

Approaching hoofbeats - The Book of Revelation

Sessions 1&2

The Bible's teaching on the future has produced much controversy, and so it is important to draw out of the Bible the areas of greatest certainty and then also identify the areas where there are differences of interpretation. This study shall approach the subject as follows:

The four main methods of interpreting Revelation.

There are four main methods of interpreting the Book of Revelation and other New Testament writings about the coming of Christ. These four methods are not competing methods. They are simply four ways in which truth must be drawn from the book. In this way it can be seen that the book really does speak to all the ages of the Church from the first century to the last years immediately preceding the return of Christ.

I. Preterist.

The Preterist view interprets the Book of Revelation and other passages such as Matt 24 as referring to events that took place in the first century AD. Thus the Abomination of Desolation occurred when the Roman armies desecrated and destroyed the Temple in AD 70. There is no doubt that many of the prophecies of Jesus referred to events that were to take place within a short period of time. This included most of the crises in Judea which led to the fall of Jerusalem. Jesus said that armies would surround Jerusalem: Luke 21:22-24. The siege and fall of Jerusalem were a period of terrible tribulation for the Jews; which could be the meaning of the prophecy in Matt 24:21. The Christians heeded the warnings of Jesus and fled from Judea to a town called Pella in Jordan in AD 67. There were false Messiahs in the siege who claimed that God would deliver them. Jesus said that Jerusalem would fall and that it would be trodden underfoot till the time of the Gentiles was fulfilled.

However, Jesus also made prophecies that were not fulfilled in the first century. For example, He said that the fig tree would blossom again: Matt 24:32. He said that the angels would gather His elect from the four corners of the compass: Matt 24:31. These were clearly prophecies that relate to the end of the age; not merely to the first century. It becomes necessary to twist these scriptures to try and interpret them as having been fulfilled in the first century! But it is important to recognise that some of the prophecies were fulfilled in the first century. John said that some of the prophecies of Revelation would "shortly take place" Revelation 1:1, but it is clear that many of the prophecies still await fulfilment.

It is also important to recognise the degree of *cyclical* fulfilment of prophecy. By this is meant that there is more than one fulfilment of a prophecy. Take for example the prophecy of the *Abomination of Desolation*. This prophecy was originally given by Daniel: Daniel 8:11-13 and 11:31. It was fulfilled by the desecration of the temple in 167-164 BC by Antiochus Epiphanes. But Jesus refers to it as something future, which was clearly fulfilled in AD 70 but certainly has further fulfilments, including the misuse of papal authority in the middle ages, and the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem. The Dome of

the Rock on the temple mount is also a fulfilment of this prophecy which continues to the present day. On the inside of the prayer area in the dome is the inscription stating that Mohammed is God's prophet and God has no Son. I John 2:22 states "He is Antichrist who denies the Father and the Son." There may yet be a further fulfilment of this prophecy and of other prophecies. Jerusalem may yet again be surrounded by armies.

II. Historical.

The historical method of interpreting the prophecies of the New Testament is based on the belief that these prophecies are concerning the unfolding of events in the whole of the Church age. According to this method, the seals of Revelation 6 are events in history. The reformation is symbolised by the discovery of the little book in Revelation chapter 10 and by the death and resurrection of the two witnesses in Revelation chapter 11. This method of interpretation is fascinating and its proponents are convincing. But this method requires a vast knowledge of history which has only been available to few of the generations of Bible readers since the Bible was written! The breadth of information needed to develop this interpretation is not available to most readers in developing nations and so is irrelevant to such readers. This method of Bible interpretation has fewer proponents in the 20th and 21st centuries, but was quite popular in the 19th century. Whether or not the symbols of Revelation can be tied to specific events in world history, there is no doubt that the Book of Revelation teaches the ways of God in history. Hence, we know that there are changes in the course of history, not merely because men have made a political decision, but rather because Christ opened a seal in heaven.

