman rule. You couldn’t go anywhere to escape the long arm of Roman rule. Most of these seven cities in Revelation 2 and 3, would've had a Temple built in honor of the Roman Emperor, requiring or expecting that people would show their loyalty to, and even worship to, Imperial Rome as a sign of gratitude for all the things that Rome had done, Rome and the Emperor were seen as the savior of the world. Rome offered true peace and well-being for those who fell within its rule and those who submitted to its rule.

So you can see why many Christians were quite willing to compromise. They would wonder, “Can we remain faithful to Jesus Christ but still remain faithful to Rome? Can we worship Jesus Christ and still worship Caesar?” Some Christians were saying “yes, we can.” So, what was the plight, in light of this, what was the plight of Christians? The plight of Christians was twofold. Number one is, some of them indeed were suffering harassment and persecution because of their witness for Jesus Christ, because of their refusal to worship Caesar and to worship Christ alone. But second, others were interested or willing to compromise. That seems to be the main problem behind Revelation. The primary problem it addresses is not persecution, the primary problem Revelation addresses is complacency and compromise among the Christians living in these cities within the context of Imperial Roman rule.

You’ve seen this slide before, earlier on, I think. This is the remains of the Temple of Domitian in Ephesus. Most of the cities would've had temples built in honor of the Emperor along with other pagan temples to pagan gods. You’ve seen this as well, this is simply a map of the missionary journeys of Paul. But the cities, Smyrna is one of the cities mentioned, the cities of Asia, the cities that Revelation is written to are situated in Western Asia Minor. This was a hot bed of Roman rule and Imperial and Emperor worship.

So what is the major theme of Revelation if it's not persecution, what is it? Basically
what John is going to try to do is to try to convince his readers to follow Jesus Christ, to obey Jesus Christ no matter what the cost, by demonstrating that only Jesus Christ is worthy of their worship, even if it requires suffering on the part of the people. So over and over in all these stirring visions and strange symbols whatever we make of them, at the heart of John's message is an attempt to convince his readers that only Jesus Christ is worthy of worship even if it means suffering. He is trying to get them to resist the temptation to show their allegiance and worship to Rome, to the pagan Roman empire that many of them are tempted to follow, but at the same time encouraging those who are resisting, to encourage them to continue to do so by maintaining a faithful witness to Jesus Christ no matter what the cost. So what that means is, the main theme of Revelation is not end times. It's not primarily about the end times, it's primarily about the first century readers trying to get them to understand that they have everything to lose if they throw their lot in with Rome. If they placed their confidence and trust in their worship and allegiance in Rome this pagan empire, they have everything to lose. But instead they should embrace Jesus Christ, they should follow Jesus Christ in obedience no matter what it costs, no matter how much they might have to suffer in doing so. Some have already suffered and John envisions more to come. But Revelation is both an encouragement but even more so a warning.

What kind of book is Revelation and again we talked about this so I just want to repeat what we said earlier in the semester when we talk about literary genres of the New Testament. Revelation is actually a unique hybrid form. It actually consists of three fairly distinct literary types blended into one book. I want to focus on two of them. One of them is that Revelation is clearly what is known as an apocalypse or at least we call it an apocalypse. They would not have called it that necessarily in the first century that’s a term we have use to designate this type of literature. What an apocalypse is it's basically a first-person narrative account of someone's visionary experience. What happens is someone has a vision and now they write that down for the benefit of the readers so that they can re-experience the vision that the person had. That’s why he communicates all this
graphic imagery. He wants his readers to feel and to experience the vision in a similar way that the author did. So the author has this vision communicated by God to him and now writes that vision down. What an apocalypse does is not so much predict the future, though it does that partially, but it's an attempt to help the readers understand and make sense of their present situation.

I always describe it like this, an apocalypse works like this if you go and watch a play all you see is what's going on in the stage. You see all the actors interacting with each other and you see the different scenes in the different movements in the play and you hear the dialogue and then once it's over it's done. However as you're aware in a traditional stage setting there's a big curtain behind the play and if you were to lift back the curtain you would see that there's much more than meets the eye. There is a director back there, there are costume designers and those that help the people change from costume to costume there are the set persons that takedown put up various sets. There's all kinds of things going on behind the scenes that makes the play work as you observe it with your visible eyes, though you don't necessarily see behind the curtain. That's what an apocalypse is. An apocalypse unveils, it lifts the curtain so that you can see behind the scenes to see that there's more than just what meets the eye.

