

Revelation — Lesson 4

The Terminology

The “millennium” refers to the 1000 years mentioned in Revelation 20:4, where it is described not as a reign *of* Christ but rather as a reign *with* Christ.

“Premillennialism” takes the 1000 year period literally and teaches that the return of Christ will occur *prior* to the millennium (hence the “pre” in its name).

“Postmillennialism” takes the 1000 year period literally and teaches that the return of Christ will occur *after* the millennium (hence the “post” in its name). Under this view, the final coming of Christ would be preceded by a 1000 year period of peace. Understandably, this view is not very popular anymore. (Alexander Campbell’s *Millennial Harbinger* was post-millennial.)

“Amillennialism” takes the 1000 year period figuratively, noting that it a power of 10, which denotes completeness.

The first thing we should note about premillennialists is that they base almost their entire understanding of the Bible (by their own admission!) on one verse from Revelation 20! Remember, we should interpret difficult to understand verses by using easy to understand verses — and there are *many* easy to understand verses that prove premillennialism false.

Brief review of the tenets of premillennialism

(1) The Restoration of the Levitical Priesthood

Premillennialists teach that the Levitical priesthood is going to be restored during the millennium. This view arises from a misinterpretation of Ezekiel 44.

But what does the Bible say?

The role of the Levitical priests was to offer the sacrifices for sin that were demanded by the Law of Moses. Jesus' perfect sacrifice put these people out of business permanently (Hebrews 10:12, 18).

The Levitical system was imperfect, weak, and useless (Hebrews 7:11, 18) and was set aside by Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:18).

The coming of reality in Jesus Christ meant that the shadow of the Levitical system was removed forever. (Premillennialists say that all of the shadows will return.)

Further, Jesus could not be a priest if the Levitical system were still functioning. Under the Law of Moses (Numbers 18), only Aaron's sons could be priests. The Law of Moses and the Levitical system cannot be separated—one cannot exist without the other (Hebrews 7:12). In addition, the old and new covenants cannot coexist (Romans 7:1–6). The first covenant was taken away so that the second could be established (Hebrews 10:9–10). Jesus cannot be priest on earth under the Levitical system (Hebrews 8:4).

(2) The Restoration of the Sacrificial System

Premillennialists teach that bloody sacrifices for sin will be restored during the millennium. This view arises from a misinterpretation of Ezekiel 43–45 and Zechariah 14.

But what does the Bible say?

Animal sacrifices were never able to cleanse the soul. They simply shadowed the coming sacrifice that would provide true cleansing. Jesus' sacrifice was all sufficient. His perfect once-for-all sacrifice meant that future sacrifices were unnecessary (Hebrews 10:17–18).

Those who have remission of sin have no further need of sacrifice.

The premillennial view undermines the sufficiency of Christ's sacrificial atonement. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:21 that "if justification were through the Law, then Christ died to no purpose."

(3) The New Covenant is not in force now

Premillennialists teach that the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31ff is not yet in force and that it will not come into force until the millennium. Walvoord says that the new covenant applies only to Israel and has no relation with this present age.

But what does the Bible say?

In Luke 22:20 Jesus says "this cup is the new covenant in my blood."

In Hebrews 9:15 we read that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant.

In 2 Corinthians 3:5-6 Paul writes that "our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant."

The problem of sin is the motivation behind both covenants. The new covenant provides forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Walvoord claims that Christ's blood produced two new covenants.

The new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is the covenant that we are under today. This covenant provides salvation and forgiveness through the blood of Christ and there is no need for any other covenant.

Premillennialists have trouble explaining the need for their theories. Either Christ is all sufficient or he is not. If he is, then why do we need the restoration of the Old Testament shadows?

(4) Jesus is not presently ruling over Israel

Premillennialists deny the complete Lordship of Jesus. They insist he is not presently ruling over Israel.

Walvoord and Lindsey both claim that although Jesus has the right to rule the earth, he is not exercising that authority at this time. For proof they point to the mess that the world is in.

But what does the Bible say?

Psalm 29:10 reminds us that God reigned (and rained!) at the time of the flood even though the world was in a mess at the time.

