

The Future Through the Lens of History

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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Tonight, I want to invite you to open your Bibles to the book of Revelation 1. This is not going to be the only place we're going to find ourselves this evening but everything or every passage that we turn to will be found in the book of Revelation, and as I spoke this morning, this is, if there is any passage in the Bible that has caused more discussion or debate than Revelation, I don't know what it may be, this is that section of scripture where there are so many opinions, so many perspectives, and shall I say, we tend to ground ourselves in whatever perspective that we are and not to budge very much. But tonight, I want to address the question or the issue: can we see the future through the lens of history? And what I want to hopefully accomplish tonight is look at the book of Revelation in totality and looking at it in totality hopefully we will see that based on the message that it has for us tonight, that we can know not just what tomorrow holds but what the future holds based on that which has already happened in humanity's history.

Tonight in chapter 1, verse 19, I want to address what I think could be one of the most critical verses in all of the book of Revelation, at least for tonight's purposes it is. Just to remind you, whom we know as the Apostle John is on the island of Patmos, he has been discharged for his faithfulness from society, he has been left to die alone and to die what we know as a martyr's death. When the Lord comes to him beginning in verse 9 and 10 and communicates to him that which must be communicated, he sees Jesus as he's never seen Jesus before. The picture of him here in chapter 1 very different than the earthly ministry of Jesus, even the resurrected Jesus at the end of the gospels. In fact, beginning in verse 17 and 18 of chapter 1, he falls as if dead. The Lord places his hand upon him and says, "Fear not, I'm the Alpha, the Omega, the beginning and the end. I have the keys to death and hell." And then in verse 19, whom we know as the Apostle John is charged with a task. Now this is important because it is this task, it is this objective that necessitates our understanding of the layout of the book of Revelation. It says in verse 19,

19 Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter;

In all of the discussion about the book of Revelation, of all the items that we love to drill deep down on and dialog about, there's really just one charge. The Lord tells him write the things which have been, write the things which are, and write the things which shall

be. It is a very simple threefold division so that tells us that the book of Revelation, the message that it contains could be laid out in three divisions. There is a section that contains the things of the past. There is a section that contains the things of the present. And there is a section that contains the things of the future.

Now as I mentioned, when it comes to the book of Revelation there's great discussion and debate on all issues but even on this one. Where do we put those divisions? What portions of Revelation are the past? What portions are the present? What portions are the future? And to be quite honest with you, the future part is actually the easiest of all those because you get to the very last part and we all understand that the new heaven, the new earth, and the new Jerusalem is days to come but there are 20 chapters leading up to that and so where do we place these divisions? Tonight, it is my proposal to you, hopefully, to make the book of Revelation somewhat simplified, is that if you're going to have three divisions, then you need to have two markers or two distinctions, and even though there is great discussion on where we might place those, I want to call your attention tonight to two very easily identifiable events that take place in the book of Revelation that if true could make the description of what we know as the book of Revelation infinitely easier for each and every one of us.

I want to call your attention, first, to chapter 4, verses 1 through 3. Chapter 4, verses 1 through 3, and then we're going to go to chapter 19, verses 11 through 15. I want to read these two passages and then discuss for you the very unique distinction that they possess. Chapter 4, verse 1,

1 After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. 2 And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. 3 And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald.

If you would, fast forward to chapter 19. Chapter 4 is on the front side of all of the events that we most often associate with the book of Revelation, the famous judgments of God, the seals, the vials, the trumpets, the antichrist, the mark of the beast, all of those things. That event that we just read in chapter 4, it precludes or it goes before those events. When we get to chapter 19, verses 11 through 15, this event actually is on the back side of the majority of those events we most often associate with the book of Revelation. Verse 11 of chapter 19,

11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. 12 His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. 13 And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. 14 And the armies which were in heaven

followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. 15 And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. 16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

