

Revelation—Hidden or Revealed?

Dear Friends,

The humanized--and humanistic--pretense of modern Christianity looks for the spectacular and the novel. To research something simple and--heaven forbid--old and historical is "Boring." This carnal soil is rich ground for the carnal speculation that so many very sincere believers impose on--and wrest--Revelation. If any writing on the Book of Revelation deviates in any way or to any other objective that John's stated and exclusive key to a right understanding of the Book, "Jesus Christ revealed," discard it. It isn't worth your time or effort to read it. When I first started speaking in the church as a young man, I attended a regional meeting near my home. I was sitting beside my uncle and my father in the ministry. A dear man was asked to preach that night. He introduced Jesus' lesson of Lazarus and the rich man. (Luke 16:19-31) He quickly invested all his effort into painting the lesson as a symbolic teaching regarding Jews and Gentiles. About mid-way through the sermon, my uncle leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I wish I knew half as much about that lesson as he thinks he knows." His comment struck my sense of humor so deeply that I almost had to leave the room. Admittedly, I tend to view Scripture, as much as possible, from a literal perspective. I adhere to the cliché, "If the literal sense makes sense, look for no other sense." When Scripture indicates that a lesson is symbolic, we should follow the text and look for the correct interpretation of the symbols, always relying on the literal passages to guide our study. Any believer who decides to read the Book of Revelation immediately encounters our study verses, but, sadly, most of them forget the lesson immediately. The Holy Spirit directed John, at the very beginning of this Book, to write the only worthwhile key to a right understanding of its contents. "Jesus Christ revealed." Not unnatural colored horses or hybrid and frightening beasts, but Jesus Christ revealed.

Every story we read and remember always includes a hero. Once you identify the hero in the story, you follow all the sub-plots and story lines with your mind focused on the hero. How will he deal with this problem? Many Bible students would greatly enhance their Bible study if they imbedded in their minds that God and/or Jesus is always the one and only true "Hero" in every Bible story. And that rule definitely includes Revelation. If Jesus faced different colored horses and unraveled their challenge, if He faced hybrid beasts consisting of the traits of the most frightening of natural beasts all in one horrifying beast, surely He can overcome whatever "Beast" or problem you and I face. And that should be our "Take-away-line" from our reading of Revelation.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

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The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: Who bare record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand. (Revelation 1:1-3 KJV)

Few Bible books have been tortured with strained and human-imaginative interpretations as Revelation. Such interpretations also ignore the inspired key to the book that we read in our study passage. Many years ago, I read an interesting and sadly accurate description of the historical view of Revelation in the Christian community across the centuries. When Christians are suffering persecution or great trials, they read Revelation for comfort. When Christians enjoy peaceful seasons, they read Revelation and speculate on a hidden mystical meaning. In my lifetime, Christians have plunged headlong into allegorical interpretations of the book.

The word “revelation” was translated from the Greek root for our English word “Apocalypse.” The word literally means to uncover or to “Reveal” what was formerly not known. In ancient cultures, apocalyptic literature was a specific literary genre. When a weak persecuted people faced impossible adversaries and were in danger of being destroyed, a writer who wished to encourage them would write an apocalyptic letter to them. The writing was veiled in symbolism that would confuse their adversary, should the adversary read it. But it would give the overwhelmed people powerful encouragement. When their future seemed hopeless, a powerful hero figure would appear, defeat their adversary, and give them deliverance and peace. The symbols in this writing were to be read with a broad-brush interpretation, mirror opposite to allegorical genre in which every detail is given symbolic meaning. The audience to whom this writing was addressed was to look for the hero figure, not bury themselves in complex or mystical meaning of all the symbols.

In keeping with this historical genre, I dearly love a story I read many years ago. A small seminary didn’t have the funds to build an elaborate campus, so they arranged with the local school system for seminary students to use the school’s gymnasium when it was not in use by the school’s students. They only required that a school employee open and lock the facility and remain present while the seminary students were using it. On this particular day, an old custodian was the assigned school employee. While the young seminary students were playing basketball, the custodian sat in a folding chair on the sideline, reading his Bible. A young seminarian noticed what the old man was reading and engaged him in conversation. As the conversation began, the student noticed that the old man was reading Revelation. The student, eager to teach the old man, asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The old man quietly replied that he believed he understood. The student asked, “What does it all mean?” He was not at all prepared for the answer he heard, “Jesus wins!” That wise old man understood the true message of Revelation far better than the young intellectual student.