Paul told the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:21 that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” in this age. In Revelation 2:26–27 Jesus claims to have already been given the authority over nations that was prophesied in Psalm 2:8–9. In Revelation 1:5 we see that Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Psalm 110 depicts Jesus as sitting at God’s right hand and ruling in the midst of his enemies. This passage is quoted many times in the New Testament as having been already fulfilled. What does Walvoord say? He claims that although Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 110:4 have been fulfilled, the remaining verses in Psalm 110 have not been fulfilled.

What is the Extreme Preterist Approach?

The Extreme Preterist Approach is also called Realized Eschatology, the 70 A.D. Theory, or Max Kingism. I generally will not spend too much time on what could be called “crackpot” theories, but since this one originated in the Lord’s church, I think we should spend some time discussing it.

Max King claims that although the kingdom came on the day of Pentecost following the ascension of Christ, it did not come with power and glory until A.D. 70. Max King claims that the event commonly referred to today as the “second coming of Christ” has already happened, and it occurred with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Max King claims that both the Christian and Jewish faiths were in operation from the day of Pentecost until A.D. 70. When the temple was destroyed, the church (the body) was resurrected—it had been buried under Judaism for 40 years.

Max King claims that there is no resurrection of the body and that Christ will *never* return to claim his people. All prophecy was fulfilled

in A.D. 70 and there is not a single prophecy that has not been fulfilled.

It is tempting to disregard this as just so much nonsense, but we should be careful. First, there are many sincere members of the church who have been lead astray by this false doctrine, and I personally know of two congregations that have been divided because of it. Max Kingism denies several of the basic tenets of the Christian faith; namely, the resurrection of the body and the final judgment.

So that we can confront it when (and if) we see it, I want to quickly go over several key reasons why this approach is wrong.

Its biggest mistake is that it violates one of the interpretive rules we discussed earlier: Similarity of language does not prove identity of subject. There are many judgments in the Bible (Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Edom, Jerusalem, Rome, and the final judgment), but the same language is used to describe each. King focuses on the Jerusalem judgment in the New Testament and assumes that all judgment language refers to it.

We often confuse the judgments ourselves, and King exploits this to get his foot in the door. I will be the first to admit that many passages that we often take to refer to the end of the world actually refer to the end of Jerusalem. (Matthew 24:1-34, for example.) However, this does not mean that all such verses refer to the end of Jerusalem. (Our confusion sometimes causes us to think that the apostles mistakenly thought that Jesus was going to come again within their lifetimes. The apostles were not mistaken about the date of Christ's return! They were inspired by God!)

Max Kingism is based on the premise that the focus of Revelation is the fall of Jerusalem. This idea is contrary to all of the evidence — both internal and external — and is one of its weakest links.

There are numerous verses that can be used to respond to this false view. Acts 1:11, for example, tells us that Jesus will return in the same manner as he left. 1 Corinthians 11:26 tells us that the communion proclaims the Lord's death until he comes. 1 Corinthians

15:25–26 tells us that death will be destroyed when Christ returns. 2 Timothy 2:17–18 reminds us that those who deny the resurrection can overthrow people’s faith, and sadly that has happened with Max King and his followers. And we could go on and on.

God’s word is not decided by majority vote, but we should be concerned when we come up with something that no one has ever thought of before. **Novel theories about the Bible are generally wrong theories about the Bible.** Max Kingism is such a theory.

What is the Preterist or Contemporary Historical Approach?

The Preterist or Contemporary Historical Approach applies the book primarily (or completely) to the conflict between the Church and Rome.

Some taking this approach apply the book to the conflict between the Church and Jerusalem, but that theory is seriously flawed. The villain in this book is Rome, not Jerusalem. We will see why as we work our way through the text, but let’s pause to consider one reason right now.

A coin minted during the reign of Vespasian (the time when Revelation was written) depicts the goddess Roma sitting upon the seven hills that surrounded the city of Rome. Chapter 17 depicts the villain in Revelation as a bloodthirsty harlot sitting upon seven hills. If you lived in the first century, if you had that Roman coin in your pocket, and if you read Revelation 17, who would you think John was writing about? How could there be any answer other than Rome?



The preterist approach does not violate John's claim that the prophecies in Revelation were to come to pass shortly. This approach makes the book meaningful to its initial readers in that it gives comfort and assurance of victory to those being persecuted. According to this approach the book is not primarily eschatological— that is, it is not primarily concerned with the end of the world, but is instead concerned with the end of Rome.

The remainder of the course will provide an extended description of this approach.

