

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth | Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart *Chapter Thirteen – The Revelation: Images of Judgment and Hope*

Big Picture Focus

“It seems necessary at the outset that no one should approach the Revelation without a proper degree of humility! There are already too many books on ‘The Revelation Made Easy.’ But it is not easy. As with the difficult passages in the Epistles (see pp. 68-70), one should be less than dogmatic here, especially since there are at least five major schools of interpretation, not to mention significant variations within each of the schools” (p. 250).

Apocalypses in general, and the Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed chronological account of the future. Their message tends to transcend this kind of concern. John’s larger concern is that, despite present appearances, God is in control of history and the church. And even though the church will experience suffering and death, it will be triumphant in Christ, who will judge his enemies and save his people. All of the visions must be seen in terms of this greater concern (p. 257).

“Just as the opening word of Scripture speaks of God and creation, so the concluding word speaks of God and consummation. If there are some ambiguities for us as to **how** all the details are to work out, there is no ambiguity as to the certainty that God **will** work it all out—in his time and in his way. Such certainty should serve for us as warning and encouragement, as it did for the book’s original recipients” (p.264).

HELPFUL STUDY TOOLS FOR ENGAGING ESCHATOLOGY

Considering the Framework (p. 145-148)

First of all, you should know that the basic theological framework of the entire New Testament is eschatological. Eschatology has to do with the end, when God brings this age to its close. Most Jews in Jesus’ day were eschatological in their thinking. That is, they thought they lived at the very brink of time, when God would step into history and bring an end to this age and usher in the age to come. The Greek word for the end they were looking for is *eschaton*. Thus to be eschatological in one’s thinking meant to be looking for the end.

The earliest Christians, of course, well understood this eschatological way of looking at life. For them the events of Jesus’ coming, his death and resurrection, and his giving of the Spirit were all related to their expectations about the coming of the end. It happened like this.

The coming of the end also meant a new beginning—the beginning of God’s new age, the messianic age. The new age was also referred to as the kingdom of God, which meant ‘the time of God’s rule.’ This new age would be a time of righteousness (e.g., Isa 11:4-5), and people would live in peace (e.g., Isa 2:2-4). It would be a time of the fullness of the Spirit (Joel 2:28-30) when the new covenant spoken of by Jeremiah would be realized (Jer 31:31-34; 32:38-40). Sin and sickness would be done away with (e.g., Zech 13:1; Isa 53:5). Even the material creation would feel the joyful effects of this new age (e.g., Isa 11:6-9).

Thus when John the Baptist announced the coming of the end to be very near and baptized God’s Messiah, eschatological fervor reached fever pitch. The Messiah was at hand, the one who would usher in the new age of the Spirit (Luke 3:7-17).

Jesus came and announced with his ministry that the coming kingdom was at hand (e.g., Mark 1:14-15; Luke 17:20-21). He drove out demons, worked miracles, and freely accepted the outcasts and sinners—all signs that the end had begun (e.g., Luke 11:20; Matt 11:2-6; Luke 14:21; 15:1-2). Everyone kept watching him to see if he really was

the Coming One. Would he really bring in the messianic age with all of its splendor? Then suddenly he was crucified—and the lights went out.

But no! There was a glorious sequel. On the third day he was raised from the dead, and he appeared to many of his followers. Surely *now* he would 'restore the kingdom to Israel' (Acts 1:6). But instead he returned to the Father and poured out the promised Spirit. Here is where problems show up for the early church and for us. Jesus announced the coming kingdom as having arrived with his own coming. The Spirit's coming in fullness and power with signs and wonders and the coming of the new covenant were signs that the new age had arrived. Yet the end of *this* age apparently had not yet taken place. How were they to understand this?

