

WEEK FOUR – 06 JULY 2025

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Apocalypse Now?

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

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Breakdown of contents each week ...

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SESSION FOUR – A tale of Two Cities (Chapters 17 – 22)

Introduction

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Revelation draws to its close with a description of 2 women, who represent 2 cities:

chapters 17:1 – 19:10	depict Babylon, portrayed as a coarse & brazen prostitute
chapters 21 – 22	depict New Jerusalem, portrayed as the Bride of Christ
chapters 19:11 – 20:15	depict the great gulf which divides the two

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us. Jesus in Luke 16:26

BABYLON: CHAPTERS 17:1 – 19:10

What does John mean us to understand by ‘Babylon’?

- A scriptural understanding of ‘the city’
- Babel the emergence of arrogant humanism (“let us make ourselves a name” – Genesis 11:4)
- Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon an expression of human pride (Daniel 4:30)
- The contrast offered by Jerusalem, the City of God’s dwelling
- Again the cyclical model helps to overcome incorrect interpretation (eg Luther’s ‘Babylonian captivity of the Church’ – he didn’t think much of the papacy...)
- the sins of John’s Babylon are greed and pride (see Luke 16:13)
- As with the Beast, Babylon is a composite image, incorporating OT references – Nineveh (Nahum), Tyre (Ezekiel), Sodom (Genesis), the literal Babylon (Isaiah & Jeremiah)
- Babylon represents humanistic, godless society – the world in defiance of God.
- Babylon is characterised by: -
 - vast international influence (17:1,2,15; 18:23)
 - a horrifying level of moral decadence (17:4)
 - vast materialistic affluence (17:4, 18:12-13)
 - In a Babylonian economy, everything is bought & sold, even the ‘bodies and souls of men’
 - Babylon is the epitome of a global market economy. Note that Babylon rides the beast – John foresees a world where money is the supreme power, dominating political systems (‘Babylon is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth’ – 17:18)
 - Babylon is both antiChristian (17:6; 18:24) & doomed (14:8; 17:1,16-18; 18:1-24)
- The fall of Babylon is:-
 - dreadfully tragic, for she is not utterly evil (18:22-23a)
 - dramatic, for she arrogantly assumes she will never be overthrown (8.7,8)

- ironic, for it is the Beast on which Babylon rides which will destroy her (17:16-17)
- welcomed by heaven (19:1-6 : the original 'Hallelujah Chorus')
- We are accustomed to the idea that heaven rejoices at repentance – but at judgment?
- We imagine that God's love must also mean His admiration ('God so loved that he gave...')
- In fact, God's love is a demonstration of His Grace – undeserved & unprovoked

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The response of God's people to Babylon (18:4)

Flee from Babylon! Run for your lives! Do not be destroyed because of her sins.

Looking forward to the city with foundations' Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16

*It is time for the Lord's vengeance; he will pay her what she deserves
Jeremiah 51:6*

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THE NEW JERUSALEM: Revelation 19:11 – 22:21

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Revelation ends with a final seven – a series of visions from 19:11 – 21:1

1. The Rider on the white horse riding out of heaven's open door (19:11-16)
2. An angel invites birds to a macabre supper of human flesh (19:17-18)
3. The Battle of Armageddon (19:19-21)
4. An angel binds Satan for 1000 years (20:1-3)

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5. Dead Christians are raised (the first resurrection) & reign on earth with Christ for 1000 years, after which Satan is released for a final fling before being destroyed (20:4-10)

6. The Great White Throne appears. The 2nd resurrection brings all people to life for the final judgment, before which the earth disappears (20:11-15)

7. The New Heaven & Earth appear & the new Jerusalem descends from heaven (21:1)

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THE RAPTURE TRAP

(1) INTRODUCTION

The view we hold on the Rapture determines our understanding of Christ's return.

There is a very popular view current today which is bad for your spiritual health.

To disagree with this view should not mean a break in fellowship with other Christians.

(2) WHAT IS THE RAPTURE?

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There is no disagreement about this. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 – 5:11 is the key text, clearly teaching that those who die in Christ will come to life and that living believers will be 'caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air'.

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See also Mark 13:27, John 14:3, 1 Corinthians 15:51,52

The word 'rapture' (1 Thessalonians 4:17) = 'harpadzo' to be 'snatched or caught up' (compare 'transport').

