

Born to Win

Revelation #1

by: Ronald L. Dart

Revelation 1

KJV2000

¹ The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass [...]

Thus begins the mysterious book of Revelation. Although why it should be a mystery is an open question. After all, the book is supposed to be a revelation. It is expressly given to show His disciples things which are soon to happen. How would you feel if you got a letter from your friend who said “I’m going to reveal some things to you in this letter.” and then you get through the letter and you really don’t know what he’s talking about? Why is this book of Revelation so mysterious? Well there are reasons for it. One is that the book is two thousand years old. It’s written in another language. It’s out of a foreign culture. It’s an account of another man’s visions and dreams. When you think about all those things, why shouldn’t we have some trouble with it even though it was intended to be clear enough to the people who had first got the book?

Revelation presents interpretation problems because of its imagery. Most prophecy, and I don’t think many people realize this, but when you go back and you page through Old Testament prophecy in your Bible, you won’t realize (unless you perhaps have one of the newer translations that lays it out in line form) that most of that prophecy is not prose. It’s poetry. And it follows the rules of poetry in a sense in that it uses poetic images. In fact, one of the prophets in the Old Testament day was brought before the king who said, “We want to know. You’ve got to prophecy for us.” And the prophet says “I can’t. I can’t prophecy because I have no musician.” And they had to go around the palace and rummage up somebody to play an instrument so that this prophet could actually prophesy. These things, these prophecies, were often sung. And so what is looked for oftentimes in prophecy is the evocation of a feeling, of an emotion, of a response in a person rather than just a simple exposition of “Well now, let’s see. In 1335 days the city is going to collapse in a great earthquake.” and telling people what is going to happen in the future.

What a prophet is doing (and to some extent this is true in Revelation) is trying to reach down into the wellspring of the things that make a person work, that affect the way he thinks, that affect the way he does things and interacts with the world around him. And so consequently, the prophets will choose images that might be a little strange to us. But if we had lived in their own time, we might respond fairly well to them.

For example, when a prophet gets ready to tell us that something is evil, he could say, “Well, this is a very evil system that we’re dealing with here.” or he could come along and say, “In my vision I saw a woman clothed in purple and drunken with the blood of the saints of God.” Well, the

image that is drawn here is much more vivid and much more striking than just simply saying, “Well this is an evil system and you really ought to stay away from it.” So Revelation presents images. What is a “candlestick” suppose to mean if you’re reading along in Revelation and tells you here’s a candlestick or here’s a lampstand? And what are these strange beasts and creatures described therein? Theoretically, at least, we ought to assume that there is a meaning to them and it’s poetry; that we ought to be able to read it and grasp somehow from the images that we find therein what exactly it is that this prophet is talking about.

Now, the changes are that the people to whom Revelation was first read had far less difficulty with this than you and I might have. I said “read” because most of the scriptures in most circumstances going all the way back even to the synagogue and the preachers who came by a synagogue and sat in the synagogue and spoke to people—they would oftentimes have the scriptures read before the spoke. Many of the people in the audience were illiterate. If they had a Bible they couldn’t read it. But when you realize that every single scripture, every copy of the scriptures, had to be handwritten painstakingly, you realize there were very few copies around.

So, most letters were read. You didn’t just hand it to somebody and say “read this.” Somebody stood before the congregation and actually read it to them. Now the people who sat in the churches and heard Revelation read probably had a lot less difficulty with the symbolism and the imagery than we have. They spoke the language. They understood the idioms. They even recognized the symbolism. Now this suggests that you and I, two thousand years later and a different language, a different culture, different circumstances, are going to have to work harder than those people had to work to understand what the book of Revelation is all about. We may find it difficulty also because we don’t understand that prophecy is really heavily into this type of imagery and symbolism. We have to learn to let the imagery speak to us. We have to learn to let it evoke the feelings in us that Jesus intended to convey.

Another reason we may find Revelation difficulty, is because God didn’t intend for us to understand it. Now, wait a minute, didn’t I just say the book is “revelation”? It is out there to show us things that are going to come to pass? Well, “us” is relative. What He said was “to show unto his servants things that must shortly come to pass.” He didn’t say everybody. Now that’s a little sobering. Not everyone necessarily was expected to understand the book of Revelation. His servants were expected to understand it.

You know, when you begin to study the Bible, if you really are careful in your reading (just sit down, for example, and begin reading through the Gospel according to Matthew) as you go along through this gospel, sooner or later it should begin to occur to you that Jesus is not necessarily speaking in concrete terms all the time. That he actually used abstracts. He used similes and imagery, and that he spoke in symbols as well. He used metaphors or figures of speech. For example, he made the statement on one occasion “If your right hand offends you, cut it off.” Now there had been a few people in history who have taken that literally and have actually done it. But, think about it—if you stole something, was it your hand’s fault? No. Okay, you grabbed it with your right hand and you carried it out of the store. You got home and felt guilty so you cut off your right hand. That probably will deter you from stealing again, but on the other hand, your left hand didn’t do it. How is it expected to learn the lesson?

