



# The Last Word

A Bible Study on Revelation by Stan Key

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## SESSION 1. INTRODUCTION

### I. A Brave, New World.

The last book of the Bible is unlike any other book in the New Testament. Though parts of the Old Testament (Daniel, Ezekiel) have some occasional similarities, there is little in the Bible that prepares us for what we encounter in the book of Revelation. Reading this book demands a **sanctified imagination!** Consider:

- Dragons, beasts, ten-headed monsters.
- Visions of heaven (warfare, throne room, etc.).
- Angel armies.
- Mysterious numbers (e.g., 666).
- Seals are opened, trumpets blown, bowls poured out, horsemen released, etc.
- Final judgment.
- Plagues and destruction of cosmic proportions.
- Two cities: a new Jerusalem on earth and an old Babylon destroyed.
- Two women: one a prostitute, the other a holy mother.
- A holy Trinity and an unholy “trinity” (Satan, Antichrist, False Prophet).
- Mortal combat between a dragon and a lamb (Who do you think will win?).
- The repetition of the number seven (churches, seals, trumpets, plagues, etc.).

Revelation introduces us to a world “in which children are instinctively at home and in which adults, by becoming as little children, recapture an elemental involvement in the basic conflicts and struggles that permeate moral existence....” (Eugene Peterson, p. x).

The result of such unfamiliar territory, has caused many Christians to:

- A. **Ignore** the book.
- B. **Over-emphasize** the book.
- C. **Misinterpret** the book.

### II. Finding the right approach.

- A. Recognize the importance of literary form (genre).

From about 200 BC to about 100 AD a new genre of Jewish literature appeared. Called ‘apocalyptic literature’ (from the Greek term *apokalupsis*, meaning ‘unveiling’ or ‘revelation’), these writings sought to inspire hope to God’s people in the midst of great adversity. This literature made great use of remarkable symbolism and visions and had several recognizable themes:

- 1) The **conflict** of good and evil.
- 2) If we understand the **future**, we can survive and thrive today.
- 3) God is in control of **history**.



Revelation (and Daniel) clearly falls into this type of literature. However, it is important to recognize how Revelation goes beyond the Jewish genre and has additional characteristics that make it unique:

- 4) The author of Revelation calls his book a '**prophecy**' (1:3; 22:7,10,18,19).
- 5) Jewish apocalyptic literature was nearly always pseudonymous but Revelation clearly identifies its author as 'John' (1:4,9; 22:8).
- 6) Jewish apocalyptic literature was generally pessimistic about the present age, but Revelation maintains a **balanced realism** of hope in the midst of trial (John 16:33).
- 7) While most apocalyptic literature sought to focus on the future, the book of Revelation has a strong **moral message** for today (calls to repentance, etc.).
- 8) John's book includes seven **pastoral letters**, something never encountered in other apocalyptic literature.

B. Historically, there have been four basic interpretive approaches to this book:

- 1) *The contemporary-historical approach.* The basic idea here is that John is writing about events occurring in the **first century** (the Beast is Nero; the Great Prostitute is Rome, etc.). Thus, most of the prophecies of the book would have been fulfilled with either the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) or the fall of Rome (476 AD). The primary weakness of this view is that the overwhelming victory portrayed in the later chapters of Revelation was never achieved in history.
- 2) *The historicist approach.* This view believes that Revelation is a **prediction** of events from the writer's day to our own... and beyond. Examining the prophecies, one can find indications of the history of Western Europe, the Reformation, the French Revolution, the re-establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948, etc. The weakness of this approach is seen in the fact that few interpreters can agree on which symbols in the book point to which events in history.
- 3) *The futurist approach.* Most popular understanding of Revelation is here (Dispensationalism, *Left Behind*, etc.). The basic idea is that everything after Revelation 4:1 belongs in a period still **in the future**, focusing on events surrounding the Second Coming of Christ. Often, this position claims that the seven churches represent seven successive ages of church history building to the rapture of the church in 4:1 (?). The weakness of this view is that it means the book would have had little significance for those to whom it was addressed in the first century.
- 4) *The idealist approach.* This school of interpretation claims that the book does not refer to any specific historical events or time periods at all. Rather it is **symbolic and spiritual**, a type of theological poem, that expresses the ageless conflict between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.

Robert H. Mounce sums up the matter succinctly when he says: "It is readily apparent that each approach has some important contribution to a full understanding of Revelation and that no single approach is sufficient in itself." (p. 43).

