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Apocalypse Now?

What does the book of Revelation have to say to us today?

WEEK ONE – 15 June 2025

WELCOME

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In these sessions, I want to address 4 Questions: why, how, what, who?

Today Why? How?

Weeks 2 – 4 What? Who?

22 June In the Control Room Chapters 1 – 5

29 June Trouble on Earth Chapters 6 – 16

6 July A Tale of Two Cities Chapters 17 – 22

My own book was written in 2006: the material is unchanged, but the illustrations are of their time – it's rather sobering to realise how much easier it is now to illustrate the potential for a third of all water on earth to be polluted and lifeless than it was then ... and to imagine a final World War with Israel at its epicentre ...

INTRODUCTION

- my evangelical conviction: the bible is God's Word
- Authorship & Date – written by John (who also wrote the gospel and three letters bearing his name)
- please read through the entire Book in preparation for this series

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Questions the book of Revelation seeks to answer = Why? How? What? Who?

But not When ... Revelation has no interest in addressing 'When?' even though that is the question most readers bring to it ...

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WHY READ REVELATION?

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1 Because it was written to reveal things!

Revelation the least read book of the bible ... why? Belief that it can't be understood ...

Irony: 'apocalypse' = unveil

- it was written to ordinary people: not many were wise by human standards 1 Corinthians 1:26
- common sense required
- the difference between literal & symbolic language
- take words to mean what they say unless strongly directed otherwise

God's intention in inspiring the book of Revelation is to take us from the small stage of human history, where everything is turmoil and chaos, and, as he hitches up the backdrop of the set, to reveal to us all that lies beyond the scene of history.

Apocalyptic ... history written from God's point of view, which offers us an understanding of world events in the light of what God is doing.

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2 To preserve us from error

We are called to know the Truth

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- the folly of predicting ...
- false notions of 'heaven'
- the Rapture trap

false notions of 'heaven' ...

A Prayer after Communion from the C of E

Loving Father,
we thank you for feeding us at the supper of your Son.
Sustain us with your Spirit,
that we may serve you here on earth,
until our joy is complete in heaven
and we share the eternal banquet with Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

... complete in heaven ... ??? Really ... ??? Not what the bible teaches

Boring heaven or restored cosmos?

‘the Rapture’ ... ‘Left Behind’ series

- 3 comings of Christ ... Bethlehem, *for* the saints, *with* the saints
- completely unbiblical – the fact that this idea was completely unknown before about 1830 should give us pause for thought!

Will address this in more detail in the final session ...

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3 To prepare us for what is to come

We have a glorious future to look forward to, when our Lord will reign here on this earth and Satan will be defeated. We need to prepare both for that future and for what lies between now and then.

Because (spoiler alert) things on earth are going to get a great deal worse before they get a great deal better. Biggest spoiler alert of all ... Jesus wins ... but it may well not be much fun (for everyone on the planet) before he does ...

And I believe the church of God needs to be prepared for what is to come.

Revelation is in many ways a martyr’s manual ...

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If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God’s people. (13:10)

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¹¹ And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name.

*¹² This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus. (14:11, 12)
... to those who overcome (2 & 3)*

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Christian Discipleship – a long obedience in the same direction

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4 Because the world at its worst needs the church at its best

As a pastor I observe fear

Savage irony that – at least in the West – we enjoy the benefits of unparalleled material security, and yet are among the most fearful generation to have lived. I believe that this is because our world has no firm ground for hope.

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5 because we are people of The Story

- History, Time: cyclical or linear
- goes from point A to point B
- as surely as it was begun by God, it will be ended by God.

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HOW DO WE READ REVELATION?

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understanding the nature of the book itself – it is unique in origin and style

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it is unique in origin

- All other NT books ... intended to be written ... planned ... Luke / Paul
- partnership ... Holy Spirit & human authors
- ... difference with Revelation ... John had no intention of writing this book
- It came upon him, without any warning, in a series of visions.
- Imagine watching Disney's film Fantasia, for the first ever time and someone saying "Get it all down ..."
- ... Greek not as polished as in his Gospel and his letters
- ... John is only the Scribe. The real Author is God himself

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it is unique in style

1:11 *Write on a scroll what you see*

1:12 *I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me ...*

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A roller-coaster ride set within a gallery hung with impressionist art

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⇒ refusing to allow different views to divide us from other Christians

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⇒ understanding the nature and meaning of 'apocalyptic' literature

the modern mind thinks of apocalyptic as wild, exotic and confusing but the word 'apocalyptic' actually means 'unveiling' – hence 'Revelation' i.e. the book of Revelation is meant to make things clear

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the pattern of apocalyptic writing is essentially moral

- You and I look at the world and we see chaos, unfairness, injustice – we cry out 'Why?'
- Bible ... honest enough to record the bewilderment of some of our fellow travellers on this human journey through life – Job, King David, even of the Son of God himself, on the cross.
- All cried out their 'why?' to a seemingly silent heaven.
- Revelation is written partly to right that balance, to show that God is in control and one day will bring everything to a wonderful, just and fair conclusion.

