

How to Understand and Apply the Bible

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Interpreting Revelation (Apocalyptic)

Apocalyptic: What is it?

Visionary experiences conveying God's judgment and salvation at the end of the age.

Visions are not hallucinations but are rather the means by which the Spirit communicated his truth about specific events hidden until those events unfold. In the meantime, they encourage and challenge God's people to live expectantly.

1. Revelation is a depiction of the Day of the Lord as described in the Old Testament and anticipated in the New Testament (Isa 13:6-13; Joel 1:15; 2:1-2, 28-32; Amos 5:18-19; Zeph 1:2-18; Mal 4:5; Acts 2:20; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Thes 2:2; 2 Pet 3:10).

The great day of the Lord is near—

near and coming quickly.

The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter;

the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry.

That day will be a day of wrath—

a day of distress and anguish,

a day of trouble and ruin,

a day of darkness and gloom,

a day of clouds and blackness—

a day of trumpet and battle cry

against the fortified cities

and against the corner towers. (Zephaniah 1:14-16)

¹² And I looked when He broke the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; and the sun became as black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood; ¹³ and the stars of the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind. ¹⁴ The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the eminent people, and the commanders and the wealthy and the strong, and every slave and free person hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; ¹⁶ and they said to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the sight of

Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷for **the great day of Their wrath has come**, and who is able to stand?" (Rev 6:12-17; NASB)

2. Apocalyptic is a form of prophetic literature. Apocalyptic (as well as some prophecy) can convey information not necessarily intended to be understood by the people to whom it was given. See Dan 12:7-13; Eph 3:4-6; 1 Peter 1 :10-12. Some prophecy is intended to encourage/assure/inspire the original readers, but not provide them with specific knowledge. *As with all scripture, meaning and application can have different targets.*

One of them said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, "How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?"

The man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, lifted his right hand and his left hand toward heaven, and I heard him swear by him who lives forever, saying, "It will be for a time, times and half a time. When the power of the holy people has been finally broken, all these things will be completed."

I heard, but **I did not understand**. So I asked, "My lord, what will the outcome of all this be?"

He replied, "Go your way, Daniel, because the words are rolled up and **sealed until the time of the end**. (Dan 12:6-9)

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that **they were not serving themselves but you**, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Pet 1:10-12)

Ways to View Revelation

Preterist (past) – The book is an expression of events in the first century, either in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 or at both the fall of Jerusalem and the fall of Rome in the fifth century. It is not futuristic.

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. (Rev 1:1a)

Problems with the Preterist view:

1. “Soon” and “near” are ways of describing something that can happen without warning, not necessarily a description of a time frame. Anything that can happen at any moment and without warning can be described this way as a caution to be ready. We use these terms that way when we don’t possess specific information.

Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. (Joel 1:15)

Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. (Joel 3:14)

“The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.” (Obad 1:15)

Be silent before the Sovereign Lord, for the day of the Lord is near. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited. (Zeph 1:7)

The great day of the Lord is near— near and coming quickly. The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter; the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry. (Zeph 1:14)

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Rom 13:12)

2. Jesus indicates that no one knows the day and hour of his return, not even him. This indicates a lack of knowledge of *any* time frame. He cannot mean no one knows the *exact* day and hour; that would be a trivial statement. He means it could be one day or two thousand years—only the Father knows.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matt 24:36-44)

3. The element of surprise that Jesus indicates in parables and in Matt 24:37 doesn’t make sense if he had in mind a near-term fulfillment.

Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Matt 24:33-35)

4. The events described in Revelation never happened in the first century. A Preterist has two options: either John got his prophecy wrong or the prophecy has to be understood as completely symbolic, vague (at best), and nonliteral, even the parts that are expressed literally and factually.

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” (Rev 4:1)

Historicist – The events of Revelation have unfolded across history and are building toward a future fulfillment of chapters 20-22.

Idealist (spiritualist) – The book of Revelation is just an allegory for the struggle between God and Satan, good vs. evil, across all times. It is not historical in any way. The portion referring to the kingdom (20:1-6) designates an indefinite time frame. Jesus is ruling over the earth right now—in heaven.

Futurist – The prophetic events of Revelation (chapters 4-22) are historical but unfulfilled. They point to events at the end of the age, as Jesus described in the Olivet Discourse and in literal fulfillment of all the biblical prophecies regarding the Day of the Lord.

Dispensationalism is the added view that the church and Israel are different entities, that the current age is one where God has shifted his focus to the church and away from Israel. Each has a distinct role in God’s prophetic plan (Romans 11:25-27).

1. The futurist position on Revelation is the inevitable outcome of reading the Bible literally.

Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come **on the whole world** to test the inhabitants **of the earth**. (Rev 3:10)

2. Jesus intended that we be watchful and observe events but not be misled, thinking that events (especially those in the near-term, from their perspective in Matt 24) indicated

the end had come. (See 2 Thes 2:1-12.) If the futurist position is not true, then those imperatives are not applicable to us today.

3. John called his Revelation *prophecy* (1:3; 22:7, 18-19). He wrote it near the end of the first century, after the destruction of Jerusalem had already occurred. It doesn't make sense to regard it as an explanation of events in the first century.
4. If the futurist perspective is true, we expect things to get worse and worse until the day Jesus returns. If the millennial kingdom is still in the future, it means Satan is not bound, but is active. This is what the New Testament teaches us (Eph 4:27; 6:11-16; 1 Cor 7:5; 2 Cor 2:11; 1 Thes 2:18; 2 Thes 3:3; 1 John 5:19; 1 Pet 5:8; James 4:7; 1 Tim 5:15).