There is no textual indication that John meant for his book to be used as a kind of **crystal ball** or Ouija Board to predict future events. It takes much creative speculation to transform the book of Revelation into vast, sweeping charts and time-

lines of human history that outlines the chronology of world events for us today. John was writing as a pastor to help the believers in the churches of Asia both survive and thrive as they lived in the evil empire of first century Rome. His words certainly point to the future and the final victory of the Lamb. But what he has to say is profitable for all believers everywhere whether they live under Nero, Attila the Hun, Ivan the Terrible, Vlad the Impaler, Napoleon, Pol Pot, Stalin, Hitler, Idi Amin, etc. Conclusion: The book of Revelation is not a call to **decipher a code** but rather an invitation to **trust in the Lamb!**

### III. Why study Revelation?

- A. It is an **understandable** word.

Don't believe the lie that pretends Revelation is written in **code language** so that only those with special training or spiritual gifting can decipher it! When it was read aloud to the seven churches in the first century, we can believe that they understood its meaning. So can we. Therefore, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near" (22:10).

- B. It is a **pastoral** word.

The book is addressed to the seven churches in the province of Asia (1:4). In all probability John was their pastor (or bishop, or part of the pastoral team providing oversight for their care). So when John writes of the Beast, the trumpets, the plagues, etc. he is not writing as a speculative theologian interested in eschatology. He is writing as a shepherd concerned **for his sheep!** The book is a pastoral letter written to help Christians living in the Evil Empire. It should be read as a Survivor's Guide to life in Babylon: how to live victoriously in a world of temptation, persecution, false doctrine, apostasy, demonic hordes, and constant pressure simply to say, "Caesar is Lord."

- C. It is a **blessed** word.

Those who read this book out loud and those who listen to it and obey its teaching are promised a blessing. In fact, there are seven (!) beatitudes promised in this book:

- 1) Blessed is the one who **reads aloud** the words of this prophesy, and blessed are those who hear it, and who keep what is written in it... (1:3).
- 2) Blessed are **the dead** who die in the Lord from now on... that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them! (14:13).
- 3) Blessed is the one who **stays awake**, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed! (16:15).
- 4) Blessed are those who are invited to the **marriage supper** of the Lamb. (19:9).
- 5) Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will **reign with him** for a thousand years (20:6).
- 6) Blessed is the one who **keeps the words** of the prophecy of this book (22:7).
- 7) Blessed are those who **wash their robes**, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city... (22:14).

So perhaps we should admit to having an ulterior motive in studying this book. We want to share in the blessing!

D. It is God's **final** word.

With this book, God's revelation is **complete**. He has nothing more to say. Because it is final. Anyone who adds to or takes from this word is cursed (22:18–19).

*What more can he say, than to you he has said,  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled? (John Rippon, 1787).*

Recognize, however, that for John, the “word” (Greek, logos) is not simply a spoken sound or a written document. God's final Word in its ultimate expression is Jesus! (see John 1:1,14).

*The revelation **of** Jesus Christ.... He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word (logos) of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ... (1:1–2).*

This final book is a “revelation of Jesus Christ.” The preposition is important! The book is not only mediated *by* (or *from*) Jesus; it is an unveiling **of** Christ himself in all his glory and power! The purpose of God's final word is not just that we know about the future, but that we **know Him!**

*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!.... And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped. (5:12–14).*

The word “amen” comes from a Hebrew word meaning firm, dependable, trustworthy, certain, and true. Anyone who says “amen” to a prayer or doxology, shows that he is in agreement with what has been said and makes it his own. “So be it”... “May it be true”... Thus, it is fitting that the last word of the book is an invitation for all of us to affirm our own personal affirmation of the Lamb in all that he **is**, in all that he **has done**, and in all that he **will yet accomplish** in the future. And all God's people said, “**Amen!**” (22:21).

#### TABLE TALK

1. Describe your own experience with the book of Revelation.
2. How does it change your approach to Revelation to see it as a book written by a pastor concerned about his sheep?
3. The book is not just a revelation *from* Jesus. It is the revelation *of* Jesus. Explain the difference.
4. The book promises a blessing to those who read, listen, and obey. What blessing do you hope to receive in the study of this book?

#### Bibliography

Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation: The New International Commentary of the New Testament*. Revised. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997

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