III. Symbolical.

This method interprets the Book of Revelation by looking at the imagery in other parts of the Bible. Thus when Babylon is mentioned, a study of the origins of this city reveals that it is the site where the tower of Babel was built. It is the city where Daniel was in exile for nearly the whole seventy years of the captivity. Babylon is the head of gold in Nebuchadnezzar's vision in Daniel chapter 2. Most of the symbols used in the Book of Revelation can be found in other parts of the Bible. This enables the reader to understand the processes of the end times and thus work out the meaning of the Book.

The Key Message of Revelation is: GOD IS IN CONTROL. This message is of course contained in all the interpretations of Revelation but the symbolical method interprets HOW God is in control. According to this method the symbols explain how God rules from heaven. Activity on earth is because of things that happen in the unseen world.

IV. Futurist.

The Futurist method is that which interprets the Book of Revelation as referring to a very short period of time at the end of history. There are many variations of this interpretation, but the most common is that introduced by Schofield, through his Bible notes which were published at the end of the 19th century. According to this interpretation, the rapture of the Church is described in Revelation chapter 4:1 and the rest of the book describes the period of the tribulation till chapter 19 when the return of Christ is described. This is by far the most common interpretation at the beginning of the 21st century, but is not the only authoritative one in terms of principles of biblical interpretation. There are

also many assumptions and speculations that are made. These include a belief that the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem and that sacrifices will again be made there. The evidence for this is the mention of the daily sacrifices being taken away; if this is a future event, there must be a re-establishment of the Temple first. There is also a belief that at the rapture there will be numerous accidents as Christian drivers and airline pilots suddenly disappear. Again this is speculation. The thought that believers will avoid tribulation is attractive to all, but this is an interpretation of scripture.

Which is the right method?... All of them!

There is no doubt that some of the prophecies refer to the first century. There is also no doubt that the Book of Revelation teaches principles of history that can and must be applied to the whole two thousand years of Church history. There is also no doubt that the Book of Revelation must be interpreted in the light of symbols and illustrations in the Old Testament scriptures. Moreover the fact that the book reveals the future is also beyond doubt.

The only conclusion that can be reached by the serious Bible student is that the Book speaks to us on several different levels and that we must seek to draw understanding from all four of these methods of studying the Book. The Bible throws light on human history. However there are some views of the Book of Revelation that are very weak. These tend to be based on current affairs. John Wesley was convinced that the Turkish Ottoman Empire was the Antichrist kingdom. Believers during the cold war believed that the USSR was the Antichrist. Such views are attractive and have some contribution to make but are often proved wrong by the flow of history.

THE SIGNS OF THE END.

There are many references to the end times in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments; for example:

- Daniel's 70 weeks prophecy
- Zechariah 14 speaks of the return of the Lord to the Mount of Olives
- Thessalonians reveals that Antichrist will be destroyed by the return of Christ; and we shall meet the Lord in the air (the rapture).
- The Olivet Prophecy
Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the same teaching of Jesus on the last days, when the disciples point out the temple buildings to Him. (see below)

The seventy weeks of Daniel

Many believers are convinced that the history of the last days can be best understood by interpreting the seventy weeks of Daniel. Daniel prophesied in 9:24-27 that there would be a period of 70 weeks which covers the structure of key events from the rebuilding of Jerusalem until the final consummation of all at the return of Christ.

How is this possible? Firstly, each day of the seventy weeks represents a year, giving a period of 490 years. Secondly these years are not consecutive but are interrupted as follows:

The start date:

The command to restore and build Jerusalem was around 457 BC.