Can We Be Certain About Anything in Revelation?

Chesterton: “What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. . . . We are on the road to producing a race of man too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.”

One must be careful about presenting dogmatic answers to anything about Revelation. However, several points should be made in this regard:

1. It is possible to make some dogmatic assertions about what this book says. The third verse of the book says that those who read and understand this book will be blessed. Clearly, God meant for us to understand this book. Just because we can't be dogmatic about everything does not mean we can be dogmatic about nothing.
2. We must have an open mind—but as Chesterton observed an open mind is only good when it clamps down on something solid.

At times, however, we will have to settle for presenting several different interpretations, each of which could be true. Our inability at times to state with certainty what something means does not mean that we

cannot state with certainty what it does not mean. In fact, on occasion we may find ourselves proceeding by the process of elimination.

Many of the Old Testament prophecies had dual fulfillments—one that was immediate and one that was fulfilled later by Christ. In our study, we will seek to explain the immediate fulfillment without denying that there may be some secondary meaning. One should be careful however in this regard since secondary meanings are much harder to identify since such meanings generally have little to do with the immediate context of the book.

Is Revelation Relevant?

This book deals with the persecution of God's people by government authorities. Is this relevant today? Are Christians facing persecution today? They certainly are outside of the U.S.A. Is it possible inside the U.S.A.?

Those who don't think that the tide has changed in this country have not been watching the tides! Politicians used to align themselves with Christian positions in order to get elected. Now they *oppose* those Christian positions in order to get elected.

Could we face government sponsored persecution here? Not all government opposition to religion is as blatant as the former Soviet Union, which actually distributed booklets in the 30's entitled *Teach Yourself to be Godless*. But here, freedom *of* religion has become freedom *from* religion.

In Europe, a preacher was jailed for simply proclaiming what the Bible has to say about homosexuality. Could that ever happen here? Could Christians ever be prosecuted for violating so-called hate crime laws?

Before World War II, Germany was the virtually unmatched fertile soil for religious worship, theology, sacred music, and evangelism. It was the birthplace of Luther and the Reformation. Even today, German is a required language for those seeking advanced theological degrees. The peaceful Amish and the Mennonites are of German origin. As we

know, the scene in Germany changed rapidly in just a short period of time, and it did so because of economic turmoil. Hitler's rise to power can be traced directly to the stock market crash in the U.S. If you ever wonder whether the love of money really is the root of all evil, I encourage you to study the history of Hitler's rise to power.

We tend to see the church and the government in the same way that the early church saw themselves and Rome. What can we do? The church is so small and the government is so powerful? The church is more important and more powerful than the U.S. government! We make a mistake when we look to the government for our salvation—it has no salvation to give. The government should be looking to the church and not vice versa. We have God on our side! We have the power of prayer on our side! We need to see the world as God sees the world!

If the book does not appear very relevant today then perhaps we should be thankful that such is the case. Perhaps our prayer should be that this book *not* become very relevant to us.

Chapter One

1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.

We are about to proceed through the text a few verses at a time, and we should recall the truism that dissection is not infrequently the death of beauty. If this book is an oil painting from God (as it is

sometimes described) then we need to do more than just analyze each individual brushstroke. We need to keep the entire painting in mind, and we need to frequently step back so we can see the entire painting.

Verse 1 tells us that the revelation in this book was from Christ, that it was received by John, and that it concerns things that must soon take place. Many “liberal” commentaries reject the notions that this revelation is from Christ and that John received and recorded it, and the “conservative” commentaries rightly castigate them for disbelieving the opening words of the book they purport to explain. **But many of those same “conservative” commentaries then proceed to ignore the equally clear statement in the same opening verse that this revelation concerns things that must soon take place!** Why don't we just believe **ALL** of verse 1?

“The Revelation *of* Jesus Christ” means that the Revelation is given *by* Jesus Christ, not that it is a Revelation *about* Jesus Christ, although it certainly does have much to tell us about Jesus Christ.

The Greek word for Revelation is Apokalupsis where “Apo” means “away from” and “kalupsis” means a “veiling.” Thus, the Revelation is an unveiling. The message of the book is not hidden or veiled, but rather is unveiled. It may have formerly been a mystery, but no longer. This book unveils the struggles through which the church would pass and unveils its ultimate triumph under Christ.

