

JOHN AND THE APOCALYPSE

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Text: Revelation 1: 1-3; 9-11; 19

Introduction: You don't hear many sermons preached from the Book of Revelation these days. And when you do, it is usually interpreted as a book whose symbolism is used to prophetically predict what is going to happen in relation to the ends of time. The vast majority of ministers who do preach on the book usually hold to a pre-millennial view, which believes that after a period of great tribulation, Christ will return and set up a literal, millennial or 1,000 year kingdom on earth. Dispensational pre-millennialism, the most popular view, teaches that the church will be raptured up before the tribulation. In my **early years as a Christian and a student** I was taught using the Scofield Reference Bible, which had this whole system worked out in great detail. I wanted to know the future and Revelation was seen as the key. Historical pre-millennialism teaches that the church will not go through the tribulation.

Another interpretation was very popular at the turn of the twentieth century. It was a very optimistic period of time. Man had made major success in science and technology. E.g., the telephone and telegraph had speeded up communication, and the railroads and steam ships had changed the way we travel. The nineteenth century, which Kenneth Scott Latourette called the Great Century, had not had any major wars.

Religiously, there was the belief that man could make the world so much better and that society's woes could be overcome. The Social Gospel arose with great hope and there was the belief that we could usher in the kingdom of Christ with a period of peace and perfection for a millennium, after which Christ would return.

In graduate school at Baylor University I became very interested in the history of Christianity, beginning with the life and ministry of Jesus and the rise of the early church. Interpreting the New Testament (as well as the Old Testament), I concluded that it was very important for me to understand the historical background of each writing, including the setting, the time, the audience, the purpose, and the response of the readers, if possible. I began to see Revelation in a whole new light. I saw the book as being written during the persecution of Emperor Domitian in the mid-90s of the first century A.D. Domitian was demanding that all of his subjects worship him in the state temples as divine and to pray to him as Lord. I saw the seven churches of Asia, which are mentioned by John, as very real churches with enormous challenges and weaknesses, as well as great potential. And I saw the millennium in a symbolic sense rather than a literal sense. I adopted the position of A-Millennialism or Non-Millennialism.

This morning I want to present my interpretation through the eyes of John as he tells his story. So sit back and image a 90 year old plus sage sharing with you his latest writing and telling you his story.

John and the Apocalypse

Setting: Patmos, a small island off the coast of Asia in the Aegean Sea. The time is the mid-90s, A.D. A very old man named John enters a room with several friends present. He looks tired, but conveys a deep sense of relief. He carries in one hand a scroll, which he holds up for his friends to see. He begins to speak.

My good friends. Here it is. It is finally finished. My latest, and probably my last, writing. I am ready to deposit it along with my Gospel and my many letters to my friends and our churches, a few of which have been copied and are circulating among our people.

Perhaps this scroll is the reason that I have out-lived all of the other apostles - Peter, who was executed in Rome by Nero; James, my brother, who was martyred under Herod Agrippa I; and all of the others, they are now gone.

But it seems that I have been spared for this very moment in time, this monumental crisis that is facing the very existence of our churches. An old man like me, the last living eyewitness among the closest disciples of Jesus, kept alive so that I could be around to encourage and challenge those persecuted saints upon whose shoulders the burden of the faith now rests.

These may be the most difficult days that the church has ever faced. Do you think that I am here on Patmos taking a vacation? No, I've been exiled to this place. I guess Rome didn't want to execute an old man, so they sent me here to keep me out of trouble and to keep me quiet. Can you image an old man past 90 being seen as a threat to the Roman Empire?

But this emperor, Domitian, he's been around for about a decade and a half. He's very different from other emperors. He claims to be divine! I know, and you know, that the Roman Senate has declared deceased emperors to be divine. But Domitian claims to be a god while he is still alive. And, he expects all of his subjects to go to the state temples, to burn incense, and to pray to him.

