

Book of Revelation: Preliminary Considerations

Considerations That Will Impact Our Perspective

- There are things we do not know, simply because God has not told us everything. One example is the "seven thunders" in Revelation 10:3-4: God mentions them, but withholds from us their meaning. There may be other significant things that he doesn't mention at all. Because of this, some events in prophecy may fit together in ways we don't expect. God has told us what we *need* to know for our strength and encouragement, but not necessarily what we *want* to know for the satisfying of our speculations. (Our job is to trust God, not to speculate on things we haven't been told.)
- Some of the events mentioned in prophecy may be fulfilled in public, so that everybody knows what has happened. Other events may be fulfilled in a less public manner (perhaps by those who do not know the Bible), so that people do not realize that the prophecy has been fulfilled. However, after it is all over, we who belong to Christ will be able to look back and see how God worked, both visibly and behind the scenes, to accomplish his glorious work.
- At Jesus' *first* coming, many things occurred in unexpected ways. We have no reason to rule out the possibility that unexpected things will happen at his *second* coming.
- The popularity of various viewpoints and interpretations does not guarantee that they are correct. Truth is not determined by the number of books a person writes, or by how sensational the viewpoint sounds. Any view that adds to or subtracts from God's Word is, by nature, deficient.

Our Focus (as we study prophecy)

- We should be focusing on what is written in the Scriptures. It is not our purpose to speculate, to invent a timetable, or to develop views based on what is *not* mentioned in the Word.

How Should Prophecy Influence Us?

- Though prophecy (such as the book of Revelation) has a focus on what will happen in the end, it is written in such a way as to show us how to respond when trials occur *even now*.
- Many judgments and distressing things are going to happen - *not only at the end, but also before*. If we focus on the distressing things, we will tend to respond the way the world does - panic, fear, self-preservation, etc. However, if we focus on the *future*, on what will come *afterwards*, we will have every reason to have a positive outlook on things - even when circumstances are bad. With such a focus, we can respond the way Jesus did - with a love for other people, a trust in God, and a willingness to do God's will (even if it results in death). As in everything, we need to take into consideration the promise mentioned in Romans 8:28+. No matter what happens, God will use it to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him. [In other words, if we love him, we don't have to worry!]

- We need to remember that fulfilled prophecy won't necessarily convert people. A person can make up excuses to explain it away - just as they did when Jesus rose from the dead (Matthew 28:11-15). In the future, many people will refuse to repent *even when they know it is God who is judging them* (Revelation 16:9, 11, 21).

A Caution About "Escapism" and the Denial of Potential Persecution

- There is a view which teaches that Christians will not be present on earth, when God's final judgments are poured out. Some adherents of this view (not *all* of them) may be tempted to reach a false conclusion that they will *escape* severe trials in this present life. However, there is no such guarantee in Scripture.
- Interestingly, this "escapism" attitude is more prevalent among people who are used to living under relatively comfortable conditions - such as people who live in "Western" nations. (Many of these people actually think they *deserve* a comfortable life!) This view is not so prevalent among those who are *already* experiencing persecution - such as Christians in many "third world" countries. (In some countries, a *willingness* to suffer for Christ is considered a prerequisite to becoming a Christian. Compare to Acts 14:22.)
- Regardless of our views about what will happen to Christians during the *end times* (including whether or not they will be living on the earth, during the final days), we should not be surprised if we have to suffer trials and persecution *even now*. We have no reason to consider ourselves exempt from such circumstances, for genuine Christians have *often* experienced severe trials. (See 1 Peter, which focuses on this fact.)
- Jesus warned us that, *before* the end times, trials would increase (Matthew 24:6-13). The main difference between the trials that will be experienced during the last days and those experienced by Christians down through the centuries is that the persecution will become more widespread. Even today, the amount of persecution is increasing quite rapidly.
- We need to have the attitude that Jesus had, when he was about to face suffering and death on the cross. He looked *beyond* the temporary suffering and focused on the eternal joy that would follow. We need to follow his example (Hebrews 12:1-3).

A Few Interesting Observations about the Book of Revelation

- Learning the book of Revelation is like learning the English language. You can become quite familiar with it, but you won't reach the point that you have an exhaustive comprehension of everything.
- The issue of "*Deja vu*" or "I've seen this before": Over half of the verses in Revelation make reference to (or are direct quotes of) Old Testament Scripture. Although the types of calamities mentioned in this book may intensify as the end approaches, they have happened before, and may be happening today. Fortunately, the words of encouragement and hope are also applicable today, as they will be in the future.
- An interesting feature: Many things in the book of Revelation occur in groups of three or seven. This includes both the literary structure, as well as many of the events or things which are described in the book. As an example, some of the phrases found in chapter 1 occur in groups of three - such as in verse 3 (read / hear / take heart) and verses 4 and 8 (who is / who was / who is to come). Two examples of "seven" include seven Spirits (1:4) and seven bowls of wrath (16:1).