

The book of Revelation: Summary, Analysis and Catholic Perspectives

9th lesson from the book of Revelation

Summary: The book of Revelation is apocalyptic in nature, describing the end of the world. Apocalypticism was a well-established belief among Jews, who held that the coming of the kingdom of God would not be brought about by a gradual transformation but by a sudden intervention, when God would end the present age and establish his kingdom in the world made new. This conception of coming events is associated with the belief that prior to this future time, the struggle between the forces of good and evil will become more intense. As the evil powers grow stronger, they will inflict persecution and in some instances even death upon those who follow a course of righteousness. The struggle will eventually reach a climax, at which time God will intervene, destroy the forces of evil, and set up a new order in which the righteous will live for all time to come. The appearance of the Messiah will coincide with the coming of these events. The Christian community was truly convinced and believed that this end could be accomplished only by a return of Jesus back to this earth from the heaven to which he had ascended. Jesus' second coming will inaugurate the coming of the new age, as well as the final destruction of all the forces of evil.

As time passed, many Christians, especially those who were suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman government, became deeply concerned about how long it would be before these events would take place. Toward the end of the first century of the Christian era, emperor worship was fairly well established, not only in the city of Rome but in the entire Roman empire. When Christians refused to worship the emperor, they were accused of all sorts of crimes and subjected to the most severe penalties. Some of them suffered martyrdom rather than deny their faith. It was a critical time for the entire Christian movement, and many of its members wondered whether the persecution would ever end, while others were perplexed about the course they should follow. Some were even tempted to abandon their faith or at least to make concessions to Rome sufficient to enable them to save their lives.

Under these conditions, The apostle John wrote Revelation, addressing it to the seven churches that were in Asia Minor. The purpose of the book was to strengthen the faith of the members of these churches by giving them the assurance that they will be delivered from the evil powers. John was confident that the great day of divine intervention would occur in accordance with the apocalyptic literature with which Jewish Christians were familiar. He knew that many terrifying events would take place first. He wanted to warn his fellow Christians concerning these events and thus

prepare them for the time when their faith would be put to a more severe test than anything that they had experienced thus far.

In writing Revelation, John follows the pattern that was used in older apocalyptic writings in the Old Testament (such as the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament, 1 Esdras in the Apocrypha, the Book of Enoch in the Pseudepigrapha, the Assumption of Moses), and many other well known writings, including sections of the Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament and portions of the Synoptic Gospels. The revelations are usually through dreams or visions in which coming events are symbolized by strange figures, the meanings of which are sometimes disclosed by an angelic messenger who was sent for that particular purpose. The apocalypses were produced in times of crises, and they were written for the benefit of people who were suffering hardship and privation at the particular time when the writing was done.

At the beginning of Revelation, John tells us that while he was on the Island of Patmos, where he was banished because of his religious faith, he heard a loud voice telling him to write what he saw and then to send the writing to the seven churches in Asia. The voice was that of Jesus Christ, who had been raised from the dead and who had ascended to heaven. Christ's messages are addressed to seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Christ commends these churches for the good works that they have performed, but for five of them, he also sends a message of warning and reproof. He is especially critical of those who tolerate the doctrines of the Nicolaitans, whose teachings he considers a real menace to the Christian community because they approve of the practice of eating meat obtained from animals that have been used as sacrifices to idols. Although the apostle Paul and other Christians maintained that this practice was not a matter of vital importance and that everyone should be permitted to follow the dictates of their own consciences, apparently John did not share this attitude.

Christ commends those churches whose members have endured persecution and, in some instances, even death rather than declare their allegiance to Roman rulers, who proclaimed their own divinity and demanded that they should be worshipped along with the other gods of the empire. He refers to Pergamum as Satan's home inasmuch as it was in this place that the cult of emperor worship was particularly strong. Christ warns Christians to expect that their persecutions will be even more severe in the immediate future. Nevertheless, they are to remain faithful and regard these afflictions as tests of their character. Those who remain loyal will be delivered from the hands of their enemies, and in the new order of things soon to be established, they will be given a crown of life and the assurance that the new order will last forever. The

persecutions that are now taking place will last for only a short time, for the hour of God's judgment is close at hand.