Very early, beginning with Peter's sermon in Acts 3, the early Christians came to realize that Jesus had not come to usher in the 'final' end but the 'beginning' of the end, as it were. Thus they came to see that with Jesus' death and resurrection, and with the coming of the Spirit, the blessings and benefits of the future had already come. In a sense, therefore, the end had already come. But in another sense the end had not yet fully come. **Thus it was already but not yet.**

The early believers, therefore, learned to be a truly eschatological people. They lived between the times—that is, between the *beginning* of the end and the *consummation* of the end. At the Lord's Table they celebrated their eschatological existence by proclaiming 'the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26). *Already* they knew God's free and full forgiveness, but they had *not yet* been perfected (1 Cor 3:22), *yet* they would still die (Phil 3:20-21). *Already* they lived in the Spirit, *yet* they still lived in the world where Satan could attack (e.g., Eph 6:10-17). *Already* they had been justified and faced no condemnation (Rom 8:1), *yet* there was still to be a future judgment (2 Cor 5:10). They were God's future people. They had been conditioned by the future. They knew its benefits and lived in light of its values, but they, as we, still had to live out these benefits and values in the present world....

The hermeneutical key to much in the New Testament, and especially to the ministry and teaching of Jesus, is to be found in this kind of 'tension.' Precisely because the kingdom, the time of God's rule, has been inaugurated with Jesus' own coming, we are called to *live* in the kingdom, which means life under his lordship, freely accepted and forgiven but committed to the ethics of the new age and to seeing them worked out in our own lives and world in this present age.

Epistle (occasional document):

"...in its final form the Revelation is sent by John as a letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor. The significance of this is that, as with all epistles, there is an *occasional* (see p. 58) aspect to the Revelation. It was occasioned at least in part by the needs of the specific churches to which it is addressed. Therefore, to interpret, we must try to understand its original historical context" (p. 253).

Basic Exegetical Principles:

- 1. Author's original intent:** the primary meaning of the Revelation is what John intended it to mean, which in turn must also have been something his readers could have understood it to mean.

Advantage: familiarity with their own historical context, familiarity with apocalyptic forms and images from the Old Testament (echoes and allusions)

Secondary Meaning: since this writing intends to be prophetic, there is the reality of a primary meaning/purpose for the intended audience, but also the possibility of a secondary meaning not fully seen by the author or his readers (paraphrase, p. 254).

2. Historical Context: there must be caution in overusing the concept of comparing Scripture with Scripture (i.e., using one passage or verse as *the key* to unlocking another passage). In our attempt to “figure out all the details,” we can’t assume that the original audience had previously read and were familiar with Matthew or 1 and 2 Thessalonians. We need to be careful to keep the “keys to interpreting the Revelation must be *intrinsic* to the text of the Revelation itself or otherwise available to the original recipients from *their own historical context*.” (p. 254)

3. Exegetical Difficulties with Imagery:

- a) One must have a sensitivity to the rich background of ideas that have gone into the composition of the Revelation
- b) Apocalyptic imagery is of several kinds
- c) When John himself interprets his images, these interpreted images must be held firmly and must serve as a starting point for understanding other images
- d) One must see the visions as wholes and not allegorically press all the details

4. Old Testament Echoes: John expects his readers to hear his echoes of the Old Testament as the continuation—and consummation—of that story.

5. One final note: Apocalypses in general, and the Revelation in particular, seldom intend to give a detailed chronological account of the future. Their message tends to transcend this kind of concern. John’s larger concern is that, despite present appearances, God is in control of history and the church. And even though the church will experience suffering and death, it will be triumphant in Christ, who will judge his enemies and save his people. All of the visions must be seen in terms of this greater concern (p. 257).

Historical Context:

“Read for *the big picture*. Do not try to figure out everything. Let your reading itself be a happening, as it were. That is, let the visions roll past you like waves on the shore, one after another, until you have a feel for the book and its message” (p. 257).

>As you read, make mental or written notes about the author and his readers.

>Go back a second time and specifically pick up all the references that indicate John’s readers are companions in his suffering (1:9)—these are crucial historical indicators.

>Purpose/Occasion—John was in exile for his faith, while his audience was also facing persecution with more to come in the future.

“The *main themes* are abundantly clear: The church and the state are on a collision course; and initial victory will appear to belong to the state. Thus he warns the church that suffering and death lie ahead; indeed, it will get far worse before it gets better (6:9-11). He is greatly concerned that they do not capitulate in times of duress (14:11-12; 21:7-8). But this prophetic word is also one of encouragement—for God is in control of all things. Christ holds the keys to history, and he holds the churches in his hands (1:17-20). Thus the church triumphs even through death (12:11). God will finally pour out his wrath on those who caused this suffering and death and bring eternal rest to those who remain faithful. In that context, of course, Rome was the enemy that would be judged” (p. 258).