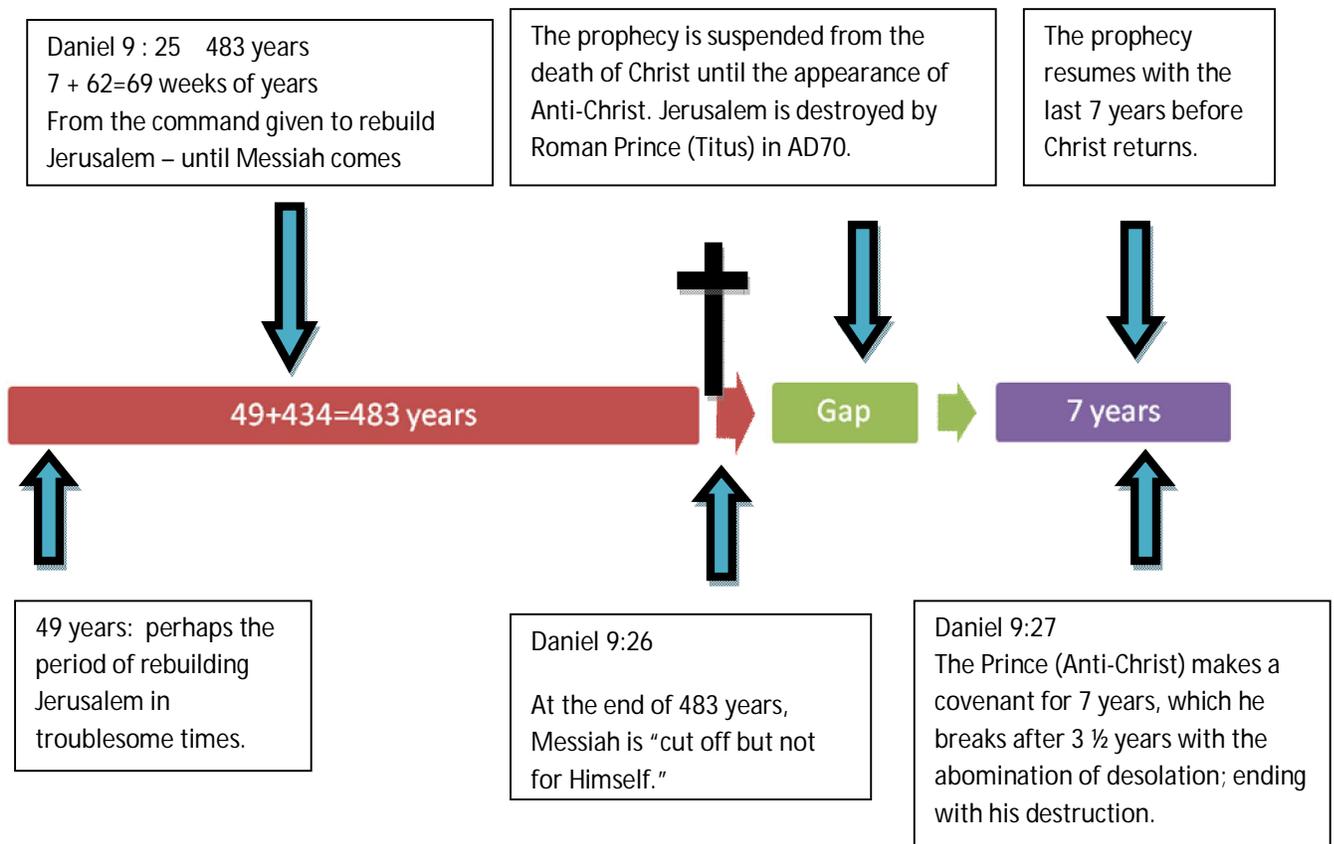
The appearing of Messiah: $62 + 7 = 69 \times 7 = 483$ years.

This brings us to the public appearance of Christ in AD 26

(The modern calendar dates from Pope Gregory the Great who made a mistake of 4 years in calculating the year of the birth of Christ. So Jesus was born in BC 4, began his ministry at the age of 30 in AD 26 and was crucified at the age of 33 in AD 29).

There remains one final week which is not accounted for, as there is clearly and intervening span of history between verses 26 and 27.