There is an absurdity in this that if you try to take Jesus literally in everything he said, you do fall into absurdity—and fairly easily I’m afraid. The fact is that Jesus constantly spoke in images, figures of speech, metaphors, similes, and comparisons. Now, he also in some cases was deliberately obscure. Now that’s not what I expected. I thought Jesus would have made his meaning clear. I thought that he came down here to save people and that he would want to make

the message of the gospel that he was giving to them as clear as he possibly could. He wouldn't want anybody to misunderstand. He wouldn't want anybody to stumble over it. And so, consequently, he spoke in ways that would make his meaning clear. I remember a Sunday school teacher telling me precisely that. Now...she told me that Jesus spoke in parables to make his meaning clear. What did Jesus say was the reason? Well in Matthew thirteen there's an interesting passage of scripture. It's a parable of a sower and the seed. You can read it for yourself, but when he had given this parable to the multitudes, his disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" That's an odd question, in a way. You would think, "Well, I'm trying to just make what I'm saying clear to them so that they will understand it. And why didn't they see that if it made the meaning clear?" But the fact is the disciples didn't seem to understand this parable either.

Matthew 13

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¹⁰ And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why do you speak unto them in parables?
¹¹ He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.

Now that's a shocker. That Jesus actually spoke to the multitudes in ways that he did not expect them to fully understand.

Matthew 13

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¹² For whosoever has, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever has not, from him shall be taken away even what he has.
¹³ Therefore speak I to them in parables: because seeing they see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.
¹⁴ And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, who said, By hearing you shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing you shall see, and shall not perceive:
¹⁵ For this people's heart has become gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.

My, I would have thought conversion and healing were his objectives. And yet he says because of their stubbornness, because they have closed their own eyes, because they had not wanted to hear, I speak to them in parables. Actually you could change the word "parable" to the word "riddle". I speak to them in riddles because they don't see and they don't understand, and they don't because they don't want to. Finally in verse sixteen he said:

Matthew 13

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¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

So we conclude that the condition of the heart and the mind of the hearer is a factor in understanding the book of Revelation. It was not intended that it be clear and easy for everyone to understand. Your heart, your mind, your approach may have something to do with why you

understand or why you don't.

Now another reason why the book of Revelation is difficult is that we take an approach to prophecy that puts our feet on the wrong path in the first place. Consider the purpose of the book: "to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass."

Now, think about it for a moment—why did Jesus' disciples, or his servants, need to know what was going to shortly come to pass? Why tell them? Wouldn't everybody want to know? Oh sure, inquiring minds want to know. But "why" is another question entirely. Did they need to know to satisfy their curiosity? Was it just so that they would know it was coming and when it came about they'd say, "Oh there, it happened. I was told before then that this was going to happen and now it's happened"? Or maybe it was to give them a warning so they could change their lives. Maybe it was so they could look at life differently. Maybe it was so they could see the hand of God in the events as they began to unfold. You need to understand that God does not give prophecy, either Old Testament or New Testament, in any form of biblical prophecy, just so we will know what's going to happen before it happens. There's got to be a *reason* why we need to know what might happen and what might not happen.

If you approach prophecy simply to know what is going to happen before it happens, you are almost certain to get it wrong. There is something about us, you know. We want to know. We're not willing to just sit here and wait and see what happens. We really want to know. But, funny, if we were talking in terms of knowing what the stock market was going to do next week or even next year, we would want to know because we would anticipate *doing something* about what we knew. If we knew what horse was going to win the third race at Santa Anita next week on a certain day—why, that would be a valuable piece of information because we could go to the track, we could put our money down and we could walk away a much wealthier person than when we went in there.

So there is value in knowing the future. But it seems that, a lot of times, people want to know what's going to happen from the Bible just because they want to know. Now if you approach prophecy that way, you're probably going to get it wrong. Because the purpose of biblical prophecy is not merely to tell you what is going to happen and when it's going to happen. Oh yea, "when" is very important—1335 days from now or 1260 days or three and a half years. Not merely with *what* is going to happen and *when*, prophecy is concerned with *why* it's going to happen. *Why* is this calamity coming to pass? *Why* is our nation going into captivity? *Why* is there going to be a drought of three and a half years? *Why* are we going to have earthquakes and *why* are we going to have plagues beginning to fall in upon us? Prophecy deals with *why* these things are taking place. You'll find in many cases the prophet spends a great deal of time telling you what is *wrong* with your life. Telling you what there is about your life that keeps it from working; what it is about your life that has brought this chastisement upon you. If you read prophecy merely to know the future, you'll probably be confused. If you read prophecy to *understand* the future, you'll be on the right track.