Now the reason that I called your attention to those two passages, in one of them whom we know as the Apostle John has been taken up, in the other passage whom we know as Jesus Christ and those who are believers in him are coming down. The reason I did so, as I mentioned this morning, the majority of the book of Revelation takes place on planet earth. We see the judgments of God. We see the wrath of God. We see just a multitude of horrendous activity that's taking place on the earth and yet the Bible says that humanity still would not repent of their sins. There are those places, as we addressed this morning, chapter 7 as well as chapter 4 and 5 and others, where we get a glimpse of the heavens. And so there are events that take place in heaven as described in Revelation, there are a lot of events that take place on earth that are described in Revelation, but those two places that we just read are the only two places where heaven and earth touch. They're the only places where the activity from earth is transferred into heaven and/or the activity of heaven is transferred to earth. In chapter 4, the Apostle John on the island of Patmos is taken up to be with the Lord to see the events from his perspective, and in chapter 19, the Lord Jesus Christ returns to earth, the famous battle of Armageddon, to commence the judgments of God.

Now back in chapter 1, verse 19. The charge was threefold: write the things which are in the past, write the things which are present, and write the things which are to be the future. Is it possible that the Lord has laid out the book of Revelation infinitely easier than we could ever imagine? Because if these two distinctions are true, if these are the dividing points or these are the places that separate the past, the present, and the future, then you and I have incredible insight into how to understand all the events of the book of Revelation, the events of the future in light of history.

If you would, go back to chapter 4 for one moment and I want you to imagine with me that my proposal is true, that here is John on the island of Patmos at the end of the first century under the reign of Domitian. He has been exiled there to die a martyr's death. He is caught up in the Spirit. In chapter 4 it says, "After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me." I don't know if that brings a recollection of any other passages in the Bible to you but in 1 Thessalonians 4 it says there's a day that's coming where those who are dead in Christ and alive in Christ will hear the voice of the Lord as a trumpet and they will be caught up together to be with the Lord. In other words, when I talk about these divisions and these distinctions, is it possible that in light of all that the book of Revelation contains, that when the Lord gave whom we know as the Apostle John this vision, when he gave him this message, somehow, somehow supernaturally he took him up into heaven and he gave him a perspective of time that is beyond even our comprehension, that he was able from the throne or he was able from the perspective of

God to see thousands of years both in the past and in the future all in one simultaneous event? If the two divisions or distinctions, shall I say, are chapter 4 and chapter 19 as I've proposed tonight, then what lies before us is that the first three chapters are that of the past, that chapters 4 through 19 are that of the present, and chapters 20 through 22 are that of the future.

Now when I mention past, present and future in light of these distinctions, I'm not talking about from your perspective or from mine, I'm talking about from the Apostle John's perspective. He was the one that was caught up and he said, "Write the things which you see, that which is past, that which is present, and that which is future." And so under these distinctions, that means that all that takes place in chapters 20 through 22 would be that of the future. That's the easy part. All that takes place in chapters 4 through 19 would be the present from the perspective that the Lord has given John by catching him up to be with him and see history from his perspective. And then chapters 1 through 3 would be the past that led up to that time that he was taken up.

What does this mean for you and I? Well, if my proposal is true, if the distinctions of division in the book of Revelation are easier laid out than we could ever imagine, then that means that in chapter 4, verses 1 and 2, whom we know as the Apostle John being caught up together with the Lord with the voice of God as the sound of a trumpet, that pictures for us an event that in time's future, an event that the Bible speaks of in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 13 where the dead in Christ and alive in Christ hear the voice of the Lord and are caught up together to be with the Lord. If my proposal is true, then what that means for us is all of the events of Revelation that are just chaotic at best are all the events that take place on the earth during that time period that we mentioned this morning that Jesus called that great tribulation, that the Apostle John was given a present-day view of in real time. If that is the case, that means that chapters 1 through 3 are the past from that perspective. That means that you and I are not living in the midst of the seven seals, we're not living in the midst of the mark of the beast, we're not living in the midst of chapters 4 through 19, we know we're not living in chapters 20 through 22, that means that you and I currently today are somewhere between chapters 1 and chapters 4, verses 1 and 2, and the question we must ask ourselves is if this is true, where are we and what does this mean? If the Apostle John was caught up in chapter 4 and given the perspective of all of the events leading up to that time where what we know as the church is caught up to be together with the Lord, then what we know specifically in chapters 2 and 3 gives us a picture, gives us a description of what you and I know as the history of the body of Christ leading up to the catching up of the body of Christ.

