

“Reading Revelation” -Pastor Bob Leroe , First Parish Congregational Church, Wakefield , MA (15 April 2018)

📖 Scripture readings: Isaiah 13:9-11 & Revelation 19:6-19

During Desert Storm, people grew concerned about whether the turmoil in the Middle East was signaling the “last days” talked about in Scripture. As I prepared to deploy, preachers were declaring that the end was near.

The last book of the Bible presents a prophetic vision difficult to fathom—filled with terrifying images, dramatic battles and mystifying pronouncements. People have used it to stir fear in the hearts of others, and it has been hotly debated over the centuries. Many avoid it because it seems beyond comprehension. Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible *but* Revelation. It’s there, but what do we *do* with it?

I see two common (and opposite) responses to the Book of Revelation: over-zealous curiosity and resigned apathy. Some Christians read every end-times book they can get their hands on, while others throw their hands up and cry, “What’s the use? It’s too hard to grasp.” Francis Chan said, “I read the book of Revelation soon after I became a Christian; it really messed me up!”

This may sound presumptuous, but I think I can summarize the Book of Revelation in one sentence: **God is in control of history**. Exactly how it will all play out is a matter of interpretation. There are 4 main views, and I doubt if any is totally correct. Perhaps we’re not capable of knowing it all; we’re not ready for such knowledge. God has revealed all we need to know; for the rest, we trust.

Knowing all the details of future events is not as relevant as knowing Christ. He is, after all, the Focus of this final book. The complete title is: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). The word “revelation” means “unveiling.” Jesus is the One promised in the Hebrew Scriptures, presented in the Gospels, preached in the Epistles, and proclaimed in the Revelation! When we open our Bibles, we learn of Him, we submit to what we read, and let it transform our lives.

The Book of Revelation is important to me, because it led me to trust in Christ. My first exposure to this book came before I was a Christian. I thought I was familiar with the Bible. But when I came face-to-face with the Book of Revelation, I realized that there was a **lot** I *didn’t* know. This led me to consider *why* Jesus died--to take my punishment on the Cross--and that’s when I came to saving faith.

Does God intend for us to have this book all figured-out? Many people claim to know what all the poetic images mean. They compile charts and write books and some even set dates (even though Jesus said “*No one knows the day or hour,*” Mk 13:32). God’s timetable differs from our’s. The Apostle John saw lots of strange creatures in his vision, but “none so wild as some commentators” (Chesterton). I’ve found that good Christians differ as to the details. The various interpretations of the Second Coming stimulate debate among theologians. What the debaters have in common is their love for Scripture and a commitment to its authority. But their views nonetheless remain in conflict. What they *do* agree on is that Jesus will (somehow) return.

Prophecy is best understood in hindsight. We read messianic prophecy in the Old Testament and see how it clearly is fulfilled in the Person and Work of Christ. But before Jesus came, these passages weren’t so clear, which may be why Israel was expecting a political messiah to come and overthrow Rome (despite what Isaiah wrote). They weren’t expecting a humble, Suffering Servant. The Book of Revelation will appear clear as day *after* it is fulfilled.

This prophetic message is intended to change how we see life. History is *going somewhere*, headed toward a purposeful conclusion, one in which Jesus will return to right every wrong and dry every tear--a new world of justice, healing, and hope. But it has an impact here and now, not just when the end of days occur. The future impacts the present. Knowing Jesus is returning should affect today’s goals and priorities, how seriously we resist sin; how we pray, our love for unbelievers, and our determination to obey God. “We live in the present as people who will be made complete in the future” (N.T. Wright).

In his book about Revelation (*Reversed Thunder*), Eugene Peterson writes: “The sin-ruined creation of Genesis is restored in the sacrifice-renewed creation of Revelation...the story that has creation for its first word, has creation for its last word.” God will come to make all things new; he will bring forth a new Heaven and new Earth. Then (finally) we will see God’s will fully “done on Earth as it is in Heaven.”

This apocalyptic book gives us great hope. A young child was reading this final book of the Bible, finished it and cried, “*We won!*” Isn’t it comforting to know that the final battle with sin has already been decided? Billy Graham was asked by a US Senator if he was a pessimist or an optimist. He smiled and said he was an optimist. Asked why, he answered, “I’ve read the last page of the Bible.” We

have the assurance that although we are living in a Hell-threatened environment, it is also a Heaven-penetrated world. This should give us confidence in facing tomorrow. It changed the Apostle John from a crushed exile to a powerful prophet. It should change us. History is headed to a wonderful outcome because our God, the Author of history, reigns!

So **when** will Jesus return? His coming is *immanent*, which means it could occur at any time, even today...but that's not the same as claiming his return is *soon*. That would be presumptuous, and anyone making such a claim is implying that they know something the Bible does not reveal. As I said, beware of date-setters! Many have set dates that have come and gone. Beware of those who claim to know the identity of the Antichrist. Many very sure preachers have confidently proposed names only to end up looking foolish.

We need to be gracious with those who interpret the 2nd Coming differently from us, and not set our particular view as a test of Christian fellowship. Our denomination wisely has no required position on the return of Christ. We allow for different views, because this is not an essential teaching. It's important, but not a fundamental doctrine.

There's a prophetic question we need to ask ourselves: "Is God's love and redemption working in the history in which *we* live?" As we await our Lord's return, how are we faring? We are living somewhere in the midst of God's story, where pain and sorrow afflict us daily, but we confidently trust the Author as we turn the next page. We can be driven by fear of tomorrow or we can trust the One who holds tomorrow in His hand. The vision of Christ in Revelation is there to sustain us in the hardships of this present darkness. God is working out His purposes.

Our job is to be watching and waiting and ready for whatever happens. However events transpire, God will equip us. We need not fear the coming Day of the Lord. It is a day of rejoicing! We recently celebrated Easter; the resurrection appearances of Christ are not complete...there is one more to come! The risen Christ will return and put evil in its place. The Final Judgment is good news. In the meantime, we need to proclaim the Gospel with a sense of urgency, and encourage one another with this Blessed Hope: God will prevail!

Prayer: Conquering Savior, in Your departure was a pledge of return. Your promises comfort and encourage us till You come again and set things right. That glorious day has no horror or dread for us. We have trusted You and we anticipate

Your triumph and dominion. Keep us in this faith as we patiently anticipate Your return, Amen.