Now if you really want to understand biblical prophecy, including the book of Revelation, you need to remember that all prophecy is firmly rooted in history. If you try to understand or interpret prophecy in the Bible divorced from history, you will be lost. A lot of what I read about people who are explaining the book of Revelation or the book of Daniel or some of the particularly far-out, apocalyptic-type literature, is that their prophecies or their interpretations hang in midair. They're just out there. They're just there. And there's no particular reason why you could interpret this beast or that beast or this period of time to be that. There's no particular reason for it; it's just there.

Now back in Isaiah there is a short statement that underlines one of the most important principles you'll ever know about biblical prophecy. It's in the forty-first chapter of Isaiah and I'll begin reading for you in verse 21. What is happening here is that God is challenging the false prophets. He is challenging in particular the false gods. Are you really a god or is this thing that you're carrying around just an idol? Is it just a piece of wood? Is it a piece of stone that you've carved and made something out of—or is it really a god? And he challenges these gods by saying this:

Isaiah 41

KJV2000

²¹ Produce your case, says the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, says the King of Jacob.

²² Let them bring them forth, and show us what shall happen [...]

That's what we all want to know, right? What's going to happen next week? What's going to happen next year? How are things going to go? What's the stock market going to do? Is the nation going to prosper? Is my business going to grow? Tell us what shall happen. Then He continues to say:

Isaiah 41

KJV2000

²² [...L]et them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare to us things to come.

²³ Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods: yea, do good, or do evil, that we may be dismayed, and behold it together.

Now what's it all about? What it's all about is this: that if you're going to explain what's going to happen at the latter end, you have to consider the former things. When did Isaiah write? What was going on when he wrote? What was his prophecy about in the proximate nature? That is in the future—the things that were going to take place in the short term. Because only if you really understand the history of these prophecies will you ever understand the latter end of them or where they ultimately go. Many do not understand Revelation because they are unfamiliar with the Hebrew prophets—especially Daniel. Nor do they understand the history behind those prophets. Nor do they understand the first-century history as it relates to Revelation. And I assure you, it is relevant. Now, there is a consistent pattern that you find in prophecy in the bible. The prophet lays out a historical context. He may name names and places and people who are alive in his prophecy. And he will lay out what is about to happen in the country—in the nation of Israel, particularly in the Old Testament—and he will tell them why. And he will tell them it is because of their sins. He will tell them it was because they have oppressed the poor. These things are going to happen because you are a pack of thieves. They are going to happen because violence has broken out in your land to such an extent that the blood from one crime runs into the blood from another crime. Because all these things have happened, then he lays out what's going to happen in terms of the calamity of the future. And then, importantly, they go *beyond that* to tell them how God will redeem them out of the calamity that they have gotten themselves in. So the prophet develops a clear historical model. And it's worth your time to go back and study that historical model and understand what the prophet is talking about.

Now I've done a series of sermons that we can make available to you called "History and Prophecy." If you'd like to study the history and prophecy with us, write and ask for a free copy of #1 of the History and Prophecy series.

It is a consistent pattern in prophecy to develop a prophecy for the future out of this historical model that the prophet has taken pains to create. That is to say, there is a historical fulfillment of a prophecy that is a model for a later fulfillment. The technical terms for it (and you'll hear them from time to time from biblical students) is "type" and "anti-type." The two words come from a Greek word and they just simply mean "model" and the "fulfillment or the reality of the model that will come along at a later time". Now this is of vital importance in understanding the book of Revelation. We read Revelation in its historical context—not because that is the objective, but because it forms the model of the end of the age. Now there is an enormous amount of controversy among scholars and students of the Bible as to how we're to take the book of Revelation. There are those, for example, who believe that Revelation prophesied things that were shortly to come and they came. They were all fulfilled in the first century and Revelation is over and done with. There's no need to concern yourself with it except as a matter of historical interest. There are others who tell you, "Oh no-no-no, that 'shortly come to pass' means 'shortly to come to pass at the end of the age'". And it is those people at the end of the age who read the book of Revelation to whom these prophecies are directed. And everything in the book of Revelation is directed at the end time. Why does it have to be one way or the other? Why can't we grasp the fact that the prophecies in Revelation are designed for the time in which they were given and at the time in which they given will serve as a model for what's to take place at the end of the age.

Take for example his statement "The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave unto him to show unto his servants things which much *shortly* come to pass." Well, now wait a minute, the book of Revelation, toward the end of it, talks about the return of Christ. And the return of Christ could not have been shortly to come to pass in the first century. He didn't come. I don't think two thousand years is shortly by anybody's use of the language. And I don't think God would have tried to deceive people in that way with that kind of little trick. So when he says things that are going to shortly come to pass, he's talking about things that are on the horizon.