Now in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, this one description if you'll allow me to give tonight, we are given the description of seven individual churches. These churches begin with Ephesus, they end with Laodicea. Every single one of these churches, every one of them was a local congregation. Every one of them ceases to exist as of today. In fact, you can go on a tour and you can see the ruins of these churches but many of them were large in size, such as at Ephesus, some of them were very small, such as Smyrna. If you look at the seven churches, all but two of them are given some type of condemnation of something that is going wrong. Only the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia are

mentioned as having nothing that is wrong. Both of those churches are only encouraged to continue doing what they're doing. The other five churches have something that is wrong, something that needs to be addressed, something that needs to be fixed. The warning, though, that is given to these churches, that is, if they do not repent and if they do not change, their candlestick which, by the way, in chapter 1 is described as that entity known as that body of believers, will be removed. It's not dealing with their salvation. It's not dealing with their eternity. It's dealing with them as an entity, as a local group or representative group of the body of Christ.

Now I mentioned tonight that the title is can we see the future through the lens of history? Let me backtrack just a moment. If my proposal is right and the two distinctions that we have in chapters 4 and 19 are the dividing markers of Revelation, and if chapter 4, verses 1 and 2 is a picture of that event of those who are dead in Christ and alive in Christ being caught up to be together with the Lord, then that means that chapters 2 and 3 and the descriptions of these churches could possibly give us insight into what lies ahead. There is a thought that I want to propose to you tonight that each and every one of these seven churches is not just a local congregation, although they are, but they represent the history of the body of Christ from the ascension of Christ unto the calling up of the body of Christ. Allow me to walk through very briefly tonight these seven churches. I want you to understand how they're described, what they mean, and how they could possibly tell us the future.

The first church, chapter 2, is the church of Ephesus. The word Ephesus means "one who is fully purposed." We know they tried those that were Nicolaitans and those that claimed to be apostles and they were false. We know they had good solid doctrine but we also know that according to chapter 2, that they had lost their first love. They'd lost their passion for the things of the Lord but yet their doctrine was solid, their biblical teaching was solid, they were strong doctrinally. They were fully purposed.

Moving on to verse 8 of chapter 2, we have the church of Smyrna. The church of Smyrna, the name Smyrna itself means "myrrh." Remember gold, frankincense and myrrh with what we know as the Christmas story, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, that which is bitter, that which is an ointment of sorts. This was a very small congregation that experienced a lot of persecution, in fact, they claimed that they could not be significant for the Lord because they were so small in number and yet he tells them that their strength isn't in their quantity but in their quality, that they are so dedicated to the things of God.

When we get to verse 12 of chapter 2, there is the church of Pergamos. The church of Pergamos, that's an interesting name. Pergamos actually means "much marriage." What happens beginning in verse 12 is we discover that this church has married the world. In fact, the Bible says that they actually possess a chair or a seat that Satan's seat is in the midst of them. The struggle is that they've so combined themselves with the world, there is no longer a distinction if what is secular versus what is sacred.

When you get to verse 18 of chapter 2, we have the church of Thyatira. That's an interesting word, Thyatira means "odor of affliction." The church at Thyatira, it says that

the one or the spirit of Jezebel has returned where she commits fornication with those who subscribe to her belief system. It is a very odorous congregation in the fact that their stench of sin rises up before the Lord.

Getting into chapter 3, we have the fifth church, it's the church of Sardis. Again, like the church of Smyrna, it's a small congregation and the name means "red ones or bloodied ones." Those that are a part of this group, severe persecution. They are staying faithful to the end. There are those who will not give in but there is heavy martyrdom and, shall we say, persecution.

When you get to verse 7 of chapter 3, it's the church of Philadelphia. We know the name means "brotherly love," obviously because that name is utilized in our culture today. The church of Philadelphia, again like the church at Smyrna, there's nothing that is said to be wrong with them, nothing needs to be changed, nothing needs to be repented of. What is it that the church of Philadelphia was, shall we say, encouraged in? It's the fact that they kept the word of God and it says because they kept the word of God, that there would be no door that would be closed unto them. If the Lord opens it, it will stay open. There is nothing that will prevent them from going forward.