John’s first sentence in the book sets the stage, “*The revelation of Jesus Christ.*” While the Revelation may use events, “*things which must shortly come to pass,*” the primary focus of the message must always remain faithful to John’s words, “***The revelation of Jesus Christ.***” When we chase near-mystical interpretations of the various symbols, we neglect the primary theme of the Book, Jesus Christ revealed. Or when we debate the date of the Book, we also neglect Jesus and the comforting message we need. Whenever a Bible student or preacher becomes over-invested in a mystical interpretation of the various symbols in Revelation, they inevitably lose their focus on Jesus. The right interpretation of this genre is not about the hidden meaning of different colored horses or hybrid beasts. It reads these mini stories, but it always looks past the symbols to the hero, Jesus! Regardless the story or the symbol, in the end, in every story, Jesus wins. So, we should take from our reading that, regardless what happens, shortly after John wrote or in our own lives, we need to keep our hearts and faith anchored in Jesus and believe the message of Revelation. In the end, despite all the trials and formidable hurdles we face, “***Jesus wins.***”

You face your most fearful and unexpected adversary in a doctor’s office after you’ve undergone extensive tests. Jesus wins! You face your ominous adversary in your boss’s office when you hear that

your job, indeed your career, is in jeopardy. Jesus wins! You face your trial in your family with family members who disappoint you. Jesus wins! If we draw this kind of comfort from reading Revelation, you join that wise old custodian. You do understand the message of the book.

Ponder for a brief moment the emphasis you hear or read within the Christian community in our time. One group obsesses over the date of Revelation. Did John write Revelation during his active ministry, say around 60 AD? Or did he write in his old age, say in the 90s AD? What difference does it make to the message of the letter? What difference does it make to the edification we may draw from John's message? Another group will focus on various human imaginations regarding the thousand years in Revelation 20. Did John intend us to understand this thousand year period according to the dispensational school, the millennial school, the a-millennial school, or something different from all these human theories? I dearly love a simple observation from Augustus Strong in his Systematic Theology, written in the early twentieth century. Strong examines the various ideas regarding the thousand years, but then concludes; it is not wise to interpret the thousand years so literally in the context of an entire letter that is so symbolic. In one brief sentence, Strong walks us past all the bizarre ideas that are so popular and gives us a refreshing and sensible perspective. Whatever the thousand years may mean, the contextual setting strongly rejects any literal interpretation we might try to force onto the lesson. If the thousand years is literal, so are the unnaturally colored horses and the frightening hybrid beasts in the letter.

Another simple filter we should always apply to our reading and interpretation of Revelation. Any interpretation that fails to provide immediate and substantial comfort to those first seven churches in the midst of their trials should be summarily rejected. John emphasized in the first verses to those churches that he was writing of "*things which must **shortly** come to pass,*" not of things which shall not come to pass for thousands of years until the last days. If we adopt the correct genre and its historical broad-brush interpretation, what provided comfort for those first seven churches equally provides comfort to believers today in the midst of their trials. For first century Christians, or twenty first century Christians for that matter, what edification do we draw from a theory about tribulations and "Rapture," especially when those who embrace these ideas argue endlessly, and never agree on the order of these events? What comfort do we glean today from the idea of a future ideal society in which Jesus literally rules the planet? If He doesn't rule it now, where is the comfort? But, if John intended, above anything else, to encourage those seven churches regarding the present reality of Jesus and His presence with them through whatever the adversary hurled against them, they and we have reason to rejoice in the message.

Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand. John chose his words carefully. (More correctly, the Holy Spirit chose His words carefully) The reader, like that wise old custodian, is blessed. Those who hear the words read are blessed. Those who learn how to face life, especially life's pressure cooker trials, are blessed. John didn't write a word about the person who knew all the symbols and understood all the words was blessed. If we read Revelation with a searching hunger for information about Jesus, we shall realize that blessing. If we read it while obsessing to find a mystical explanation for the symbols, John doesn't write one word about a blessing.

A logical and wise foundation for our Bible study will guide us to avoid many of the snares that hinder our finding comfort in Revelation. All too frequently contemporary Bible teachers and students read the symbolic passages in the Bible, Revelation, Jesus' parables, Ezekiel, or Zechariah, as examples, and strain to find imaginative interpretations, all the while ignoring the simple, straightforward literal writings in Scripture. Wise Bible interpretation follows a mirror opposite path of study. Focus on the literal passages. Study to learn them as your foundational faith. When you encounter any of the symbolic

passages, always—no exception ever—interpret the symbolic passages in harmony with the literal and simple.

How can we make sense of the many frightening—often horrifying—symbols we find in Revelation? Simple. Keep Jesus in your faith-focus. Remember, whatever they are, however frightening they may appear, in the end, they fail, and Jesus wins the day. How do you apply that truth to your life? Follow the obvious. We find the key in a simple passage that every believer should memorize and recite to him/herself daily.

*Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, **I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.** So that we may boldly say, **The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.** (Hebrews 13:5-6 KJV)*

I've read any number of books that each claimed to offer the key to a right understanding of Revelation. Some of them gave the welcomed help, especially those that urged keeping the first three verses of the Book in mind as I read the remainder. But many of them were far more speculative than substantial. If you study Revelation according to John's key in these first verses, you have no need for a fictional novel to learn what the Book teaches. You have no need for one of the various imaginative theories about the meaning of the Book. You need the simple faith of that wise custodian, along with his vigorous faith-focus on Jesus. Study Revelation for focus on Jesus and His certain victory over all His—and your—adversaries. However you may see yourself in each story John writes, be sure to keep yourself and your faith securely fixed, "Safe in the Arms of Jesus," as the old hymn reminds us. What else matters?

Elder Joe Holder