Caesar is Lord, that's what he wants us to admit. Caesar is Lord! How absurd. How unacceptable! We Christians are good citizens. We pay our taxes. We try to live exemplary lives. We fulfill our responsibilities as good subjects of the Roman Empire. We even pray for Caesar. But we must never pray to him. He is not Lord! Jesus is Lord! We must never give to the state that which belongs to God alone!

But Domitian cannot understand that we can be good citizens and not worship him. He thinks that we are treasonous. He fears for his empire, for his kingdom. And he is convinced that it will all fall apart if we do not call him Lord.

That is why he has launched forth with this physical assault upon the church, such as we have never known before. The Jews persecuted us, the populus, from time to time. Every time there was a fire, or famine, or a plague, they blamed it on us. They believed that their gods were angry for tolerating us. Even Nero persecuted us when much of Rome burned. He needed a scapegoat to take the heat off of himself.

But now, especially here in Asia where we have worked so hard and for so long, now we see that our very existence is threatened to the death. Why? Simply, because we won't worship the Emperor.

We must not give in! We must not yield at any point on this issue. With courage and conviction we must stand firm, even if it costs us our very lives!

These are the reasons that I have written this scroll, to encourage and rally the Christians of Asia to remain firm, to keep the faith regardless of the cost. **Courage**, that is the great Christian virtue, which is needed now (Show the scroll). That is what I am saying in this scroll.

But this is no ordinary writing. You see, I have chosen to present my message in apocalyptic language. You ask, "What is apocalyptic language?" Well, such literature has been around for centuries. Read Daniel and Zechariah, if you are interested in a few good examples from the ancient writings.

Apocalyptic writings use elaborate and mysterious symbolism. Many of my fellow Christians are quite familiar with apocalyptic symbols, so they can understand my hidden message. I use names, numbers, animals, birds, precious gems and metals. All have secret meanings for those who understand.

For example, when you read about Babylon, you are not reading about Babylon. You are reading about Rome. Do you remember Peter's first letter? At the very end he encourages his readers to stand firm. And then he writes, "She who is at Babylon . . . sends you greetings." Peter was never in Babylon. But he was in Rome, where Nero was persecuting the Christians. And you know the tradition that says that not only Peter, but also Paul, were executed by Nero. One has to be careful about accusing Rome of persecuting Christians. But those who know the ancient history know that Babylon persecuted the Jews. Rome, the new Babylon, is now persecuting the Christians.

Or, take numbers, they all have a special meaning. Five, or any multiple of it - 10, or a 1,000 - they mean human completeness; six represents evil; seven symbolizes the union of earth and heaven; twelve is the number of completeness. When you read my scroll, remember what I have just said - when you read about the seven seals or the seven trumpets, or the seven bowls of wrath; or, the mark of the beast with the number 666, or the 144,000, a multiple of twelve; or a 1,000 years. Don't forget that these numbers have symbolic meanings!

Why do I write like this? Why don't I just openly and clearly present my message? There are two reasons. First, my message calling for faithfulness, courage and steadfastness during these difficult days must be proclaimed. Christians must know that God is sovereign and that he will vindicate his people if they are faithful. They must be assured that Domitian and his successors will not always deceive the people on this matter of worshiping the emperor. Second, my message must be hidden. I cannot openly say that Domitian is going to lose in this struggle. If a Christian were caught with such literature saying that Rome (Babylon) would be overthrown, that Domitian would be defeated, that Christianity would prevail, that would imperil my fellow Christians, one with such a book would surely risk losing his life. So by using the symbolic language of apocalyptic literature I am able to both present my very important message to Christians who understand my symbols, and at the same time protect my readers. After all, how many Roman officials do you know who can understand apocalyptic imagery? How many of you Christians today can make sense of what I say by using apocalyptic symbolism?

In fact, that might be a good name for this scroll: "The Apocalypse," the revelation, the unveiling! I am unveiling God's message of the revelation of Jesus Christ, and what it means in light of the tragic circumstances now facing the churches.