The dispute arises over when this will happen – before or after the 'Great Tribulation'.

(3) THE 'SECRET RAPTURE' THEORY

This is the view found in many contemporary books (the 'Left Behind' series).

It divides the return of Christ into at least 2 separate events, with a gap of (normally) 7 years in between (the duration of the 'Great Tribulation' or 'Satan's Little Season').

Christ will first return invisibly (without warning) to gather the elect. This could happen at 'any moment'. Christians must therefore be constantly ready.

The 'third' Coming corresponds to classic Christian expectation, as Christ comes visibly on the clouds.

Christ thus comes once 'for' and then again 'with' his saints.

This position is known technically as the 'Pre-Tribulation Position' as it claims that the Rapture will occur before the 'Great Tribulation', snatching the elect out of harm's way.

(4) THE ORIGINS OF THIS NOVEL DOCTRINE

Well, there was a Scotsman, an Englishman & an Irishman...

Significantly, there is no trace of this view anywhere before c. 1830.

The Rev'd Edward Irvine taught it to the Rev'd John Nelson Darby who went to the USA and taught it to Dr C.I Scofield. He incorporated it into the Scofield Bible. The rest, as they say ... is NOT HIS STORY ...

'Dispensationalism'

Darby (misinterpreting 2 Timothy 2:15 = correctly handling the word of truth) divided human history into 7 'dispensations', during which he believed that God 'dispensed' his relationship with humanity on an entirely different basis for each (not what Paul argues about Abraham in Romans 4).

He also divided the future destiny of God's people, Christians going to heaven while Jews remain on earth. (What then of the 'one new man' of Ephesians 5?)

Finally, he proposed the 2-stage return of Christ.

Why has the 'secret rapture' been accepted?

The idea of escapology rather than eschatology is immensely comforting.

The doctrine claims to bring comfort & encourage faithfulness lest He come 'at any moment.' The challenge of being constantly ready can indeed be an incentive to faith and holiness.

But a false doctrine cannot be a source of real comfort. Only the truth sets us free.

Is there a 'biblical' case for the secret rapture?

In a nutshell, no. There is not one single, clear statement to support it within the NT.

Jesus himself teaches us the true sequence of events (tribulation – then Return, Matthew 24).

So even if I'm wrong, I'm the right sort of wrong ... if I'm wrong, I'm in for a very pleasant surprise ... if they're wrong, they're in for a very nasty shock

We need to be prepared for the worst or we may abandon the faith when trouble comes.

DANGER – Great Apostasy of which Jesus warns us in Matthew 24.

Corrie Ten Boom – China

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'See, I have told you ahead of time' (Matthew 24:10).

*'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
When you walk through the fire you will not be burned'. (Isaiah 43:2)*

The idea of escapology is far more attractive than eschatology.

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THE RIDER ON THE WHITE HORSE (Revelation 19:11–21)

The NT's use of the imagery of war – a war fought in 2 stages

1. the Incarnation – Jesus alone, in disguise, unarmed.

His purpose

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The First Coming at Bethlehem

- to challenge the enemy to mortal combat
- to deliver men & women from the enemy & form 'The Resistance'

- to prepare for The Day of reoccupation of a Kingdom sown behind enemy lines

As John writes, the first phase is over. In Revelation 19, phase 2 unfolds.

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The Second Coming (venue tbc)

2. The Return of the King

- no longer alone (angels – v.14)
- no longer in disguise (many crowns – v.12)
- no longer unarmed (a sword in his mouth v.15)

Always a single event in the NT

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This is the same Jesus; but a different mission (compare Isaiah 61:1-2 with Luke 4:18-19)

His return sees the systematic defeat & judgment of the forces of rebellion described in the Book of Revelation: -

- the Beast & the false Prophet (19:20)
- Satan (20:10)
- all who have joined the rebellion (20:11-15)

It is only on the basis of a purged cosmos that a new order can begin (21:8,27)

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THE MILLENNIUM BUG (Revelation 20)

1. INTRODUCTION

What's the fuss about? Why does the Millennium question cause such division?

We will look at the issue within a framework of questions about the Return of Christ –

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Who, Where, How, When & Why?