Last but not least, verse 14 of chapter 3, we have the church of Laodicea, probably the most famous of the seven. It's the lukewarm church. It's not hot, it's not cold, in fact, we get a picture in verse 20 that Jesus is actually standing on the outside saying, "I would love to be a part of things if you would just let me in." You know, the word Laodicea is an interesting word, it actually means "the rights of the people."

Now those are the individual congregations, that is a brief summary of what their name meant and their issues both good and bad. But what if tonight, what if tonight in light of the divisions, in light of the distinctions, what if we could take ourselves and place ourselves in the Apostle John's position? What if we could go to that moment in time where the Lord calls us out, those who are dead in Christ, those who are alive in Christ, and he takes us to be with him in the air? That means that all the endeavors of the last 2,000 years or whatever time period it will be up until that moment are the time period of the past. Is it possible that these seven churches just aren't respective congregations, they're not just local groups of believers, is it possible that they give us a snapshot of the history of the church leading up to the catching up of the church?

Allow me to visit this by going back to the church at Ephesus. Think about this church. It's got good solid doctrine. It's not wavering in truth. It's making sure that everything that is spoken is from the word of God, that there is no variance, there is no... I mean, that everything is the way it's supposed to be. If we look back in time, it's a good picture of that early church. Remember those early apostles that gathered in that Upper Room, they go through what we know as Pentecost and you read through the book of Acts and you read through the letters of the Apostle Paul, they were always standing for truth. In fact, that little book that we know as Jude right before Revelation said, "I came to you. I wanted to speak of the common salvation but there is need for me to speak about the fact that there are people who are creeping in and they're trying to promote false teachings, and we

need to make sure that doesn't settle into who we are." In fact, a study of the first, shall we say, centuries of the church show us this fight, not a fight of flesh and blood but a fight for truth. What is doctrinally pure? What is biblically true? What is erroneous in nature?

The second church is the church of Smyrna, small in number, heavily persecuted, being thrown in jail on a regular basis. You know, by the time you get to the mid-second century, what we know as the persecution of the church is in full bore. In fact, what we know as the Roman Empire state sponsored at least 10 major legislative pieces promoting the persecution of the church of Jesus Christ, where it was actually put in print that it was legal to persecute and to kill those who were believers in Jesus Christ, and yet the interesting thing is that in Christianity the more that the faith is persecuted, the more it is attractive, the more that it is squished, the more that it grows, and by the time we find ourselves in the mid-fourth century, Christianity has been attempted to be eradicated, martyrs have been by the 10,000s, the churches have been burned and banished but the faith of the church though not very public is as strong as its ever been, much like the church at Smyrna, small in number, persecuted but strong in spite of the fact that they don't think they are.

Then there's Pergamos. You see, something happened in the early fourth century that I'm sure many of you because of the history that you've read are aware of, that there was a formal marriage between the church and the state. We decided, when I say "we," that's a collective term, we decided in the early fourth century under the direction of one by the name of Constantine to establish a state religion. The Roman Empire claimed Christianity as its official faith. At that point, those who were, shall we say, faith leaders would approve the state leaders and those that were the state leaders would approve those that were the church leaders, and you know what happens when the church marries the state, right? It always goes sideways. Oh sure, the first couple of decades were good but if you notice in verse 14 of chapter 2, it talks about this stumblingblock, how often the legislation would get muddied and who would it actually benefit, and it didn't take long before the marriage of the church and state did such in the Roman Empire to where you could no longer distinguish what was of God, what was of man, what was biblical versus that which was simply political.

Then there's the church at Thyatira. It wouldn't be long thereafter, in fact, it would be about the sixth, the seventh century that humanity would fall into the Dark Ages, a time where education was sparse, but more importantly what you and I know as the scriptures would become incredibly scarce. The church of Jesus Christ as far as a faith, a belief in him, would not be nonexistent but it would be tough to find. You see, that marriage had borne full steam and just like in Thyatira, there's this Jezebel who comes, who demands that there be activity, this interaction with each other that causes both to be spoiled. There's a reason we call it the Dark Ages, not just because of education and knowledge but because spiritually it was a dark time. If you wanted to hear the truth of God's word and you wanted to hear about Jesus Christ from about the sixth century to about the 14th century or so, it was tough to find. Jezebel had her reign.