The final week then refers to the resumption of Daniel's timetable at the end of time. This timetable requires a period of 7 years immediately preceding the final return of Christ. Many believe that Daniel 9:27 indicates that the Prince of Rome who destroyed the temple in AD 70 will be paralleled by a future prince of Rome who will be the Antichrist. Some believe that the treaty of Rome, which was made to found the EU, indicates that the EU is a revived Roman empire. This would also fit in with the vision of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2, whereby a fragmented form of the Roman Empire is the form assumed by the Antichrist when Christ returns. By this interpretation the Antichrist will make a treaty which will lead to peace in the Middle East, but that he will break the treaty in the middle of the week and great persecution will ensue. Most of these interpreters believe that the Church will be caught up in a "Secret rapture" at this point and that the second half of the week is the Great Tribulation which will be "the time of Jacob's trouble" Jeremiah 30:7. This will culminate in a terrible war around Jerusalem described in Zechariah 12-14 and Rev 19. This is Armageddon.



This basic framework is the Futurist interpretation of the last days. It is certainly true that the numbers 1260 days, and forty two months (3 ½ years) appear and re-appear in the book of Revelation. This would fit in well with this interpretation.

While the interpretation may be correct it is nevertheless wrong to build too large a structure on this. Novels have been written around this subject and have speculated on the implications of a secret rapture. In these films and novels airplanes and buses crash as Christian pilots and drivers suddenly disappear. This is speculation and there is no biblical evidence to support such a scenario, though there is no absolute reason why it could not be accurate. The Bible says "one will be taken and another left" Matt. 24: 40, but does not teach that it will be exactly as described in these books.

This futurist interpretation is often applied to the Book of Revelation in a manner which is also speculative and not one hundred per cent accurate. According to this view, the secret rapture is described in Rev 4:1 when John is told to "come up hither". The rest of the book is then interpreted as a description of events in the Great Tribulation until the return of Christ in Rev 19. In this way, almost all of Revelation fits into about the three and a half years of the Great Tribulation, and has no direct relevance to the majority of Christians. This is a weak interpretation of Revelation and relies almost entirely on the fact that the Church is not mentioned by that title after chapter 3 and until chapter 19. This is a weak principle by which to interpret the Bible. For example the word "disciple" does not occur in the New Testament after Acts, but this does not mean that the epistles of Paul were not part of the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations! Nevertheless, it does not mean that the futurist interpretation is wrong. Rather the important thing is to have an open mind and a humble non-dogmatic attitude.

The teaching of Jesus – The Olivet prophecy

Jesus Christ is the greatest of all the prophets in the Bible, and it is no wonder that His Olivet prophecy (Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21), provides us with a vital overview and key to understanding all Bible prophecy.

The disciples ask Jesus, in Matthew 24:3 "*When will these things be, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age.*" Jesus then gives an outline of all key events leading up to His return and the end of all things.

Leading up to the end

- False Messiahs and False prophets will appear: Matt 24:5 and 11
- Wars and rumours of wars: Matt 24:6
- Famines, earthquakes and diseases: Matt 24:7
- Increasing persecution of the Church: Matt 24:8.
- Increasing sin and iniquity resulting in a decrease of love and compassion: Matt 24:12
- The gospel will be preached throughout the whole world - and then end will come: Matt 24:14

Events fulfilled since Jesus

- Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 : Luke 21:20
- The fig tree shall blossom: Matt 24:32. Israel became a nation once more in 1948
- Jerusalem shall be a Jewish city once more: Luke 21:24. This was fulfilled in 1967
- Many small nations will regain their independence in the last days, not only Israel: Luke 21:29

Events still to come

- The Abomination of Desolation shall be erected once more: Matt 24:15
- The Great Tribulation: Matt 24:21
- False Christs and prophets come to deceive: Matt 24:24
- The powers of heaven will be shaken: Matt:24:29
- Believers shall meet Christ in the air: Matt 24:31
- Christ shall return: Mat 24:27

AN OVERVIEW OF REVELATION

- Chapter 1

Christ revealed as Lord and God and in the midst of the Church.

- Chapters 2- 3

Jesus is in the midst of His Churches ministering to keep the light burning brightly. He addresses the Churches, correcting or commending and encouraging. The rest of the book is irrelevant unless the Churches are responding to their Lord. These are not types of Churches in historical succession, but rather are seven types of Churches that exist at any time in Church history.

