

# Revelation: A Call to Faithful Witness

Class 1, "Orientation to Revelation"

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*Why is studying the book of Revelation so daunting?*

1. Just plain weird (disturbing and unusual imagery)
2. Lack of analogous biblical literature (genre issue)
3. Lack of interpretive consensus – too many divisions based on eschatology
4. Cultural preoccupation with forecasting the future
5. Pop culture apocalyptic obsession (endless string of disaster movies)
6. Abundance of "specialists" with charts, diagrams, and eschatological systems
  - a. E.g., Clarence Larkin's dispensational charts
  - b. Rev. Jim Bray's "advanced" chart
  - c. Obsession with predicting the future
    - i. Edgar Whisenant's *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988*
    - ii. Ron Weinland's date-setting
    - iii. Harold Camping's 2011 dates

*How to read Revelation*

- Imbalance: End times stuff over and above Christ as the Lamb, his reign, and the witness of the church
- Characterized as opaque, bizarre, violent, dangerous, even pseudo-canonical
- A metaphor: *To study Revelation is to spend time in the wilderness.*
  - Familiar comforts are gone
  - Danger is present
  - Scenes of staggering beauty
  - Untamed environment where you are not in charge
- Key issue (for this and any book of the Bible)
  - Are we asking the same questions that the author is answering?
  - Exegetical paradigm matters. What is the book of Revelation?

*Genre (totally arbitrary figures)*

- 27% epistle
- 27% prophecy
- 34% apocalypse
- 6% liturgical text
- 6% political text

*Genre implications*

- **Epistle**
  - "John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace . . ." (1:4)
  - It has recipients: "John . . . intended his letter to be understood by *them*, to shape *their* perceptions of *their* everyday realities, and to motivate a particular response to *their* circumstances" (deSilva, *Unholy Allegiances*, 3).
  - Situation:
    - False teaching – Nicolaitans (2:6, 15); see below
    - Persecution (2:10, 13) – limited in scope, not empire-wide
    - Temptation to compromise through idolatry and immorality (2:14, 20–21)

- Spiritual complacency (3:1–5, 15–17)
- **Prophecy**
  - “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this **prophecy** . . . and [those] who keep what is written in it” (1:3).
  - We tend to understand “prophecy” as murky oracles looking off into the distant future.
  - Prophecy equated with prediction has given rise to three of the major schools of interpretation for Revelation:
    - **Historicist** – events spanning history from John to the second coming
    - **Futurist** – mostly yet-unfulfilled predictions (highest degree of literalism: 1/3 of earth’s trees haven’t been burned, so that must be yet future)
    - **Preterist** – “the time is near” (1:3; 22:10), usually 70 AD up to Constantine
  - As declarative of God’s will, note 1 Cor 14:3–4, 23–24, 29–31; cf. Jezebel (2:20)
  - Future-oriented prophecy usually addresses the immediate future (Nineveh, Samaria’s drought), to evoke a faithful response (not just to predict) – deSilva, 7.
- **Apocalypse**
  - Means unveiling, opens window to God’s reality, puts the present in the context of sacred history
  - Cf. Daniel 7–12, *1 Enoch*, *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*
    - **Idealist** – ongoing battle between good and evil, “timeless truth” – overlooks the timeliness of the message

*Issues facing the original audience*

- Minority status
  - Competing worldviews
  - “Invitations” to question the correctness of convictions
- Surrounded by the traditional Greco-Roman gods and the “story of Rome”
  - Religious pluralism
  - Peace
  - Economic prosperity
- Pressure to blend in (Pergamum, Thyatira)
- Accommodation (Sardis, Laodicea)

*Central theme of Revelation*

- **Maintain a faithful witness to Christ in the face of persecution and temptation, because if you overcome, you will enjoy God’s eternal kingdom.**