Now let's put that in the context of the first Christians as you have Christians living in Asia Minor. I’ll go back to this map is briefly. As Christians living in Asia Minor with Rome ruling over everything that's all they see. From their empirical viewpoint of the world all they see is the Roman Empire ruling all things and in control of the world. All they see are all these signs of Imperial rule and the pressure they have to show gratitude, even worship, for the Roman Empire. What Revelation does as an apocalypse and the word “apocalypse” means “a revealing or unveiling.” What it does is lifts the curtain so they can see behind the stage of their first century world. They see there's more than what meets the eye. Behind what I see lies an entire heavenly world and there lies a future towards which history is moving. Having seen that now they are able to see their world in a new light. So now they have, for example, in Revelation 4 to 5, John sees a vision of heaven with God
and Jesus Christ seated on the throne and all of creation acknowledging their sovereignty. Having seen that then John can go back and look at his world and say that's not all there is to it. That's deceptive in the sense that Rome rules visibly, empirically yet I see Roman rule but now I have had a vision where I know that behind the scenes that is not necessarily perceptible to the visible eye, God and Jesus Christ are actually on the throne ruling over the entire cosmos. At the end there is a goal to which my existence is moving and that is a new creation where God and the Lamb and God's people will reign and rule supreme.

So with that knowledge, now John can look at his first century existence and situation in a brand-new light. Rome is not all it’s cracked up to be. Caesar is not the final authority. We don't need to worry about resisting Roman rule. There's no need to give into worshiping because the true King is seated on his heavenly throne. So that’s what Revelation does. Again I find it helpful to compare it to a stage, first century Asia Minor that John sees, but when he has this vision it lifts the curtain so he can see behind and beyond the first century to see there's a far bigger picture. Rome is not all there is to it. What I see with my physical eye in Asia Minor is not the complete story. There's an entire heavenly world with God seated on his throne and there's a future towards which all things are moving. Now armed with that new perspective John can now encourage readers to live and respond appropriately to the situation. So that’s kind of what an apocalypse does.

The other literary form that we probably overlooked but Revelation participates in is the form of a letter. Revelation begins and ends just like one of Paul's letters. That is significant in the same way that Paul's letters, for example, Galatians, we’re addressing very specific problems. So Revelation is addressing a very specific issue. In the same way that Paul was addressing his readers with information that they could understand and would meet their crisis and provide answers, in the same way I take it that Revelation is communicating a message that would have been understood by the first century readers. It’s a letter, it's addressed to a very specific problem and the church needs to see their problem and situation in a new light and Revelation provides that. So, again, we often focus on this is as a prophecy, as an apocalypse but we often forget it's a letter as well.
Since John uses the form of a letter because that's the best way to immediately address his readers and to address their specific situation in a way that they will understand. Revelation must contain information that the readers can grasp and understand, that will meet their problem, that will help them respond to face their crisis which is Roman rule and emperor worship.

So in light of this, how should I interpret Revelation? First of all as I've already said Revelation is symbolic and not literal. I was raised in a church that said you need interpret Revelation literally and only interpret it symbolically if nothing else works. I would flip that on its head. You should interpret everything in Revelation symbolically unless there is a really really good reason not to because Revelation is an apocalypse. It unveils heaven in the future but it does so in highly symbolic language. Perhaps the symbolic language is fitting for information that cannot be grasped by the human senses but that now requires kind of a mysterious type of language. A symbolism that is meant to get you not only to understand cognitively the meaning of John's Revelation but to feel it as well. In other words, John's not just after your mind, he’s after your emotions as well, when he writes this letter.

So in my opinion when we read the Revelation we must interpret it symbolically. Revelation is not like watching a CNN news broadcast on what's going on in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world. It's more like taking a walk through an art gallery and seeing different symbolic portrayals of different events, a series of artistic visionary depictions of the different events as they roll before John's eyes throughout the book. So what that means is that it's important to read it not to say what does this mean? What does this refer to? How is going to be fulfilled? But sometimes just to read it to get the point and to feel, to respond to it not just mentally but emotionally to John's vision.

Second, the meaning of Revelation, however we interpret the symbols in the chapters in the different visions in Revelation, the meaning of the book must be something John intended and his readers would have understood. Remember Revelation’s a letter. In other words, Revelation is not to be understood as if John sits down and looks into a crystal
ball and sees the future. Now he comes back, sits down to looks in the crystal ball and sees the 21st century unfold and now he goes back and tries to explain that to his readers. No. Revelation is a letter, Revelation was written by an author to first century readers to address their need with something they could understand. So that means any interpretation of Revelation that John could not have possibly intended and his first century readers could never have grasped should probably be rejected.