- Chapters 4 - 5

Heaven, the throne room: centre of all history. Here we see the scene in heaven before and during the cross. The song is a song of worship to the Creator in chapter 4, but turns in chapter 5 to the song of the Redeemed. The Lamb of God appears slain on the throne, and the blood presented in heaven unleashes the song of the redeemed.

- Chapters 6-11

The opening of seven seals and the sounding of the seven trumpets. The history of the world from the cross to the return of Christ is recounted. History is punctuated by the opening of seven seals.

- Chapters 12-18 The main players in history:

1. Ch 12: Israel and the Church

2. Ch 13: The Antichrist

3. Ch 14: The End-time Church

4. Ch 14: End-time revival followed by judgment

5. Ch 15 -16: Heaven pours out final judgments leading up to Armageddon

6. Ch 17 – 18: Babylon the capital of an Antichrist world system

- Ch 19 Armageddon and the return of Christ

- Ch 20 The Millennium followed by The Judgment

- Ch 21-22 The Bride in the New Creation

Revelation chapters 1-3

Jesus is in the midst of His Churches ministering to keep the light burning brightly.



The seven Churches of Revelation:

- Ephesus
- Smyrna
- Pergamum
- Thyatira
- Sardis
- Philadelphia
- Laodicea

The seven Churches of Asia:

The seven Churches are a picture of the Church throughout the Church age. Some have suggested that they are symbolic of the Church in a historical sense. It is rather that these seven kinds of Churches are to be found at any one time in Church history, both in the first and the twenty first centuries! What then are the main points exposed in these letters?

Ephesus – the loveless Church

Ephesus was a successful Church and here once more it is important to recognise that not all that pleases man pleases God. The Church was hard working, had resisted false apostles (who shall multiply in the last days: 2 Tim 3:1-9 and 2 Peter 2:1). The Church had not given in to weariness and fainting. The Church had been given the privilege of receiving the greatest ministry, being founded by

Paul, pastured by Timothy and then having John in its eldership and Mary the mother of Jesus in its membership! Imagine having tea with Mary and John and all the fascinating stories they must have known. The Church had been born in revival and among the early assemblies was one of the most privileged.

How sober then was the warning that even this great Church had fallen. Jesus said that the Church had fallen and thus indicated that as far as He was concerned the condition of this Church was dangerously similar to other fallen beings ("How you are fallen from heaven, Lucifer son of the morning," Isaiah 14:12). Many teachers of the word speak of the fall of Adam, although the phrase is never used in the Bible. This Church had slipped and fallen from its exalted position and there can be no doubt that privilege always brings with it the danger of smug satisfaction and pride. We are blessed because God is good and gracious to sinners, not because we are so great and worthy of blessing!

The Church continued on in the form of a successful Church but was heading for disaster. They had lost love for the Lord and for each other. Duty was the motive, not love. Outwardly, all was the same, but inwardly there was a coldness and distance from Christ and from each other. The times of prayer would have been marked with great prayers but coldness. The teaching would have been marked with great correctness but no passion. The worship would have been a shadow of former days when zeal and love moved them to great acts of renunciation. Acts 19:19 tells of the burning of books worth 3 million US dollars!

Now the Church was cold and close to death. Though this may seem hard to believe, Paul describes the greatest of sacrifice, knowledge and even faith as meaningless and empty if there is no love: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Clearly the answer for this Church is to return to first love, and to seek God and a renewal of intimacy in prayer and devotion.

Smyrna – the Church in times of persecution

This Church needed words of affirmation and encouragement from the Lord. When we are in the right way, God seeks to affirm us and strengthen us. This Church was passing through severe opposition and persecution. They seemed poor in their own sight but were rich in the eyes of God. The key word of Jesus to this and to all Churches is "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give you a crown of life." This word does not mean merely that we must be faithful all of our lives, but that we must be willing to give our lives for the Church, and for the Lord. The Lord Himself loved His Church and died for her (Ephesians 5:25). Christians must have this life-style that is choosing God above life itself.