Analysis: The Book of Revelation often has been regarded as a mysterious book, quite beyond the comprehension of the average lay reader. Its many references to angelic beings, its elaborate description of Christ as he appears in the heavenly courts, its use of such mystic numbers as three, seven, twelve, and their multiples, the accounts of strange beasts, symbolic names, and definite time periods – all suggest some hidden and esoteric meaning that supposedly can be detected only by an expert. For these reasons, many people have ignored the book, feeling that any attempt to understand it is futile. Other people have taken an opposite attitude and have found in this book what they believe to be predictions of whole series of events, many of which have already occurred and the remainder of which are about to take place in the near future. The basis for these views, many of which sound strange and fantastic, is found in the elaborate symbolism used in the book. The use of symbols has an important place in religious literature, for there is no other way in which a person can talk or even think about that which is beyond the realm of finite human experience. But there is always a danger that the symbols may be interpreted in a way that was not intended by the author who used them. Only in regard to the content in which the symbols are used can we determine what the author meant.

One source of confusion has been the result of a failure to distinguish between prophetic writing and apocalyptic writing. The prophets used a particular literary form in which they expressed their messages; the apocalyptic writers used a different literary form, one that was better suited to the particular purpose that they had in mind. To understand either group, one must interpret their writings by considering the respective literary form that they used. The characteristics of apocalyptic writing are fairly well known. In addition to the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation, a wealth of apocalyptic writing exists in the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament. A careful study of these writings shows that they have a number of common characteristics: They were produced in times of crises; they describe the conflict between the forces of good and evil; future events are made known through dreams and visions; the end of the conflict is to come shortly; and those who remain faithful through persecution and trial are promised a reward in the messianic kingdom soon to be established. The messages are for the benefit of the persecuted and are usually conveyed by means of symbols that only the faithful can understand.

Interpreted in light of these characteristics, the Revelation of John is comparatively easy to understand. The unique feature about Revelation is the particular occasion that caused it to be written. Toward the end of the first century of the Christian era, the

attitude of the Roman government toward Christianity became especially hostile. Nero, the Roman emperor, charged that Christians were to blame for the burning of Rome. Although the charge was false, it was sufficient to cause many people to regard the new Christian movement with suspicion. Jews and Romans alike resented the fact that Christians condemned so many of the things they were doing, and they especially disliked the belief on the part of Christians that their religion was superior to the older faiths that had been honored for centuries. The Christians often held their meetings in secret places, and their critics imagined that they were doing all sorts of evil things. It was easy to circulate rumors of this kind, and along with other things, Christians were charged with plotting against the Roman government. As the opposition to Christianity became more intense, the followers of the new movement were asked to prove their loyalty to the Roman government by denouncing Christ and by worshipping the statue of the emperor. When they refused to do this, they were tortured and even put to death.

Under these conditions, the Revelation of John was written. It would be difficult to imagine anything more appropriate for the members of Christian churches at that time. They needed encouragement and the assurance that their trials would soon be over, that the evil powers of the earth would be destroyed, and that the triumph of righteousness would be established in the world. The message of Revelation was intended for this particular time and set of circumstances. Christians familiar with the older apocalyptic writings would understand the book's symbolism, for practically everything John said to his contemporaries was said before to people who suffered under similar circumstances. It is a mistake to suppose that John was predicting events that would take place in the later centuries of Christian history. Writing to the people of his own day about events that would happen while they were still living, he states that Christ will return while those who put him to death on the cross are still living. The permanent significance of Revelation lies in the author's conviction that right will ultimately triumph over evil.