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the presentation of apocalyptic writing is often symbolic

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the symbols come in 4 categories –

- some are obvious in meaning (the 'dragon' / 'serpent' = Satan)
- some are explained in context (the 'stars' in chapter 1 = angels)
- some are paralleled elsewhere in Scripture, notably in the OT (morning star)
- some are obscure, but very few (the 'white stone' of 2:17)

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numbers are also used as symbols –

- one, first = exclusiveness, primacy, excellence ('I am the first and the last')
- four = universality, the whole of the created order ('the four winds')
- six = imperfection, man's number, one short of perfection ('666')

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- seven = fullness, perfection, totality ('the seven spirits...')
- twelve = the tribes of Israel, the apostles (24 combines the two)
- thousand = a large number, a multitude, a long period of time

4 classic Methods of 'reading' (interpreting) the book of Revelation

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The **Preterist** – all the predictions of the book of Revelation were fulfilled during the days of the Roman Empire

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The **Historicist** – the predictions of the book of Revelation cover the entire Church Age between Christ's first and second Comings

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The **Futurist** – the predictions of the book of Revelation all apply to the last few years of Earth History

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The **Idealist** – the predictions of the book of Revelation are purely figurative, and have no specific fulfilment

All 4 methods share one common assumption – that the key question is WHEN?

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I suggest we

- Reject the Idealist
- Combine the other 3
 - Revelation spoke initially and powerfully into the reality of the 1stC Church
 - It has continued to speak to Christians suffering down the ages as a result of persecution
 - It contains truth to help the final generation navigate the last days of Earth ...

** A KEY to reading Revelation **

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In Scripture, the future is only 'unveiled' that it might influence the present

The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. (2 Peter 3:10-13)

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HOW DOES REVELATION FIT WITHIN THE SWEEP OF SCRIPTURE?

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Important that scripture is univocal (i.e. speaks with one voice) ...

1. THE WITNESS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

- the Old Testament is the Word of God as surely as is the New
- the author of Scripture is consistent
- Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture
- the more complete our view, the more accurate our view

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the Book of Revelation itself is steeped in the Old Testament

676 allusions to and verbal parallels with the Old Testament occur within its chapters: including

- 53 from Exodus
- 99 from Psalms
- 128 from Isaiah
- 92 from Ezekiel
- 82 from Daniel

more than in any other New Testament book (*source: the UBS Greek New Testament*)

A Few of the many Old Testament examples ...

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²⁵ In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. ²⁶ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. ²⁷ But you remain the same, and your years will never end. Psalm 102:25-27

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All the stars in the sky will be dissolved and the heavens rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shrivelled figs from the fig-tree. Isaiah 34:4

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See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. Isaiah 65:17

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Some characteristics of Biblical Prophecy

- it is sometimes capable of multi-reference application
- it sometimes exhibits a 'concertina' effect
- sometimes contrasting prophecies are given about the same event

- it is never given without purpose (the scholarly term is *teleological*)
- it is Christ-centered

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2. THE WITNESS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Only Philemon and 3 John make no mention of the End Times

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But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:13

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¹⁰ He also says, 'In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. ¹¹ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. ¹² You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.' Hebrews 1:10-12

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Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. Revelation 21:1

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3. THE WITNESS OF JESUS

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⇒ He is the fulcrum of history & the lens by which we view past, present & future

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⇒ He ushers in 'The Last Days' (Joel 2, Acts 2, Hebrews 1:2)

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⇒ All the promises of the OT are reinterpreted in and through Him

- Israel
- The Land
- The Temple

THE PATTERN OF REVELATION & THE TEACHING OF JESUS

John received Revelation directly from Jesus. But did Jesus say anything about the End of the World during his time on earth?

The answer is 'yes' – in what is called the 'Olivet Discourse' (Matthew 24 & 25, Mark 13, Luke 21: also Luke 17:23-37)

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A COMPARISON OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION with JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT 'THE END TIMES' IN MARK 13 (known as 'The Olivet discourse' – also found in Matthew 24 & 25, and Luke 21)

| MARK 13 | THE BOOK OF REVELATION |
|---|---|
| MARK 13:1 – 4 A temple overthrown | REVELATION 1, 4 & 5 A throne room revealed |
| MARK 13:5–23 Tribulation on earth Concurrent signs (vv 5 – 8): war, rumours of war, famine 2 Preliminary signs (vv 9 – 13): Persecution & Proclamation First penultimate sign (vv 14 – 23): Desecration & Deceit Second penultimate sign (vv 24, 25): Convulsions in the heavens | REVELATION 6 – 18 Tribulation on earth A repeating cycle of war, rumours of war, famine Persecution & Proclamation Desecration & Deceit Convulsions in the heavens |
| MARK 13:26 – 31 The sign itself: The Coming of the Son of Man The Passing of heaven and earth | REVELATION 19 - 22 The Rider on the White Horse A new heaven and a new earth |
| MARK 13:32 – 37 Warnings to be ready and to endure | REVELATION 2 & 3 Encouragements to be faithful and to overcome |

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What on earth are we to expect? (that's a clue...)

- ⇒ Creation was God's original goal; recreation is his ultimate goal
- ⇒ Israel & Jerusalem have a part in God's ultimate future
- ⇒ A time of great tribulation for 'the saints' towards The End
- ⇒ Christ's physical return to & rule upon earth, deeply affecting all creation
- ⇒ A final battle against & judgment of all the powers of evil
- ⇒ A new heavens and a new earth

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Next Week – 22 June

What? Who?

In the Control Room

Chapters 1 – 5