And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is **the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended.** After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. **They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.** (Rev 20:1-4)

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. (1 John 5:19)

5. The futurist position follows the outline expressed in Revelation 1:19.

Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. (Rev 1:19; NASB)

Symbolism in Apocalyptic Literature

Allegorical visions – The author/visionary is given a picture that conveys meaning through symbols, like metaphor (images that represent reality in some colorful but entirely different way, like calling God our rock), metonymy (images that represent reality in a colorful but direct way, like referring to Satan as serpent or dragon), and personification (images that refer to something general, like a kingdom or city, and make it seem like a person or creature).

- Ezekiel 37 – Valley of dry bones: “Then he said to me: ‘Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel.’” (Ezek 37:11)
- Daniel 2:27-45 – Vision of the statue (successive kingdoms)
- Daniel 4:10-27 – Vision of the tree (Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar)
- Daniel 7:1-27 – Four beasts = four kingdoms (similarly, Dan 8)
- Acts 10:9-16 – Unclean animals represent Gentile believers
- Rev 12:1-17 – The woman (Israel) and the dragon (Satan)
- Rev 13:1-10, 11-17 – The beast out of the sea (Antichrist and his kingdom)
- Rev 17:1-18:24 – The beast out of the earth (the False Prophet)

Spiritual representations (noumena) – The author/visionary is given a picture of something that cannot, in principle, be depicted directly, such as God sitting on his throne. Glimpses into the heavenly realm are of this sort. The author is instead given visual symbols (usually similes) to understand what is happening.

- Isaiah 6 (throne room of God)
- Ezekiel 1 (four living creatures)
- Daniel 10 (angel – Gabriel)
- Zechariah 4 (the golden lampstand and two olive trees)
- Zechariah 5 (the flying scroll)
- Zechariah 6 (four chariots)
- Rev 5:6 – “Then I saw a Lamb, **looking as if** it had been slain”
- Rev 6:9 – The souls of the martyrs
- Rev 9:1-11 – Demons who appear to John like locusts. “The locusts **looked like** horses prepared for battle. On their heads **they wore something like** crowns of gold, and their faces **resembled** human faces.” (9:7)
- Rev 15:1-8 – The seven angels and four living creatures
- Rev 16:13 – “Then I saw three impure spirits that **looked like frogs**; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet.”

Physical semblances (phenomena) – These are physical (earthly) realities that are described in terms that may include symbols, if the author has no more effective way to talk about them.

Many visionary experiences in the Old Testament express concrete things, delivered as a vision but the insight provided is of something intelligible and (potentially) visible.

- Ezekiel 11:1: “Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the gate of the house of the Lord that faces east. There at the entrance of the gate were twenty-five men, and I saw among them Jaazaniah son of Azzur and Pelatiah son of Benaiah, leaders of the people.”
- Ezekiel 40-47: The temple in the millennium. Very specific, most of it within Ezekiel’s comprehension, but note that there are elements within the vision that are spiritual representations (Ezek 40:3): “He took me there, and I saw a man whose appearance was like bronze; he was standing in the gateway with a linen cord and a measuring rod in his hand.”
- Daniel 9:20-27 (Seventy Sevens – denoted a vision but delivered audibly as a series of events).
- Rev 9:15-17 – Armies crossing the Euphrates. “And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand. **I heard their number.** The horses and riders I saw in my vision **looked like this:** Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses **resembled** the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur.”
- Rev 19:17-21 (elements of all three types blended together)

Outline of Revelation

1. The things John had seen (1:1-20)
2. The things which are (2:1-3:22)
3. The things which will take place after these things (4:1-22:5)
 - The heavenly scene (4:1-5:14)
 - The seven-sealed scroll opened (6:1-17)
 - The 144,000 sealed (7:1-17)
 - The seventh seal/Seven trumpets sounded (8:1-10:11)
 - Two witnesses (11:1-14)
 - The seventh trumpet/Seven bowls anticipated (11:15-19)
 - Allegorical presentations of characters & events:
 - The woman and the dragon (12:1-17)
 - The beast from the sea (13:1-10)
 - The beast from the earth (13:11-18)
 - Snapshots:
 - The lamb and the 144,000 victorious at the end (14:1-5)
 - Angels delivered a warning to the world (14:6-20)
 - Seven bowls poured out (15:1-16:21)
 - Allegorical presentation of Babylon (17:1-18:24)
 - Wedding supper of the lamb/celebration in heaven (19:1-10)
 - Return of Christ and the final battle (19:11-21)
 - Millennial Kingdom on earth (20:1-6)
 - Satan's final stand (20:7-10)
 - The great white throne judgment (20:11-15)
 - The completion of the new heaven and new earth (21:1-8)
 - The new Jerusalem (21:9-22:5)
4. Epilogue (22:6-21)

Application of Revelation for people of all times

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.” (Matt 24:42)

- Parable of the Unsuspecting Homeowner (Matt 24:42-44)
- Parable of the Faithful vs. Wicked Servants (Matt 24:45-51)
- Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1-13)
- Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-29)
- Parable of Sheep and Goats (Matt 25:31-46)