So again went when I hear people talk about this referring to nuclear warfare or this refers to Osama bin Laden or this refers to computers or the barcodes. Again ask yourself could John have really have intended that and would his readers have ever understand. If the answer's “No,” then a red flag should go up in your mind. Remember we need to interpret Revelation like we do any other book in the New Testament. First of all by asking what would this book most likely mean in its first century context? What was John, the author living in first century Asia Minor, trying to communicate to his readers living in first century Asia Minor pre-technological that did not have computers and thermonuclear war and helicopters and all those other things.

Student question:

The question is: What about the Old Testament prophets who appeared to prophesy sometimes better than they knew? I would temper what I just said by saying that this does not mean that John understood everything and how everything would be fulfilled and how everything would wrap up, but it does mean if he didn't know it then neither do we.

The second thing is John actually reverses what the Old Testament prophets especially Daniel does. At the end of the book of Daniel, which is a very similar book to Revelation, in fact, Revelation draws on Daniel a lot. The very end of the book of Daniel, after Daniel sees all these visions, he is told by an angel to seal up the contents of his book because it's for a later time. When you get to the end of Revelation John is told by an angel “don't seal up the words of the prophecy because the time is now.” In other words, this is already been fulfilled in the day of the readers with the coming of Christ. What the Old Testament prophets anticipated and prophesied was now being fulfilled, so that John is told
don't seal this up. It is not for later generation it's for now. It's for your first century readers. So, yes, John may not have understood all the implications and how everything was going to pan out and be fulfilled but if he didn't neither do we. But when he does understand when he does described enough even events that he may not have understood the full significance of, when he does describe them he still uses language that his readers were familiar with. He’s not describing tanks and helicopters and things from the 21st-century he's using language and images that come right out of his first century context and out of the Old Testament.

Third, don’t lose sight of the forest for the trees. Don't get so bogged down in trying to figure out all the details of what everything refers to so that you miss the main message. Revelation has much to say about almost every area of Christian belief. It has so much to say about who Christ is, who God is and what it means to trust in Jesus Christ, and what it means to follow in obedience. It has so much to say about worship, but we miss it, and salvation is by grace through faith and what it means to live a life of obedience and discipleship to Jesus Christ. Yet we miss that when all we do is try to treat Revelation like a code where we say what in the 21st-century does this refer to and we go through and draw these detailed correspondences. So don’t become so preoccupied with examining all the individual trees in the forest that in the little details of vision that you don't see what the whole forest looks like. Revelation’s visions all communicate something important. Yet we miss that if we become too obsessed and preoccupied with all the details.

Related to that, don't miss the main purpose of Revelation and that is exhortation to holy living. Revelation is not primarily about predicting the future. It's trying to motivate the readers to holy living and obedience to Jesus Christ even if it requires their suffering.

Finally, a good dose of humility is a virtue when interpreting Revelation. Due to the distance and to the fact that we’re reading somebody else's mail, we’re reading a book with that communicates in images and symbols that we’re not privy to and given all the controversy surrounding the book and the various ways it's been interpreted we always need to approach it with humility and be open to correcting the ways we've been taught or
read it in the past.

Now two other things I want to cover: first of all, in a light of what I just said about reading Revelation. It's often helpful to understand how Christians throughout the centuries have approached the book so that we can learn how to avoid or how we should approach the book. Generally, although this scheme is still far too simplistic I think it's so common it's a good starting point for trying to classify how Christians approach the book. There are in history four general approaches to interpreting Revelation but there's variation within all of these.

The first one is what is often known as the “Preterist approach.” So if you're ever reading a commentary on Revelation or a book on Revelation and they talk about writer’s a Preterist view basically it says Revelation only referred to events in the first century. So it wasn't predicting anything outside of the first century. Everything in Revelation basically was fulfilled in the first century. So Revelation is not some prophecy about the future. It's a commentary on the present first century situation. In other words, Revelation’s already all been fulfilled. But like any other book of the New Testament we can still apply it to our lives as God's people but we have to understand Revelation. According to this view known as the Preterist view, Revelation is not predicting the future, it's not predicting but describing events that already took place in the first century.

A second approach is known as the “historical approach.” This one I don’t want to spend a lot of time on because it's really no longer in vogue. You don't see many people holding to this and you can see why. This approach said, Revelation is basically a forecast of history. So what this approach often did was it took momentous events throughout history usually starting back in the third or fourth century and even up until the 19th and 20th century. It would take crucial events or movements or ideologies and ways of thinking and line them up with certain events in Revelation. So Revelation was kind of seen as a history book written in advance. What would be the problem with this? What can you see right off the top your head would be the problem with this approach? There's a number but there’s one basic one. Again that this approach is been around for quite some time what it
does is Revelation becomes a kind of a history book written before and it just anticipates and predicts the main movements and events in history. [Student response]

That's right, what happened we come to the end and the end has not yet arrived. What usually happens then is this view has to continually be revised to take into consideration new events and new shifts in history, thinking, technology and things like. So you're exactly right. This has to be revised so many times you don't see many people holding to this approach any more.

