

Relating to Revelation

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UNCLE SAM

- Take a look at this political cartoon [of Uncle Sam standing over New York after the 9/11 attacks].

Q: Who is this guy?

Q: Where is he?

Now imagine someone a 1000 years from, who knows nothing of the context, trying to understand this bizarre picture.

Q: Is he supposed to be a giant? Is he turning into stone?

You know why his legs are steel, his feet are buildings, he's surrounded by smoke, and he's staring resolutely to the East. You can easily understand the artist's intent, because:

- When we know the context, we can identify the symbols.

A VERY STRANGE BOOK

The Book of Revelation has got to be the scariest and most bizarre book in the NT.

The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. – Revelation 9:7-9 NIV

And it is because it is so strange and filled with bizarre, abstract images, the book of Revelation invites extremes.

- Some people just love this book ... for all the wrong reasons!
- They scour it for clues so they can create grand theories about the end times.

As a teenager, I read through Revelation more times than I could count, trying to discover how the world was going to end. I was especially interested in the "Number of Beast," 666.

- Taking the other extreme, many people avoid it altogether, finding it both scary and irrelevant to daily life.

EXHORTATION, NOT SPECULATION

After spending countless hours reading Revelation, I realized that I wasn't any closer to God or any stronger in my faith. In frustration, I put the book down and avoided it for a long time.

- I wondered why God put such a useless book in the Bible.
- It only seems to encourage unproductive speculations.

I knew better; if God put it in the Bible, it was there for our benefit. So, after 10 years, I was ready to give it another try, from a new perspective.

- For the first time ever, I was able to enjoy reading Revelation.
- I learned that it's a book of exhortation, not speculation.

I can't tell you if there will be a "pre-trib" or "post-trib" rapture or who the Antichrist is ... but I can show you what I have learned and how you can relate to Revelation, and grow closer to God.

PRINCIPLES FOR READING REVELATION

There are three basic principles that are essential for relating to Revelation:

1) We must approach the book of Revelation with humility.

- The Bible may be infallible, but our interpretation of it is not.

Revelation is hard to understand, and there are many things that are impossible to nail down. If we lack the humility to confess our ignorance, we will make the mistake of claiming certainty where there isn't any.

I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul.... - Psalm 131:1-2 NIV

The fact of the matter is that people have been struggling to understand Revelation for 1900 years. They have fallen into one of four groups:

- Futurists: The majority of the events will occur in the end times.

This is the most common view among evangelical Christians and is view behind the "Left Behind" series. This view has only been popular since 1850.

- Idealists: The majority of the events are strictly symbolic, describing timeless truths.

The idealist looks for themes, such as God triumphing over evil. For 1500 years, this was how almost all Christians and theologians understood Revelation.

- Historicists: The events cover the span of history, not the end times.

In this view, the Antichrist may have been Hitler or Napoleon, or maybe Caesar.

- Preterists: The majority of the events occurred in the lifetime of John's original audience.

The preterist believe John was writing about "current" events and events soon to come. The beast described in Revelation referred to Rome and the beast's destruction foretold the fall of Rome.

- Incidentally, this is what I lean towards.

SOME ALTERNATE EXPLANATIONS

Remember the Number of the Beast? In John's day, it was common for names to have a numerical value based on its letters. In Pompeii they found some graffiti that said "I love her whose number is 545!"

- The number of the deranged emperor Nero was 666.
- John had to be discreet lest he be executed for writing against Nero.

In John's day, it was very difficult for Christians to be involved in commerce without participating in pagan worship. The Mark of the Beast may be no more than a highly imaginative way of referring to money with Nero's name and face.

- Some scholars believe this is the infamous Mark of the Beast.

And Babylon who rides on the beast with seven heads? The Bible tells us the seven heads are seven hills and it is well known that Rome sat on seven hills.

Regardless of what interpretation you follow, knowing that godly men and women have legitimately approached Revelation in such different ways should foster humility and caution in our approach.

2) We must attempt to understand the context.

Just like the political cartoon of Uncle Sam, when we know the context, it is much easier to identify the symbols. John was using common symbols of his day, understood by his readers. (I have handouts in the back that explain some.)

He also uses a writing style that was very common in his day, called Apocalyptic, which is known for using wild images and rich symbols.

- Apocalyptic writings were the Picassos of literature:
- Big, bold images that are confusing close up, but are clear when you step back.
- We also use confusing expressions: “All hell broke loose.”

We will never understand the imagery as well as the first century readers, but we can learn the same lessons.

3) Finally, prophecy is given to encourage action, not speculation.

Whether we are reading in the OT or the NT, God always intends prophecy to benefit us. Nineveh was warned of impending doom so they could repent.

Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book. – Revelation 22:7 NIV

- How do we “keep” prophecy? I want to be blessed!
- Is it by outlining the events and labeling the figures?
- We keep prophecy by responding to it; by learning its lessons and applying them.

LESSONS FROM REVELATION

Revelation teaches us three main lessons: It is a book that unveils, warns, and encourages.

1) It unveils Jesus in his glory.

This is the one and only time we see Jesus since he ascended to heaven. In the Gospels he was the suffering servant, the lamb led to slaughter. In Revelation he is the conquering King.

- Before, he veiled his divine majesty in his humanity, now he appears unveiled.

As I read this, remember that this is written by Jesus’ closest friend:

His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of

rushing waters.... His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. - Revelation 1:14-15; 17 NIV

- What a revelation!

This book calls us to have a revelation about Christ; He is the glorious sovereign Lord who is worthy of our praise, honor, and obedience.

2) It warns us not to get entangled in this world.

Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues... - Revelation 18:4 NIV

I have read of Christians in other nations who have figured out who the infamous beast is... America! They have a point; in many ways the U.S. fits John's description of a nation who exports its corruption to the world.

This book calls us to have a revelation about ourselves; even as we live in this world, we must not ally ourselves with this world that opposes God and his ways.

3) It encourages us that God is in control.

The Christians of John's day faced discouragement as they suffered and waited for Jesus to return.

I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.... Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. - Revelation 3:8; 12 NIV

"Overcoming" is a major theme in Revelation. Like John's readers, we may feel that this world is spinning out of control. Revelation encourages us that God is in control; he has and will overcome.

This book calls us to have a revelation about God; he is directing all events and circumstances to his good purposes.

- I encourage you to start reading Revelation: You'll find it quite a revelation of Jesus Christ!