>Keys for interpreting—John makes a distinction between two crucial words/ideas: “tribulation” and “wrath”. To confuse these and make them refer to the same thing will cause one to become hopelessly muddled as to what is being said (p. 258). “Tribulation (suffering and death) is clearly a part of what the church was enduring and was yet to endure. God’s wrath, on the other hand, is his judgment that is to be poured out on those who have afflicted God’s people. It is clear from every kind of context in the Revelation that God’s people will *not* have to endure God’s awful wrath when it is poured out on their enemies, but it is equally clear that they will indeed suffer at the hands of their enemies. This distinction, it should be noted, is precisely in keeping with the rest of the New Testament. See, for example, 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10, where Paul boasts of the Thessalonians’ ‘persecutions and trials’ (the same Greek word as ‘tribulation’), but he also notes that God will eventually judge those ‘who trouble you’ (the verb form of ‘tribulation’)” (p. 258).

Literary Context: (Concise overview/summary of the Revelation, p. 259-261)

To understand any one of the specific visions in the Revelation it is especially important not only to wrestle with the background and meaning of the images (the *content* questions) but also to ask how this particular vision *functions* in the book as a whole. In this regard the Revelation is much more like the Epistles than the Prophets. The latter are collections of individual oracles, not always with a clear functional purpose in relation to one another. In the Epistles, as you will recall, one must “think paragraphs,” because every paragraph is a building block for the whole argument. So also with the Revelation. The book is a creatively structured whole, and each vision is an integral part of that whole.

Since the Revelation is the only one of its kind in the New Testament, we will try to guide you all the way through it rather than simply offer a model or two. It should be noted, of course, that the basic structure is clear and not an object of debate; differences come in how one interprets the structure.

The book unfolds like a great drama in which the earliest scenes set the stage and the cast of characters, and the later scenes presuppose all the earlier scenes and must be so understood for us to be able to follow the plot.

Chapters 1-3 thus set the stage and introduce us to most of the significant *characters*. First, there is John himself (1:1-11), who is the “seer” and will be the narrator throughout. He was exiled for his faith in Christ, and he had the prophetic insight to see that the present persecution was only a forerunner of what was to be.

Second, there is Christ (1:12-20), whom John describes in magnificent images derived from Daniel 10 and elsewhere as the Lord of history and the Lord of the church. God has not lost control, despite present persecution, for Christ alone holds the keys of death and Hades.

Third, there is the church (2:1-3:22). In letters to seven real, but also representative, churches John encourages and warns the church. Persecution is already present; the church is promised more. But there are many internal disorders that also threaten its well-being. Those who are victorious are given the promise of final glory.

Chapters 4-5 further help to *set the stage*. With breathtaking visions, set to worship and praise, the church is told that God reigns in sovereign majesty (ch. 4). To believers who may be wondering whether God is really there, acting on their behalf, John reminds them that God’s “Lion” is a “Lamb,” who himself

redeemed humankind through suffering (ch. 5). And so all heaven bursts forth in praise to “him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.”

Chapters 6-7 begin the unfolding of the actual drama itself. Three times throughout the book visions are presented in carefully structured sets of seven (chs. 6-7, 8-11, 15-16). In each case the first four items go together to form one picture; in 6-7 and 8-11 the next two items also go together to present two sides of another reality. These are then interrupted by an interlude of two visions, before the seventh item is revealed. In chapters 15-16 the final three group together without the interlude precisely because they lead directly into the final visions of chapters 17-22. Note how this works out in chapters 6-7:

1. White horseman = Conquest
2. Red horseman = War
3. Black horseman = Famine
4. Pale horseman = Death
5. The martyrs' question: “How long?”
6. The earthquake (God's judgment): “Who can withstand [the wrath]”
 - a. 144,000 sealed
 - b. A great multitude
7. God's wrath: the seven trumpets of chapters 8-11

Chapters 8-11 reveal the content of God's temporal judgments on Rome. The first four trumpets, echoing the plagues of Egypt (Exod. 7-10), indicate that part of this judgment will involve great disorders in nature; trumpets five and six indicate that it will also come from the barbarian hordes and a great war. After the interlude, which expresses God's own exaltation of his “witnesses” even though they die, the seventh trumpet sounds the conclusion: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (Rev 11:15).