My message is addressed to the seven churches of Asia. Ephesus has left its first love; Smyrna is a church that is poor but is rich; Pergamum dwells where the throne of Satan is located; Thyatira harbors a Jezebel; Sardis has reputation for living but is dead; Philadelphia has an open door of opportunity; and Laodicea is neither hot nor cold but lukewarm, tepid.

Look, these churches are not perfect, but name one throughout history that was. They all have their problems, their weaknesses, and their shortcomings. But they are in the heat of battle. The pressure to yield to Domitian is so great in Asia. In fact, the war, and it is spiritual warfare, may well be won or lost in Asia! These churches simply cannot give in! They must not!

And, if they can stand in the face of such brutal opposition, then surely all churches and all Christians in all ages can stand, regardless of the circumstances. Most certainly their example will encourage others to keep the faith in these difficult days, and in future days and generations to come. That includes your time as well!

You want to know about the contents of this scroll. Well, I have written about the things which were, the things that I saw in my vision on Patmos. I was also instructed to write about those things which are, so I have written to the pastors, or as I call them angels, of the seven churches of Asia. I was candid, honest with them. Our hope lies in the endurance of these real churches, not in perfect congregations that don't exist.

And I wrote with all kinds of symbolism to describe what is taking place right now in the churches in the Roman Empire. I described being taken up to heaven. There in the court of

heaven I saw the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God - the Messiah and the Suffering Servant, if you please. He was the only one worthy to open the seven-sealed scroll. And then, using broken seals and sounded trumpets to convey the judgment of God, I was able to state clearly and with certainty that God and Christ are sovereign. God rules, He is in control, and those who remain faithful to Him will be vindicated by Him. Those who become martyrs for the faith will be rewarded. They will be safe and in his presence forever and ever!

I might remind you that in passage after passage I use symbols to convey the tragedies and difficulties of this age. I remind you to understand this truth in trying to interpret and apply my message to your generation. For example the first four seals speak of the four horsemen of the apocalypse (white, red, black, and pale); the fifth seal represents the witnesses, the martyrs of the faith, wanting to know how long before God's justice will prevail. The sixth seal speaks of the 144,000, a number that when taken literally has been misinterpreted for centuries.

The second part of my vision, which begins in chapter 12, describes how God will ultimately be victorious over Satan and the forces of evil. In the end the Messiah will appear, and God and the Messiah will rule over His kingdom forever and ever. Again, I use symbols to present my message – and to hide it from the Roman authorities. I call Satan a dragon. I tell how he tries to devour a newborn child of a woman but how he is unsuccessful. The woman, of course, represents Israel, and the child was Christ. I placed this battle in heaven. Keep in mind that what was taking place on earth was a part of the greater cosmological struggle between good and evil! Then Satan is cast down to earth. And, listen carefully for this is the heart of my message, Satan will make war upon the church. That is what is happening now!

How will he do this? By means of two beasts. The first beast was the Roman Emperor, Domitian. He demanded that all people worship him, including Christians. All of Domitian's subjects were to acknowledge that "Caesar is Lord." If they did not do so, then persecution would obviously follow.

The second beast was the official cult in charge of enforcing Emperor worship. This beast used economic boycott, deceit, and execution, if necessary, to carry out his duties. I used a secret code number for this beast – 666! You ask, where did I come up with that? Well, there is a rumor floating around that Emperor Nero would return to persecute the church. He was the first emperor to do this, you know, like Domitian is now doing. Now, if you understand Hebrew you know that each letter has a numerical designation. Using that alphabet and applying the assigned number for each letter, if you look at "Nero Caesar," then add the number for each letter, the total comes out to be 666. Nero has returned in the person of Domitian and his cult that persecutes the church. Pretty clever, huh. I am really proud of that one!