There's a third approach that is important. This is known as the “Idealist Approach.” What the Idealist Approach says is that Revelation does not specifically refer to any particular events or any time in history. It's basically a grand symbolic portrayal of the battle between God and evil. It demonstrates the God wins and his triumphant in the new creation. So it's just a general symbolic picture that could be true numerous times in church history that it fits. So, yes, it does describe the first century but since it’s just a general symbolic view of the struggle between God and evil it could refer to any period in church history that it fits. So that’s known as the “Ideal View.” The symbols are ideal symbols, they’re just general symbols that could be applied to the numerous situations. That's known as the “Idealist View.” You can see the advantages then we don't have to worry about trying to figure out exactly what Revelation is predicting. They’d say it’s not predicting anything. It's just a general symbolic picture that can be made to fit in the first century for John. It fits that situation but it could also fit many more until Jesus Christ comes back.

The last approach that has been one of the most popular is known as the “Futurist.” That approach basically says almost everything in Revelation after chapters 4 and 5 refers to a period of time sometime in the future. That is, nothing in Revelation has taken place yet. It's all a prediction of future events so from our perspective we’re still waiting for these things be fulfilled. Obviously the Left Behind series would fit into this, but there's a variety of approaches that fit the futurist view. Not everybody who thinks that Revelation is future would try to predict the end or anything like that. Many of them say, “No, that's impossible.” But they would still hold that Revelation is largely a prediction of events that
have not yet happened but will happen right before and leading up to and including the second coming of Christ. In other words, the Preterist view of Revelation is about the “already” and the Futurist say, “No, Revelation is about the ‘not yet,’” If I can use that language. Of course, I can, I do so all the time.

There are couple other approaches I think that could be added to these and should be added but if you ever read about Revelation throughout history at least among Christians especially, their approaches could largely be divided into these four movements. Again except for this the second one, the other three are still very popular approaches to interpreting revelation today.

Now which one is right? What maybe you have guessed from your next section in your notes, the question: do we have to choose? I wonder if based on the setting and based on the kind of literature Revelation is if somehow it is a combination of the first of these three is not that perhaps is not the correct approach. That, yes, Revelation I think was the Preterist view does in some respects does justice to Revelation in addressing the first century. It is trying to make sense of the readers in the first century world. It is referring to events that are taking place or will take place in the first century. It would do no good, at least to my understanding, to predict a bunch of events that would take place in the 21st century. What good does that do for first century readers wondering if they should give in to worship Rome or not?

So there is a sense in which that is true, but at the same time Revelation is future. It does point to an end, a goal, where history is moving. It does end with a new creation, with God establishing his kingdom and a new creation at the end of history. So there is a future element. A lot of John’s symbols that come out of the Old Testament are trans-temporal symbols. Symbols that certainly can apply and add meaning to a variety of situations. For him it was the first century, but John picks up symbols that have been applied to other nations and other crises in the past in the Old Testament. Now he reapplies them so in a sense even his symbols are trans-temporal. They are ideal symbols that could find more than one application. So I think we should probably keep all three of these approaches in
mind as we read through Revelation.

Now let me end this by saying this and we’ll talk a little bit more about this on Friday. Everyone knows what this is. I show these cartoons, seriously, I'm not poking fun at anybody or any situation. I am just using the most common political cartoons that have become popular in the last couple days, but in another one in the last few months. Now when you look at this what is this cartoon saying? If you were to go over to Pakistan would you find a mailbox that said 911 and have all these signs? Would you find this? Probably not. Or if you took a photo or if you took your digital camera and snapped the picture of the compound where they caught bin Laden would you find this? Probably not. What is this saying? It’s saying something about the political event.

One more cartoon quickly. This goes back a few months to March madness. But notice the brackets have to do with gas for a five dollar a gallon. Is the point of this that if I went to Washington DC I would find four of five men and this other person here with this long pole would I find them in the room watching this bracket? The point or function of a political cartoon is a way of interpreting our events in are our life in a way that straightforward prose may not. The point is not that these are literal. The point is that these are rather symbolic and exaggerated ways of making a point about certain political events. In my opinion, the political cartoon is one of the closest literary analogies to Revelation that we have today. Again we read letters and we write and read stories and write letters and stories, but when was the last time we read of Apocalypse? We don't read and write apocalypses anymore. But that is part of the problem of interpreting Revelation. But in my opinion the political cartoon is one of the closest literary analogies to what Revelation is trying to do. On Friday we’ll talk a little bit more about that and then look at two or three specific texts in Revelation that illustrate how it works.

All right see you then.

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