

Keys To Understanding The Book Of Revelation

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The book of Revelation is maligned, disregarded, misrepresented, but sadly not often handled aright. As a result many disregard this book which is filled with treasures for those who are striving to seek God with all their heart – even in the midst of the persecution and tribulation which is promised to those who live godly lives. In this lesson we will not claim to answer all questions about the book – I know of no one alive today who can do such. But this does not mean we cannot understand and learn much about the book. Perhaps as we examine a few “keys” to understanding this book it will encourage all of us to take a fresh look at the book.

I. Get out the “humble pie”

I don't have to know everything to know some things. Sadly there are those, even within the body of Christ, which claim that if you cannot know all things, you cannot know anything. Such is utter foolishness. Of course God's Word affirms that we *can know* (John 8:32), while also stating that we cannot know all things (Deuteronomy 29:29), but we can also see this truth demonstrated in our daily life. When I was 12 I bought my first car - a 1953 Ford. Any who have seen this model car know it is a distinctive style of car. Someone may point to a crowded parking lot and being to single out newer cars and ask, “Is that a 1953 Ford?” Now I may not know whether the car to which they point is even a Ford. I may not know the year it is, but I *can know that it isn't a 1953 Ford!*”

Likewise, when I look to the book of Revelation (or any other Bible book), I may come across things I do know understand, but that will not negate the things which I *do know* within the pages of that book. The dangers of failing to understand this basic principle are twofold:

1. I may fail to look to the book of Revelation (or any other book) with the intensity which it deserves because I discouragingly say, “I can't understand it.”
2. I may haughtily strive to “explain” even those things which in reality are puzzling to me, often in an attempt to convince others of my “scholarship.”

Either of these attitudes is dangerous to one's growth as a Christian and manifests a problem of pride.

II. Back Up!

One word seemingly disregarded by premillennialists and many others is the little word “signified” in verse 1 of the first chapter. The word literally means to show in signs – as is often said, simply divide the word and see it as “*sign* – ified .” When we approach the book we need to understand that there is much in the way of symbolic or “picture” language within its pages. The same thought is given in verse two of that same chapter when we are told John wrote the “things he saw...” and then re-emphasized in verse 19 when John is commanded to write “what thou hast seen.”

This use of signs and symbols is a special type of literature known as apocalyptic, the same type being seen in the books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah when they penned their works under similar situations of severe persecution and trial. This style of writing was used generally during times of severe persecution with the desire to deliver a message in symbolic form to cheer and comfort those who were persecuted while preventing further persecution from the oppressors.

The book is a series of visions. The problem many have is they are constantly “guessing” at what the complete picture is by zealously examining the “parts” instead of the whole. To illustrate, my grandchildren often bring me a picture they colored while in Bible class. To show me their work of art they may come to be and put the paper right against my face while asking what I think of their drawing. Now if I am content to “guess” by the small portion of the drawing I see I might (and usually do) make a grievous error. I may just see a spot of reddish color in a small strip and think it is the ribbon Rahab tied to her window. But if I back up and look at the whole picture I may find it is the coat of many colors which belonged to Joseph. Now with the picture my grandchildren show me the consequences are not too serious. But when people approach the book of Revelation in such a fashion the consequences can be eternal. It is not a small thing to devise some new teaching contrary to the will of God (cf. Revelation 22:18-19; Galatians 1:6-9), but that is exactly what many are doing with the book when they seek to take a small part of God’s “picture” and build a doctrine upon it while refusing to back up and look at the whole picture.

Some years back a man told me of a study he had with another who desired to know about the book of Revelation. He encouraged his student to back up and look at the whole picture. His exhortation was to strive to lay aside all preconceived ideas he had or had heard about the book and then read it through from beginning to end and strive to see what the writer was trying to communicate to the first century Christians. The next day his student came to him with the statement: “I don’t know what all the book means, but I do know Christ wins!” How sad that many seek to find some new thing in a small portion of God’s picture while losing the beauty of the whole masterpiece.

III. Read the Directions

How many times have you attempted to assemble something... only to have to go back and finally consult the directions after several failures? Anyone who has children or grandchildren has probably experienced such when trying to assemble some present. After such an experience I can remember thinking to myself, “I should have looked at the directions before I started!”. When approaching the book of Revelation we need to understand that God has provided some

“directions” which can be invaluable in seeking to extract the divine message. Note some of the “directions” given in the first chapter that are clearly disregarded by many who attempt to “put the book together” with their pet doctrines...