2. WHO?

- Acts 1:11 – 'This same Jesus will come back in the same way you have seen him go'
- The significance of the angel's use of the name 'Jesus'
- The glory of the Incarnation (Ephesians 4:9) & Christ's resurrection body (Philippians 3:21)
- Jesus is our 'pioneer' (Hebrews 2:10). We will also receive resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15 / Philippians 3:21)

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Philippians 3:20

Jesus said it is 'the Son of Man' who will return (Matthew 24.30; see Daniel 7.13)

3. WHERE?

- If Jesus is to return bodily, it must be to a specific location on earth.

- Christ will return to Jerusalem, 'the city of the great King' (Matthew 5:35), 'the great city' (Revelation 11:8), 'the city he loves' (Revelation 20:9).
- The OT prophets foresaw the day when Jerusalem would be the seat of a Godly world government (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-5).
- Zechariah 14:4 suggests a very precise location – 'On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives'. This was the location for the ascension (Luke 24:50 - Mark 11:1 - Acts 1:11).

4. HOW?

The contrast between Christ's first & second advents: -

The babe of Bethlehem was apparently insignificant, except to the eye of faith.

The return of the Lord of Glory will be the biggest public event in history (Matthew 24:30; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 1:7)

Now technically possible ...?

5. WHEN?

Daniel asked – 'How long will it be before these astonishing things are fulfilled?' (12:6)

It is ironic that this question has caused the most controversy, because our studies have shown that it is the area in which the visions of Revelation express the least interest!

The certainty of Christ's Return should relegate other questions in importance

But we have been told some things in relation to this question: -

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- No-one knows precisely when Christ will return, not even Christ himself (Matthew 24:36)
- There will be signs, as we have seen, many of which will reoccur over and over again in the course of history – ‘war will continue until the end’ (Daniel 9:26)
- Revelation suggests an increasing intensity in the signs as history moves on (15:1)

Many believe that earth history will end in a particularly awful – but short – period known as the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21, 22, 29-31).

Many believe it will last 3 & a half years: -

Daniel 7:21-27; 8:19-26; 9:24-27; 12:1-2.

The problem with the predictions in Daniel is that they are linked with the end of Israel’s system of daily sacrifice & so seem to apply to the destruction of the Temple in AD70.

Yet Jesus used that very event to speak of the End Times (Matthew 24:15-22) – concertina effect of prophecy

His warning of a time of distress unequalled before or since refers to The End (Matthew 24:29)

Revelation also emphasises a period of 3 & a half years (11:2,3;12:6,14;13:5)

Possibly John is stressing that the worst of evil is short compared with the wonder of what is to come – this is Paul’s reasoning in Romans 8:18.

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I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

So what of the Millennium – how do we read Revelation 20?

There are 3 major positions: -

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Post-millennialism

Jesus will return after a millennium of worldwide Christian dominance
This is barely credible

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A-millennialism

we are living in the millennium now
The major problem here is the banishing of Satan in 20:1-3
Is Satan really absent from the world today?

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Pre-millennialism

Jesus will return & reign for a lengthy period on this present earth.
The major problem here is the astonishing release of Satan (20:7-10)

Arguments in support of Pre-millennialism: -

It is the oldest view, held by all the 'Church Fathers' until Augustine's Greek ideas

It best fits the plain pattern of Revelation 19 – 22 & the plain sense of the passage (20:1-6)

1000 years is specified 6 times
the focus throughout is on earth (19:11-16, 17-21; 20:1, 4, 8, 11)
the destruction of the beast & false prophet leaves a vacuum in world government

the verb 'come to life' (used of martyrs in 20:4) = dzah'-o always refers to physical resurrection (e.g. Lazarus in John 11:25)

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It is supported elsewhere in scripture (Revelation 2:27, 5:10, 11:15; 1 Corinthians 6:3; Philippians 2:10; 3:11; 2 Timothy 2:12; Acts 1:6; 3:21; Luke 1:32; Matthew 2:2; Luke 23:38; Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:3; Zechariah 14:9, Isaiah 11:9; Habbakuk 2:14; Daniel 7:9-13, 18, 22-27)

(7) WHY?

This is by far the most important question to answer and yet is the most neglected. Why does Christ need to return to earth? Among the reasons

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To complete salvation

²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9:28

Salvation is a process. We have been saved (justification); we are being saved (sanctification); we shall be saved (glorification)

1 Peter 1

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes

even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

It is not complete until the physical creation, including our bodies, is restored.

