

Revelation: Introduction

Let me introduce you to the book of Revelation for a few moments, and we will look at Revelation in more detail in our next class. My goal in this class and the next is to help you become more comfortable reading the Revelation. I want you to have more of an understanding of the book, so that you will know how to navigate through it. My goal is not only to make you comfortable in your own study of the book, but to give you a sense of ease so that if you are a teacher in the church you will not be afraid whenever you finish studying a book of the Bible and you ask the question, “What would you like to study next?” and someone says, “Well, let’s study Revelation.” I don’t want you to get the chills when they say that, but instead to say, “Yes, that is a good idea; why don’t we do an overview of the Revelation?” I would like to at least equip everyone here to have the sense that they could give a four-week overview to the Book of Revelation, which is a really good way to touch upon the main themes of the book.

I have a strategy for the book, which I will summarize using the acronym COPE. The “C” stands for “confess.” The first thing you have to do is confess that the book is difficult. Read a very obscure passage and say to yourself, “This is really obscure. I do not know what this means.” The “O” is for “orient”—orient people to the basics of the book. Explain things like who wrote it, when, and why. The “P” is for “present”—present the main themes that run throughout the book. There are certain themes that pervade Revelation and would make a wonderful three or four-week study, even if you never want to delve into it in great detail. Finally, “E” is for “explain.” You want to explain to people the options, the different ways of understanding the book. It is very important when working through a book like Revelation to be gentle and mild and agreeable—unless you are talking with well-trained Mormons and you need to be tough with them—because Christians could get into fights over this. We have to remember that the enemy is not our fellow-Christian. The enemy is unbelief, so you do not want to teach Revelation in a way that will cause division in the church. If someone disagrees with you sharply, it is really always the right thing to be humble and to recognize that wonderful people and great scholars have taken different views of the book. Unless, of course, someone is denying the deity of Christ or His return or something central like that, it is best to be humble with regard to matters of interpretation in Revelation.

Let us orient ourselves to the book a little, so that we can understand the background. John wrote Revelation; this was the same John, I believe, who wrote 1, 2 and 3 John. He is a pastoral figure in this book, as he was also in the letters 1, 2 and 3 John. He is writing letters to seven real churches. When you look at the letters to the seven churches, you need to realize these are real cities with real people who are having real struggles and joys in A.D. 90 or 95 when John wrote. The readers are seven actual churches with particular needs which we will study, although the book is also for the universal church. We can see that especially at the end of the book. We talked about treasuring these words and not changing any words and so forth, and we talked about the return of Christ and the coming of His kingdom, which we all need to know about.

The genre of Revelation can be discussed. People have different ideas as to what it is. What is the book? If you read Revelation, what does it seem to be? It seems to be prophecy. What else does it seem to be? It also seems to be a letter—actually, seven letters to seven real churches. What else does it seem to be? It also seems to be apocalyptic, and I mean that literally. Apocalyptic literature is literature with lots of imagery. Apocalyptic literature contains a profusion of images, sometimes startling images, and the book of Revelation is apocalyptic. In fact, if you look at Revelation, it has epistolary greetings and it writes letters to seven churches in verse 4 of chapter 1. Chapter 1:1 says “the revelation of Jesus Christ” and the word for “revelation” there is the Greek *apokalupsis*. It is an apocalypse. It is also a book of prophecy. I want you to ask you a question and I want you to think about it carefully before you answer

it. If the book of Revelation is prophecy, what time is it about? Is it about the past, the present, or the future? Prophecy is about the past, the present, and the future. If you know your Old Testament prophets, like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, for example, and others, they are often interpreting the recent past of Israel and saying, "This happened to the nation and here is what it signifies." Prophets interpret the past. They, of course, interpret the present where they give words for the present, and they also speak to the future. In a way, we can understand that, because a prophet has the mind of God and God sees past, present, and future we might say "indifferently," and therefore He can speak to the past, the present and the future equally. For those who say that the book of Revelation is about the present, we say, "You are absolutely right." We have to be agreeable, remember that? If somebody says that Revelation is all about the future, we say, "You're right, it is." If somebody says that it is about the past, we say, "You're right, it is." However, if someone asked me what I think Revelation is about, the main thing I would say is that the Book of Revelation is about Jesus, because it says so. The book says that it is prophecy. In chapter 1:3, for example, it says, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy." It also calls itself prophecy in chapter 22 about four times.

Chapter 19:10 says that when John meets an angel, the angel says to him, "Do not worship me; worship God, for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." I take that to be a central statement in the book of Revelation: "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." Revelation is a book of prophecy, and it is the responsibility of prophecy to testify to Christ. There are many ways to do that, not always talking about the cross, but Revelation is about Christ.

When was the book written? I believe, and most people agree, that it was written during the reign of Domitian, an emperor who was reigning at the end of the first century and who died, I think, in 96 A.D. There is a reason why people believe that. There is a bit of church history or tradition that says that. Domitian was one of a handful of emperors in the 1st century A.D. who insisted on his deity during his lifetime. We talked earlier about how the emperors would be considered gods after they died, but there were a few who wanted to be granted deity while they were still alive. Caligula was one, Nero was another, and Domitian was the third.

Now just picture it this way: if you were a friend of the emperor, it could be kind of a tricky question as to what you should call him, would it not? For example, my seminary students occasionally wonder what they should call me when they see me outside of class. My general rule of thumb of is, if I have sneakers on, you can call me 'Dan'—especially if we are on the basketball court together—and if I have a tie and black shoes on, you should probably call me 'Dr. Doriani'—especially if we are in the classroom. What do you call the emperor Domitian, if you are his friend? Did he say, "Just call me Dom"? No, Domitian said, "Just call me 'My lord and my god,' and if you don't, I'll kill you" (and he indeed did). Or he said, "If you wish, if my wife is with me, you may call us 'Our lord and his consort.'" Those are the two titles that pleased Domitian. So you see, of course, since a Christian would not call Domitian "My lord and my god," and since a Christian would not call him "Our lord and his consort," Christians were liable to persecution by the power of the Roman government, which is indeed what we see constantly, especially in chapters 12 through 14 of Revelation. The problem of the Roman Empire demanding worship for its governors is the backdrop for the book.

When was the book written? The book was written during the reign of Domitian then, it seems, although it never says that anywhere, of course. There is one other thing that makes us think that it was written around then, because the church has to be old enough or mature enough to have the problems that are described. The church at Ephesus, by the time Revelation is written, has stagnated and lost its first love. The church at Ephesus was planted by Paul and also visited by Peter, Apollos, Priscilla, and Aquila repeatedly in the 50s and 60s. It takes a little time, at least a few decades, to go from being the

centerpiece of Christianity in the region of Asian Minor with all these apostolic visits to having the problem of coldness. You could also look at the church at Laodicea, which is chastised for pride over its riches. Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60 or 61, and it would take some time to rebuild and achieve economic stability, let alone wealth. And most of the New Testament has to have been written by the time the book of Revelation is written, because Revelation is steeped in the New Testament. I have given you a number of those citations on your handout; if you read them, you will see how the Revelation shows itself to be grounded throughout in the words of Christ, the words of the Apostle Paul, and the teaching of the apostolic body. Revelation draws on all of the Scriptures to see how this crisis in the life of the church, this time of challenge from Domitian, shall be met.