

December 27

Revelation 1 - 3

Hi, my name is Marty Barnhart. I am the Director of Ministry Expansion here at Christ Community Church. Today we read the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation - the last book of the Bible, the most mysterious book of the Bible, and the most controversial book of the Bible. It is here in the Book of Revelation or the Apocalypse that we read about what is going to happen at the end of the age and beyond. It is the only book that tells the reader they will be blessed if they read it yet most folks would rather skip over it.

The Book of Revelation was given to John the apostle while he was in exile on the island of Patmos. When his exile ended, John went to Ephesus, where he lived out his life.

Revelation is a book that perhaps has frightened you in the past, not only because of its subject matter, but also because of the bewildering number of interpretive schemes that have been advanced through the ages. It is full of Old Testament images and references. Your growing knowledge of the Bible will certainly put you in a better position than ever before to both recognize and interpret those allusions. The book is also full of apocalyptic symbols and language which may frighten us and will confuse us as attempts are made over and over again to describe persons and things which defy human description. Today, in the description of Christ Jesus as John perceived Him in the vision of chapter 1, we have an example of the symbols and language I have just noted.

The language John uses in his description is rooted in the Old Testament and in particular in the Book of Daniel – where he uses the title Son of Man. Most of the features of this awesome description are drawn from Daniel's visions in chapter 7 and chapter 10 of the Old Testament prophet's book. The candle stands recall a scene we viewed in the Book of Zechariah. And the words that Christ speaks in Revelation 1 are drawn from the Book of Isaiah, where they are spoken by Jehovah Himself a wonderful reference to the deity of Jesus Christ.

The quotation in Revelation 1:7 also comes from the Book of Zechariah chapter 12 which prophesied that the inhabitants of Jerusalem will look upon the one that they pierced and mourn because of Him.

Now, before I go any further, I would like to make just a few observations about how we should approach the interpretation of this wonderfully mysterious book:

#1: We must always keep in mind the principle that the primary meaning is the one which would have made sense to the 1st century readers of the book. John wrote this book to comfort a persecuted church toward the end of the 1st century.

#2: The Book of Revelation is built around a series of visions and we must not adopt any interpretive scheme which violates the integrity of that structure. Each vision

begins with a reference to the Spirit of God. "I was in the Spirit," John says, "on the Lord's day."

#3: Interpret what is obscure in light of what is plain - not the other way around. This is a rule of Biblical Hermeneutics or Biblical Interpretation that we seek to use as we read the Bible.

The first vision begins with chapter 1 verse 9 and covers chapters 1-3. In it, John sees the glorified Christ walking in the midst of the lampstands, which he tells us represent, 7 churches in Asia Minor. The order in which they appear is geographically the order in which you would visit them if you were to do a walking tour of Asia Minor.

There is a clearly identifiable pattern that is followed by most of the 7 messages or letters that are delivered here. Each begins with a description of Christ (1), followed by a commendation (2), then a condemnation for that which is lacking (3). Then comes a call to repentance (4), accompanied by a warning. Each letter concludes with a magnificent promise (5) which begins with the words, "He who has an ear, let him hear."

If you were to chart the churches you would notice that the letter to the churches at Sardis and Laodicea are missing a commendation and Smyrna contains no condemnation.

I am sure that the name of the Nicolaitans jumped out at you since they are condemned in both the letter to the Ephesian church and to the church at Pergamum. I am sorry to tell you that we have no other knowledge of this group. Also, there is no identification for the Jezebel condemned in the letter to the church at Thyatira, though there is no mystery at all about her offenses. Clearly, from our reading this week, the early church had an enormous problem with false teachers and apostasy.

In order to help you understand the interpretations, I need to drop 3 more words on you right now. "Preterists" believe that the Book of Revelation addresses only the church of the 1st century and speaks of events which relate directly only to them. According to them, it has no prophetic significance for us. "Historicists" believe that the Book of Revelation deals with prophecies relating to the various periods of church history. "Futurists" believe that most or even the entire Book relates to end time events and had little or no immediate relevance to its 1st century readers.

There may be some validity to the Historicist view that the letters to the 7 churches do "fit" some aspects of church history, but please remember that each one of the 7 churches was a real church - and the first and primary interpretation of these letters is a Preterist view that these are to the real churches that existed in John's day. A hybrid view that I hold is a combination of Preterist and Futurist views observing real churches and prophecy for a time yet future.

I want to notice with you that the great invitation of Revelation 3:20 that we so often use in the context of evangelistic presentations is not addressed in its Biblical context to unbelievers at all, but to Christians who are badly in need of repentance and renewal. It is not wrong to use this verse in talking to non-believers because it is certainly true that Christ is waiting to respond to anyone who calls upon Him, but this is primarily a call to Christians to repent.

As you continue to read, take a moment to link the Old Testament to the reading in Revelation. You will be blessed by the study and see connections that you may have missed. Think about the commendations and the condemnations you read today. If God made a list of commendations what would he say about you? Would you have any condemnations? If you thought of any take time to confess them, remove and replace them with practices that will honor the Lord Jesus. Keep reading because we are almost at the end of the Bible! Thanks for listening today.