Thus we have been brought through the suffering of the church and the judgment of God on the church's enemies to the final triumph of God. But the visions are not finished. In chapters 8-11 we have been given the big picture; chapters 12-22 offer details of this judgment and triumph. What has happened is something like looking at Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. At first, one is simply awestruck at the sight of the whole of the chapel; only later one can inspect the parts and see the magnificence that has gone into every detail.

Chapter 12 is the theological key to the book. In two visions we are told of Satan's attempt to destroy Christ and of his own defeat instead. Thus, within the recurring New Testament framework of the already/not yet, Satan is revealed as a defeated foe (already) whose final end has not yet come. Therefore, there is rejoicing because “now [has] come the salvation . . . of our God,” yet there is woe to the church because Satan knows his time is limited and he is taking vengeance on God's people.

Chapters 13-14 then show how for John's church this vengeance took the form of the Roman Empire, with its emperors who were demanding religious allegiance. But the empire and the emperors are doomed (chs. 15-16). The book concludes as a “tale of two cities” (chs. 17-22). The city of earth (Rome) is condemned for its part in the persecution of God's people. This is followed by the city of God, where God's people dwell eternally.

Hermeneutic Focus:

“Furthermore, we can still hear as God’s Word—indeed, *must* hear—that discipleship goes the way of the cross, that God has not promised us freedom *from* suffering and death but triumph *through* it. As Martin Luther rightly put it in the hymn ‘A Mighty Fortress’: ‘The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him . . . the body they may kill; God’s truth abideth still: His kingdom is forever.’ Thus the Revelation is God’s Word of comfort and encouragement to Christians who suffer, especially believers who suffer at the hands of the state, precisely because they are Christians. God is in control. The slain Lamb has triumphed over the dragon (Rev 12:7-12).

“All of this is a Word that needs to be heard again and again in the church—in every geographical setting and in every age. And to miss this Word is to miss the book altogether.

“But our hermeneutical difficulties do not lie in hearing this Word, the word of warning and comfort that is the point of the book. Our difficulties lie with that other phenomenon of prophecy, namely that the ‘temporal’ word is often so closely tied to the final eschatological realities” (p. 262).

“Just as the opening word of Scripture speaks of God and creation, so the concluding word speaks of God and consummation. If there are some ambiguities for us as to *how* all the details are to work out, there is no ambiguity as to the certainty that God *will* work it all out—in his time and in his way. Such certainty should serve for us as warning and encouragement, as it did for the book’s original recipients” (p. 264).

A WALK THROUGH THE REVELATION | How to Read the Bible Book by Book | Fee and Stuart

Introduction: The Historical Setting (Chapters 1-3)

- Prologue (1:1-8)
- The Historical Setting (1:9-3:22)

Introductory Visions: The Scene in Heaven and on Earth (4:1-8:5)

- A Vision of the Heavenly Throne (4:1-5:14)
- The Opening of the Seven Seals (6:1-8:5)

Preliminary (Temporal) Judgments on the Empire (8:6-11:19)

- The Judgments of the Seven Trumpets (8:6-9:21)
- Two Interlude Visions (10:1-11:19)

Conflict between the Church and the Evil Powers (12:1-14:20)

- War in Heaven and Its Aftermath (12:1-17)
- The Beasts out of the Sea and the Earth (13:1-18)
- Outcome of the Holy War: Vindication and Judgment (14:1-20)

The Seven Bowls: God’s Judgment against “Babylon” (15:1-16:21)

- The Prelude (15:1-8)
- Babylon is Judged (16:1-21)

Wrap-Up: The (Original) Tale of Two Cities (17:1-22:21)

- God Judges the Harlot for Economic Oppression (17:1-22:21)
- The Last Battle (19:11-20:15)
- The New Jerusalem: The Bride of the Lamb (21:1-22:11)

Epilogue (22:12-21)