Important book: Revelation is an important book to study because it is the capstone of God's self-revelation to man. Revelation is the book of consummation. It tells us the ending of the story that began in Genesis 1. The greatest value of Revelation is what it teaches us about the future. It discloses that this world is headed for a divine judgment. Revelation is also important because it reveals and reaffirms many of the great doctrines of Scripture. Revelation is theologically rich. It displays the sovereignty and holiness of God. It teaches us that God is in control, that He has a plan that He is bringing to fulfillment. It reveals that God alone can foretell the future and that He does so with 100 percent accuracy. The Christology (doctrine of Christ) is glorious in Revelation. Jesus is the Lamb (28 times) who was slain, yet is alive forevermore. He is

God (Revelation 1:17). He is worshipped as God (Revelation 5:13). Salvation comes through Christ alone by faith alone in His death on the cross (1:5). Only His blood can wash away our sins (5:9; 7:14). He is the Lion of Judah who is coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16). The book of Revelation provides a divine view of history. We see that no human empire can endure. Man's day will come to a tragic end. In the 404 verses in Revelation, there are about 278 allusions to the Old Testament. Revelation has a great deal to say about angels and demons. In fact, it talks about angels more than any other Bible book. Angels are active throughout the chapters, especially in bringing God's wrath to the earth. The reality and evil of Satan and his demonic host is also evident. Satan accuses and persecutes God's people, hates the Jews and tries to destroy them, empowers the Antichrist and the false prophet, and finally, is doomed to the lake of fire. One final reason to study Revelation is that it's the only book of the Bible that contains a special blessing for those who read it and keep the things written in it (Revelation 1:3). For this reason Revelation has been aptly called "the Blessing Book." The Lord's rich hand of blessing will rest upon us as we study this book together and strive to understand and apply its truths to our lives.

What are some of the keys to interpreting Revelation, especially all the symbols? The book of Revelation may be the most neglected book in the Bible. There are undoubtedly many reasons for this, but a chief one is that there are people who either claim or assume that no one can really understand what it means. With all the mystifying symbols and striking images that appear throughout the book, many people despair of ever understanding the book. Even many pastors never preach on Revelation. Or if they do, they preach only from the first three chapters. This neglect of the capstone of God's revelation to man is tragic. As we observed earlier, Revelation gives us the end of the story just as Genesis gives us the beginning.

There are three practical keys to unlocking the meaning of this great book—keys that can help every reader understand it better. **The first key** is to recognize that the Lord meant for us to understand Revelation. The word "revelation" is a translation of the Greek word **apokalupsis** which means to uncover, to unveil, or to take the lid off something. In other words, the purpose of this book is not to hide the truth from us or make it confusing, but for Jesus Christ to uncover or take the lid off the future so we can know about the end times. Remember, the Lord promises a special blessing on those who study and apply the message of Revelation to their lives: "God blesses the one who reads this prophecy to the church, and he blesses all who listen to it and obey what it says" (1:3). It is a blessing that anyone reading Revelation can experience

The second key to unlocking the meaning of Revelation is to realize that most of what is in the book is not new information. While it is certainly true that Revelation looks ahead and reveals the future, it also looks back and brings together all the threads running through the OT books. Revelation contains 404 verses, and 278 of them allude back to the Old Testament. Revelation has no direct quotations from the Old Testament, but contains a total of 550 allusions or references back to the Old Testament. So a significant portion of Revelation brings together content from the Old Testament into a comprehensive sequence of events

The third key to understanding Revelation is to correctly interpret the symbols in the book. Symbols are not just symbols of nothing. They have their own meaning. Symbols are valuable tools of communication. They communicate truth concisely, and they communicate it graphically. In Revelation 11 the apostle John could have spent a great deal of time describing the spiritual and moral conditions of Jerusalem. Instead, he called the city "Sodom and Egypt." Quickly and vividly he communicated a volume of truth that remains graphically fixed in our minds. Symbols and figures of speech, then, represent something literal. It is the task of the interpreter to investigate this figurative language to discover what literal truth is there. Symbols, therefore, are not meaningless. Neither are they an open invitation to let our imagination run wild. They do not give us free rein to make the symbol mean whatever we want it to mean. In most cases the immediate context or the use of that same symbol by other biblical writers will establish the boundaries for proper interpretation. The bottom line is this: we should not be afraid of or intimidated by Revelation. God wants us to understand and apply the truth of this book to our life. We should follow these three keys with thought and care, and ask the Lord to open our heart and mind to the precious truths about our coming King!