Scholars who actually study the book of Revelation have an early theory and a late theory for the time in which Revelation was written. But early and late are relative terms, they're only about 20 to maybe at the most, 30 years apart. That's not very long. Maybe 15 to 20 years difference between the early and late periods of Revelation. What were you doing 15/20 years ago? I mean, how long ago has it been? The fact is that if that early theory is true, you're placing the actual writing of the book of Revelation shortly after the time that Nero had died. It's early. The temple has not yet been destroyed, Nero, I believe, is dead, and the prophecies of Revelation very sharply and clearly delineate the Roman empire and the people of that time who heard it read, would have seen it that way as clear as crystal. There would have been no question in their mind who Revelation is talking about.

Take for example the famous number: 6-6-6 which is the number of the beast's name. Now that's been studied for generations, but it's all very clear. Nero-Caesar, by following the Greek system of letters and numbers, turns out to number up as 6-6-6. So a first century reader would have said "Oh, 6-6-6; that's Nero; that's who he's talking about." Not only does the number fit, but the characterization of the beast and what the beast was to do and the kind of power these beast had fit Nero to a "T". So the historical model was easily enough understood toward the latter part of the first century. So when he says "these things are going to shortly come to pass", he's talking about much of—not necessarily all of—the book of Revelation. Because we will find as we study the book of Revelation that there is some of it which is clearly end-time and could not have been going to "shortly come to pass" in the first century. But the model would.

To assume Revelation is *only* about the first century is a fatal error. To assume that the first

century has no relevance to the *interpretation* of Revelation, is just as serious a mistake. Now, with that in mind, take a look at the first chapter of Revelation.

Revelation 1

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¹ The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and revealed it by his angel unto his servant John:

² Who bore witness of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw.

So here you got a man whose name is John (we'll see later that he's on the isle of Patmos; he's in trouble; actually in prison at the time) and he saw things and heard things and he bears record of the word of God, the testimony of Jesus Christ and of all the things that he saw; three things that are brought up here. Now what you have is a kind of title page leading into the book of Revelation that identifies what this is. It's the Revelation of Jesus Christ, this is what it's about and this is who got it. This is the contents of it. So all of this is beginning to be laid out for us. Then he says:

Revelation 1

KJV2000

³ Blessed is he that reads, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.

Now the reference to "he that reads and he that hears" is a reference to how this letter would be delivered. What is not oftentimes understood about the book of Revelation is that it is an epistle. Just as much as Romans is an epistle of Paul, Revelation is an epistle of John. It is an epistle that is directed at seven churches in Asia Minor. And we might want to talk a little later about why *those* seven churches and what are they and what's the significance of them. But for now, we have a title page that tells us who got it, who it's going to and he also says that you are going to have this read in church and there are people who are going to sit and listen. So blessed is the reader, and blessed are those that sit and hear and who keep the things that are written therein.

Now there is an important difference to understand between prophecy and apocalypse. The "apocalypse" means revelation and that's what we've got in the book of Revelation. There is a kind of prophecy that comes along which in many ways, in Daniel, seems to say or seems to be oriented toward telling you *what's* going to happen and *when* it's going to happen and *how long* it's going to be from one thing to the other in the thing. That's apocalyptic literature. Prophecy, on the other hand, is really a kind of preaching. It has to do with moral content. In other words, there's a great deal of moral content in prophecy whereas in apocalyptic it's almost entirely absent. So the prophets tell you what's going to happen and why it's going to happen. The apocalyptic literature tends to just tell you *why* and you've got to go to the prophets to find out what that's all about. But then, notice in Revelation, that Revelation is not pure apocalyptic; it is prophecy. Because he not only says that you *hear* the words of the prophecy, but that you *keep* the things that are written in this.

Now remember I asked earlier, "Why do you want to know? Why is he going to tell you? Why do you need to know what is going to shortly come to pass?" Well the answer is simply enough so you can respond to it. So you can do something about your life so that you can straighten up

where you're not flying right. So that you can actually get things rolling in your life. So when you sit down to read the book of Revelation, it's a good time for you to think through your own life, to think about the things you need to deal with because the time is at hand. It applies now as I think it never has in the history of the world; as we see many of the things taking place around the world that look very much like the things that are prophesied in the book of Revelation. But in a way it doesn't matter. For any of us, at any time of our lives and wherever we are, the time is at hand to turn your life around. And, you know, that's the objective of prophecy—it's to sober you up. To make you see God's hand in history; that He is working and that He is going to do these things whether we human beings like it very much or not.

In the next program I want to get into the first chapter of Revelation and talk about those curious "seven spirits" that are before the throne of God. What they do; what they accomplish. But all that will have to wait until the next program. Until then, this is Ronald Dart saying, "Straighten up and fly right."

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