- In verse 1 we are told the book is a message of “things which must shortly come to pass.” In verse 3 he reiterates that “the time is at hand.” While we understand that such things as the final judgement are yet future, we must likewise approach the book with the understanding that the message was written to present facts and assurances that would give comfort and knowledge to those recipients of the first century. We too gain assurances of God’s divine concern for us, but to make the book apply to things 2000 plus years in the future is an absurd handling of the directions God has revealed to the serious student of the book.
- As already noted, the opening passage of the book clearly states it is a book of things which were “signified” (verse 1) and the “things he saw” (verse 2). In verse 19 of the same chapter John is given instructions to “write the things thou hast seen.” Given the plain statements of the figurative nature of the book, it would be wise to be very afraid of someone who boasts of taking the book “literally!” Of course those who make such claims do so very selectively (see the lessons on Armageddon, The Thousand Year Reign and such for examples of such foolishness).
- In regards to the coming of Christ we are instructed, “Behold, he cometh with the clouds and every eye shall see him” (verse 7). This would compel an honest student of the book to refrain from fantasizing of secret comings and raptures. The Bible throughout is clear that when Christ returns it will be far from secret (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18).
- In verse 9 John speaks of he and his first century readers as being companions “in tribulation.” Again the honest student will refrain, given the “keys” we have seen thus far, from propelling the tribulation of the book then to a people thousands of years removed, yet many dishonest students have done that very thing.
- Also in verse 9 John makes it clear that the “kingdom ... of Jesus Christ” was then in existence and he and his readers were inhabitants of it. Again this is nothing new to readers of the New Covenant. Jesus had promised such (Mark 9:1) and Paul had plainly stated it was so (Colossians 1:13). Of course the millennial mania has caused many a Bible student (?) to go past this clear revelation and proceed directly to a misuse of the statement in Revelation 20 regarding the “thousand years.” (Cf. Robert Taylor’s lesson on this subject).

There are no doubt other “keys” we can use in helping us in an honest assessment of this book, but if these alone were used it would immediately put a stop to the foolish predictions of premillennialists and dispensationalists. It is sad though that many are not willing to be “noble” and “search the scriptures” – instead they are satisfied to be guided by the erroneous manmade concepts and then strive to put their ideas into the book, completely disregarding the directions God has given in the very first chapter of the book.

IV. Take Off Your “New” Glasses And Put On An “Ancient” Pair

One’s interpretation of the book will be colored by the approach that is taken toward interpretation. There are basically three methods of interpretation which men use in seeking to properly interpret the book. The method they choose will of necessity bring various conclusions. These views are:

- Preterist – According to this system the successive visions apply to events chiefly in the history of the Jewish nation and of Pagan Rome. These events have occurred long since in the past.
- Historical – holds that a succession of historical events, future when John wrote but now in part in the past, are portrayed by a series of visions.
- Futurist – These insist that the predictions apply mainly to events yet in the future, and will be fulfilled in the future history of the literal Israel. They assert that Israel will again occupy Palestine, that the temple will be literally rebuilt; that the holy city shall be literally trodden down for 1,260 days by the Gentiles, etc.

Of these, the historical and futurist disregard the “directions” we discussed. The preterist comes closer to the ideal, but even some of these make grievous errors. When considering the approach one will take toward the book, may we suggest that the proper means will take into consideration an approach which should be used in regards to the study of any Bible book. Look to the historical setting of the book, examine the literary style and thus approach it as one would in the date and setting of the original writing. This would be “historical, literary exegesis.”

If we put on a pair of “rose tinted glasses” we will of course see things all rose tinted. Likewise if we put on a pair of twenty first century glasses as we examine the book of Revelation we will color our interpretation by these. A serious student must remove the presuppositions of his or her culture, religious biases, etc and ask what the message meant to the original recipient. After all, in the first chapter it is clear that the book was written to those in the first century who would be blessed as they read, heard and kept the things written (verse 3). Thus to put the message as meaningless and unable to be understood except by those thousands of years in the future (as the historical and futurist methods of interpretation do) would be a violation of the claims of the book itself!. Clearly to be true to the book itself we must strive to examine the message in light of the first century saints. It would do the serious student great service to study the meaning of various numbers and symbols to the first century Christians, enabling us then to see the true message of the book for its original recipients.

V. “Figure” The Book Out!

Use a proper hermeneutic in dealing with the language type. We have already seen that the book is written largely in signs or symbols. We need to approach the book with a recognition of what these figures would mean to the 1st century audience. As earlier noted, we need to be careful of foolish statements such as “the difference between you and I is I am willing to take the book literally.” For example, lets briefly note some of the problems which arise when we strive to

make such passages literal as we look to Revelation 20:1-5 and the thousand years. Those who claim a “literal” interpretation use this as their sugar stick to defend a future earthly millennial reign. While they insist they take the passage literal so as to have a literal thousand year reign we would ask...

- Is the devil a literal “dragon” or “serpent”? (verse 2)
- Are the key and chain literal? (verse 1)
- Can you describe a literal bottomless pit? (verse 3)
- Are those of verse 4 literally beheaded for Christ?

Of course to each of these they would answer in the negative. *Yet they boast of “taking the passage literally!”* We can take the same approach to examine the 144,000 of Revelation 7 and 14, or the “battle of Armageddon” of Revelation 16. Each will show the foolishness of the boast to “just take the book literally.”

Conclusion

These “keys” are nothing unique – it is simply suggesting that we approach the book in a logical and consistent manner. When we do so (with this book or any other in the Bible) we will find God’s message instead of the whims and desires of mankind. When we do that, we will discover the true riches of the gospel message which will allow us to have the same hope as those in the first century were assured of – victory with Jesus! (Revelation 17:14).