Book for our spiritual journey: The book of Revelation was written to first-century churches in Asia Minor. In this time and place, the Roman Empire was dominant. The seven little churches were facing external persecution from a hostile culture, the seductive influence of that same culture, and spiritual lethargy from within their own hearts. The book of Revelation showed them and us how to live victoriously in the midst of both torment and temptation. It shows the path to eternal victory in several important ways, all of which can be life-changing for us. Revelation reminds us that God Is in Sovereign Control: As God's people seek to live faithfully and suffer victoriously, in the midst of a simultaneously hostile and attractive culture, we must frequently remind ourselves that God is in control of all that befalls us. This book emphasizes God's sovereign control. God's sovereignty is praised in the song of the twenty-four elders (Rev. 4:11) and is exalted in the cry of Revelation 19:6, 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.' In a world that sometimes seems to be

spinning out of control, we desperately need the reassuring vision Revelation offers, a vision of all things being accomplished according to the will of a loving, sovereign God.

A catholic reading of the book of Revelation: As Christians, we believe the world will end someday, human history will draw to a conclusion, the Second Coming of Christ will definitively destroy the forces of evil, sin and death, God will pronounce a final decision on human conduct and the Kingdom of God will shine in resplendent fullness forever. A casual reader can easily be confused by the Book of Revelation with its fantastic accounts of terrifying plagues, cosmic signs, hard-fought battles between good and evil and heavenly images beyond our imagining.

We Catholics interpret this final book of the Bible far differently than some of our Christian brethren in that we see its meaning as symbolic, rather than literal. So what does the Book of Revelation or the Apocalypse say to us? What are its lessons?

1. The struggle between good and evil, Christ and Satan, will go on until the end of the world. Why God allows evil to seemingly have its way may often remain a mystery to us, especially when we bear the brunt of its power. The parable of the weeds among the wheat comes to mind. But we know how the story ends. God wins in the final triumph of Christ; this conviction gives us hope and meaning in the darkest of nights.

2. Our earthly liturgical worship is a participation in the life and activity of heaven. In "The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth," Scott Hahn writes movingly how his conversion to Catholicism was triggered by the startling realization that most of the prayers and rites of the Mass come from the Book of Revelation. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we step out of the chronological timeline of history and enter into the eternal timelessness of God; we walk into the vast and beautiful world of the resurrection of Christ. At Mass, if we could put on a supernatural lens, we would see angels flying around and observe the saints worshiping the Lord with us. When we participate in the Eucharist, we have already entered into the "end of the world."

3. Our actions and words in this life radically matter and we will be judged on all of them. Many people think everyone will be automatically saved. "God is all good, he loves me and will forgive me everything in the end." Obviously, God is rich in mercy and pardon, yet he is also just.

The Book of Revelation speaks often about the general judgment of the world and the particular judgment of every human person. While we trust in God's mercy and

compassion, we also strive with our heart, mind and soul to love God, to live virtue and to grow in holiness. How we live, what we do, the words we speak, the choices we make impact eternity and our final destiny. How important a regular examination of conscience, the sacrament of reconciliation and a radical commitment to live the Gospel and the teachings of the church become in the light of God's mercy and justice.

Some Christians seem obsessed with the end of the world, trying to decipher the signs in Revelation, gathering at a particular place on a specific date awaiting some cosmic eruption, talking about the great tribulation to come. When we look at natural disasters, the Ebola crisis, the horrific violence in the Middle East and our own cities, the apparent rise of atheism and secularity, we may be tempted to think the end has come. Yet, the world has endured worse and has continued its course. The sufferings, tragedies and evil of this life should propel us to a deeper relationship of love, trust and service with God, whose definitive apocalypse or revelation is the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ: His saving life, death and resurrection. Jesus is our fixed point, the Alpha and the Omega who will love us forever!