Romans 8

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

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To be vindicated

(Philippians 2:10 – ‘every knee shall bow’).

To conquer evil & its architect

The release of Satan would reveal that, even in a world governed perfectly by Christ, people will still rebel against Him. The judgment which follows will thus be seen to be entirely just.

'Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven' – Luke 11:2

'As for you, go your way until the end. You will rest and then at the end of days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance' – Daniel 12:13

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THE GREAT WHITE THRONE (Revelation 20:11-15)

JUDGMENT, THE SECOND DEATH AND HELL

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

When we think of God, his nature, character, and his activity, we follow scripture in declaring that God is love (1 John 4:8). Nowhere does the bible say that God is wrath (or, indeed, anything else). Love defines God. Yet he is also just, and hates sin, because it ruins the wonderful earth he created and the creatures with which he peopled it. It follows that his response to sin is a function of his love, just as when a human mother disciplines her child.

Most of us are willing to acknowledge that we are all in part responsible for that ruin; although few of us will have done so with G K Chesterton's elegance or brevity. When, early in the 20th Century, The Times asked, 'What is wrong with the world today?', its editor received many well-argued and lengthy answers. Chesterton wrote simply, 'Dear Sir, I am.

Yours faithfully, G K Chesterton.' At two words, it remains the shortest letter published by the paper.

Another common human trait is the cry for justice.

C.S. Lewis wryly noted that every human is eager for justice ... until it is applied to them.

But indeed, God must, and will, one day, right every wrong, restore what is broken, straighten what is crooked, redeem what is lost. He must and will bind up the broken-hearted, and end poverty, injustice, inequality, oppression, sin and death. So why, we cry, doesn't he do so NOW? The answer, according to the bible, is that judgement is not God's *desire*. In one of the most famous verses in scripture, Jesus declares

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. John 3

Justice cannot be delayed forever, but the bible indicates that God does delay it in the hope that as many as possible may be saved:

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:8-9

Luke 15 ... parable of the prodigal son ends, not with the Father inside, enjoying the party with his long-lost son; but out in the darkness, beseeching his other (equally lost) son to come in from the cold ... what a wonderful image of our God ...

CHAPTERS 21 – 22

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THE NEW CREATION, A NEW WORLD ORDER (Revelation 21–22)

- perhaps we are surprised to find a city as the symbol of God's new order
- people living together; social organisation
- the influence of Greek thinking within the Church has led to false ideas about Christian destiny
- the nature of the intermediate state (the meaning of Sheol / Hades)
- the New Order a Garden City. Where? 'On the new earth'
- 'We are looking for a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells' (2 Peter 3:13)
- cultural diversity is maintained (21:24)
- old divisions are healed (22:2)
- the implication of progress, development – is there Time in eternity?

Waiting for this 'New World Order' should inspire us to

- social concern and action – poverty, racism, climate action
- greater commitment to the Church = The Bride of Christ ... (one of the few brides who sadly doesn't often turn heads ...)

Vision gives pain purpose ...

Characteristics of this new world

John describes the precise reversal of the consequences of sin

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- Evil & Chaos will have no place (21:1)
- there will be no more suffering (21:4)
- there will be no more dissatisfaction (21:6)

- there will be no more wrath (21:9)
- there will be no more night (22:5)
- there will no longer be any curse (22:3)
- there will be no more threat to peace (21:25)

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- there will be exquisite intimacy with God
 1. the image of parenthood (21.7)
 2. the image of matrimony (21.9) (nb – Jesus in Mt 22.30; Mk 12.25; Lk 20.35)
 3. the image of servanthood (22.3, 4) – ‘They will see his face’
- there will be all the potential of Eden – ‘Behold, I make everything new’ (21:5)

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WHAT IS THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF REVELATION?

‘This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints’ (13:10)

‘This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus’ (14:12)

‘... to him who overcomes’ (2 & 3)

Discipleship – a long obedience in the same direction

There comes a point when we lose the ability to frame all this in words, and so we turn to the writers, the artists and the poets ...

“The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world ... had

only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

C.S. Lewis – the Last Battle

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That's all folks ...!