This same word translated “revelation” is used elsewhere in the Bible but is used only here in this book. In Galatians 1:11–12, we see that Paul received the gospel by *apokalupsis* from Jesus Christ. In Galatians 2:2, Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem “by Revelation” to preach. See also 1 Corinthians 14:6 and Ephesians 1:17.

The story of the Bible is one of revelation, with the ultimate revelation being Jesus' perfect revelation of the Father. In John 14:9, Jesus said, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” In God the Father there is no Christ-unlikeness! If you want to know how God the Father would react to something or some-

one, look in the gospels to see how Jesus reacted. When you see Jesus, you see the Father. He reveals him perfectly.

It is a wonderful and comforting thought to know that *God reveals*. God wants to us know; He wants us to understand; He is not in the business of hiding things from us. Men, by contrast, try to hide from God as in the Garden, and they try to hide their evil deeds. When Christ comes, he will “bring to light the hidden things of darkness.” (1 Corinthians 4:5) In Revelation 6:15, we will find people who say to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” God reveals; Man hides. What a contrast!

As we have already noted, the time frame given here is crucial to understanding the book. John was shown things that must “soon take place” in verse 1 and was told that the time is near in verse 3. In other contexts, the interpretation of those clear statements would present no difficulty, and yet here for some reason they are almost universally ignored and rejected.

The Greek word *eggus* meaning near or soon is used in verse 3 (and in 22:10). Here are some other verses in the New Testament where that same Greek word is used:

- Matthew 24:32 Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is **nigh**. 33 So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is **near**, even at the doors.
- Matthew 26:18 And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is **at hand**; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples.
- John 2:13 And the Jews' passover was **at hand**, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
- Romans 10:8 But what saith it? The word is **nigh** thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach.

- Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made **nigh** by the blood of Christ. ... 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were **nigh**.
- Philippians 4:5 Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is **at hand**.

Again, the usage of the term elsewhere seems clear. Under what theory of interpretation should we take an *opposite* meaning when the word is used here in verse 3? **The time is near! It is not far off!** Those who pride themselves in interpreting each word of the Bible *literally* should start with this word!

The things in this book “must” take place. God has spoken and Rome has been judged. Those judgments must now take place.

In verse 3, a blessing is given to those who read and keep the book. This book is meant to be understood! Otherwise that blessing is just an empty promise!

In fact, there are seven blessings in this book:

- Those who read, hear, and obey are blessed in verse 3.
- Those who die in the Lord are blessed in 14:13.
- Those who are awake and watchful are blessed in 16:15.
- Those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb are blessed in 19:9.
- Those who share in the first resurrection are blessed in 20:6.
- Those who keep the words of this book are blessed in 22:7.
- Those who do what God commands are blessed in 22:14.

There are a remarkable number of “hidden sevens” in this book. By one count there are 29 different words that occur precisely seven times in this book. The word “signified” (“made it known”) in verse 1

is one such word, and it is also a clear link to the gospel of John, which uses the same word repeatedly to describe the miracles of Christ.

Notice that John refers to “he” who reads and “those” who hear. Typically, a public reader would have read the revelation in front of an assembly, and in doing so, both were blessed. I think there are some lessons here for us. First, we know the importance of public Bible reading. (1 Timothy 4:13) But, second, the readings are intended to be a blessing for both the reader and the listeners! Sometimes our readers seem so bored with what they themselves are reading that I wonder how any blessing can flow from their dull monotone to what seems to be an equally bored group of listeners! How can the word of Almighty God be boring? And yet we sometimes make it appear so.

It is a great privilege to hear God’s word read in our own language. Not everyone enjoys this privilege. The scripture reading is one of the most important parts of our worship service, but like every part of our worship we need to give it our very best. The secret to spiritual renewal is time with God’s word.

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

The seven churches addressed here and in Chapters 2-3 were not the only churches in Asia. In particular, Colossae (Col. 1:2), Hierapolis (Col. 4:13), Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12; Acts 20:5), and Miletus (Acts 20:17) also had congregations. Why then single out these seven?

Some suggest that these seven churches were the centers of seven postal districts. Others feel that John must have had some special relationship with these seven churches. Still others feel that since the number seven is used 54 times in this book in a manner that often depicts perfection or completeness, this may have been John’s way of addressing the book to all churches. I think the latter is most likely.