Pergamos – False teaching and immorality

This Church had kept faithfulness to the Lord through days of persecution. Jesus uses the interesting word "Antipas" to describe one of the early martyrs in this town. The word means literally "against everything!" This sums up the Christian's lot: he is a stranger in every nation and an opposer of every other religion and philosophy. Though he is kind, loving and generous to all, yet in his mind and philosophy he is in direct conflict with the world and the powers of darkness that lie behind the world's systems. (1 John 2:15-16). This is the fate of all who would live faithful to Jesus: they will be persecuted: 2 Tim 3:12.

Jesus commends this Church but is grieved that despite the many victories there is impurity in the teaching. The teaching of Balaam led to idolatry and immorality, and was a ministry that was motivated by financial gain. These are serious warnings in the twenty-first century when there are many scandals involving misuse of money in the ministry and sexual immorality. Once more the warning is chilling since these things can of themselves draw great numbers. Sinners do not want to renounce worldly carnal pleasures. But the Church who would please God, must live in purity, through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thyatira – False teaching and immorality

Thyatira was in a similar condition to Pergamos, and had works that were greater than the early days of its founding. However the false teaching here was of greater level and involved a “Jezebel spirit”. Many have assumed this to be an attack on the ministry of women, but this is surely a gross oversimplification. The Church is the bride of Christ, but this does not mean that it is only open to females! Similarly there are many men with a “Jezebel spirit” which symbolises a teaching that waters down the message of holiness in the Church and permits fornication, adultery, divorce for trivial reasons and remarriage. While grace is needed in the Church in the handling of those who fail, yet there is to be a clear upholding of righteousness and holiness in the Churches, not by works of the law, but by grace through faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Church must be holy, and no amount of numbers in the Church can change the mind of the Lord on this essential foundation of spiritual life.

Sardis – the Church with a great name but a dead spirit

Think of the best possible name for a Church. Watchman Nee so disliked the denominational titles that he refused at last to recognise them and acknowledged only the Church of a locality, hence the Church of Singapore, the Church of London etc... Soon of course this name lost its significance. Others have thought out the best title believing that it will make a significant contribution. “The True Church of God.” “The True Apostolic Church of God.” “The True Apostolic, Full Gospel, Pentecostal Four Square Assemblies of God.” The name means in the end nothing but it is rather the lives of the believers that will make the reputation of the Church. Jesus rebukes this Church for having a great name but a poor life! He declares that they never see things through, they never finish things off. They start but do not finish, and they give up half way. This Church must turn back to remember how God had moved in the past and seek somehow to regain that original freshness by seeking God for a fresh out pouring of the Holy Spirit.

Philadelphia – the Church distinguished by fervent love

This is the second of the seven Churches with no reproof from the Lord. Jesus declares that though the Church has little strength, yet it is very precious to Him, no doubt because of the brotherly love. This means that the Church has an open door in the Spirit, in prayer, in preaching, in evangelism in all realms. Love will open the door, and love is the great key to growth. Love sinners, seek out people to help, take opportunities to pour out to people. Such a Church will grow and only such a Church deserves to grow!

Laodicea – the half hearted Church

This is the Church that has often been taken as the picture of the western Church in the 21st century. It is a Church that has wealth but no zeal. There is a terrible condemnation in that there is neither coldness nor zeal and Jesus declares that He will vomit the Church as tasteless out of His mouth. Christ states that if there were coldness in the Church He could do something, because souls would realise their need, but lukewarmness produces just those sleepy conditions which allows the Christians to have enough religion not to fear eternity, but not enough to flee the world.

Jesus counsels this Church to be zealous! How can one find zeal if that is precisely what is lacking? The answer is obedience. Jesus is declaring that it lies within the response of His people to be zealous and not just to wait for something to happen.

There are three aspects to His advice:

1. To buy gold, this is godly character and enduring faith.
2. To buy white clothing. This is purity and inner holiness.
3. To buy eye-salve to anoint their eyes. This is revelation from God.

The Church needs to transact with God on these things. But what is the currency of heaven? How can we buy them? The answer is the currency of the heart: humility, faith, love, repentance and zeal. This is a currency that every person has to hand, but cannot be used without giving up things that compete with the goal of faith.