On the other hand I have really confused so many interpreters throughout the history of Christianity. Many have used the number – 666 – to apply to the Roman bishop. During WWII, some used it to apply to Adolph Hitler. If you assign a number for each letter of the alphabet, e.g. "a" equals 1, "b" equals 2, etc. and add 100 to each letter, the total for HITLER when added up equals 666! I heard that one person, no doubt a Democrat, wrote the full name of one of your presidents – Ronald Wilson Reagan – counted the letters in each name and came out with 666. Some people have way too much time on their hands. Some former students of your current interim pastor are still trying to figure out a way to come up with 666 for him, fortunately to no success so far.

Back to my vision, events lead up to a battle between the forces of God and Satan, the great battle of Armageddon. Of course, my prediction is that God will surely win. The first beast (imperial Rome) and the second beast (the official religious cult that enforces emperor worship) are defeated and cast into the lake of fire. Satan, that old dragon, is chained for 1,000 years (read carefully 20:1-6). Satan will no longer deceive the nations on the matter of emperor

worship. Keep in mind that 1,000 years is a symbol for a complete period of time. Satan will not deceive the nations to worship the emperor. And those who became martyrs for the faith during the reign of Domitian, they will know peace.

But Satan will be freed again. He will try to challenge God with all that he has. However, in the end God will completely defeat him. Now, for those interested in the future, this is my future prediction. In the end God will defeat Satan once and for all and the church will know peace. The church through the ages will be with God forever in the new Jerusalem – no pain, no sorrow, no tears – only joy and triumph. Don't you think that this message will resonate with those who are facing the persecution of the Roman Empire and all of its power?

You may ask, how will this scroll be received, how will it be understood? I am sure that some will find it confusing. They will throw their hands up in the air, say “I can't understand it,” and avoid it like the plague. Do you know the name John Calvin? Look at his commentaries on the books of the Bible. There is not one on Revelation. He found it to be too confusing.

I also suppose that there will be others who read more into the scroll than there really is. I know that some will try and mix symbolism with literalism. Some things they will interpret symbolically, others literally. There are some who are still looking for an earthly kingdom of 1,000 years, the millennial reign of Christ and His church on earth.

But I remind you that Jesus said that His kingdom is not of this world, it is spiritual, and its power is in serving, not in the sword, not in governmental authority. James, my brother, and I initially saw His kingdom as earthy, and we were criticized by Jesus because of this. In our arrogance we wanted to sit on the right hand and the left hand of Jesus, sharing in His earthly power. But after His death and resurrection, then we understood clearly what He was really saying. His kingdom was to be found in the hearts of the believers, not in earthly authority! So, read my lips “He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword!”

Some will interpret this scroll as a plan for all of the ages, spelling out in detail all that will take place. But it is not a plan for the ages. It is a blueprint for survival. Why would we look down the tunnel of time when the real future of the church is in our hands at the very time of this writing, when the real future of the church is in our hands and how we respond to the challenge from Domitian, who is threatening our very existence. If we don't survive today, there may be no church in the 21st century!

My friends, faithfulness is needed now. The church is in grave danger. The faith is being threatened as never before. We cannot stargaze and be faithful.

Now, with all of the courage we can muster, with all of the conviction that we have, we must give witness and testimony to Christ. There are untold pressures on us, risk around every corner, and challenges at every moment. Dare we concentrate so much on the future when the battle for survival is now?

To my people, keep the faith. Give witness to Christ with your very lives. Stand firm as never before. My message is very clear for my generation – and yours. Courage is the Christian virtue to be practiced; cowardice is the great sin to be avoided, the great vice in times of struggle.

We cannot lose the fight now or there will be no future. God's people must stand firm and hold on tighter and more convincingly than ever before. We must be willing to pay the price for ourselves, for Christ, and for those who will follow us in the years ahead.

That is the message of my scroll for these troublesome days – and for those days of trial, which will surely come. You must be God's people – today – and He will be your help forever and ever. Amen!