Oh, but then there's Sardis. In the midst of all that, there are these pockets of people who began to find fidelity of the faith, they began to preach the faith, they began to sing the faith, and all of a sudden you see kind of in that 12-14-15th century that all of a sudden there's these pockets of believers that start popping up all over the world and making a name for themselves because they're making a name for Jesus, all of a sudden we're finding that the Bible is becoming accessible, all of a sudden we're discovering there are people who are willing to stand up and say, "Thus saith the Lord," and just like the church at Sardis, oh, there was heavy persecution but there was incredible faithfulness.

Then we get to the church of Philadelphia, remember one of only two churches that there is nothing bad said about it. What were they complimented for? They kept the word of God. Now you hear me all the time refer to an event that we commonly and collectively call the Reformation, that which started on October 31, 1517 with Martin Luther's famous 95 theses. It's more than just that day, it's more than just the councils that took place. What happened in the 16th century in the world, what happened is we saw a return to the word of God, we saw the publication of the word of God, we saw a return to the preaching of the truth of God's word, and the fire of revival took off around the world. That corrupt entity, that marriage that had been about days past began to crumble worldwide. Kind of the mantra of what we know as the Reformation was, "By faith alone, through grace alone, by scripture alone." The word of God went forth. In fact, if you go back today and you look at all the great missionary movements and all the great revival movements that took place in days past, you will discover that they took place sometimes between what we know as the Reformation and days recently gone by. In fact, if you were to do an honest study of revivals, awakenings, major movements of God, initiation of incredible endeavors over the course of the last 50-100 years, you're hard-pressed to find any. Oh, you'll find a pocket here and you'll find a pocket there but most of what we know as the great movement of the gospel throughout the world in the last 500 years took place beginning in the early 16th century and went to about what we know as the early 20th century. The door was wide open.

Oh, but then there's this last church, it's the church of Laodicea. We don't like to talk about it because it's the lukewarm church. It's not hot and it's not cold. Interesting what the church of Laodicea brags about, they've got a lot of money and great buildings. Isn't that interesting? All that is around them is pleasing to the eye but according to verse 20, Jesus is on the outside. It says the one thing you need is you need to have your eyes washed, you need to be cleansed, you're seeing things erroneously. The church is lukewarm, all about themselves, inward focused and cares nothing about the things of God as long as the institution thrives.

Now for the sake of my proposal tonight, is it possible that we can actually see the future through the lens of history? If the divisions that I've laid before you are right and if the distinctions that I've laid before you are correct, then that means that you and I today if we look at history aren't living in the days of the church of Ephesus, we're not living in the days of Pergamos, we're living in the days of Laodicea. We're living in the days where we're more interested in what I want than the gospel going forth. Remember Laodicea means the rights of the people. It means we're living in the days, we're more

interested in what we construct than the gospel that goes forth. We're living in the days where we do all kinds of things in the name of the Lord but the Lord himself isn't even a part of it.

Now I don't think it would take much convincing to convince you that that is the world that we are surrounded in each and every day. So when you go to chapter 3 at the very end of the church of Laodicea, what happens next? John is called up. If you and I tonight can see the future through the lens of history, that means that all these traits of these churches have been explored and exposed, and I know you hear this all the time and you expect me to say it, it means the next thing on God's calendar is him calling us home, those who are dead in Christ and those who are alive in Christ. So when we speak about it being the last days, that's not just metaphorical. When we say, "Oh, these are the last moments of history as we know it," that's not speaking in hyperbole, that's speaking as history. That means that the institution worldwide of what we know as the church isn't going to become any more holy, that you and I should stand firm for its truth in the midst of its lukewarmness and do exactly what Titus 2 says, looking for that blessed hope and the appearing of our Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.

If you and I can see the future through the lens of history, that means the next thing that's on God's great calendar is that shout from heaven, that sound of the trumpet where those of us who have been a part of the body of Christ for 2,000 years all meet together to be with the Lord in the air. Ladies and gentlemen, history as we know it may be literally knocking on our door.