

Basic Rules of Bible Study

Compare Scripture with Scripture

“Whom shall He teach knowledge? And whom shall He make to understand doctrine? Them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little” (Isaiah 28:9-10).

“Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13).

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Each of the Bible writers was inspired by the same God. While it is composed of sixty-six books and written by forty-four different authors over a 1,500 year span of time, the Bible is a cohesive whole dealing with one basic theme. What one writer only touches upon, another explains in greater detail. Sometimes two or more prophets saw the same realities clothed with similar or entirely different symbolism. By comparing all that is written on a given topic, we are far more likely to discover the Bible’s intended meaning and be guarded against false interpretations.

Rightly Divide the Word of God

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing [handling accurately] the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

It is vital that we let the Bible say what it intends to say and not become reckless in our dissecting of its chapters and verses to concoct private interpretations. Every passage of Scripture has an immediate context that must not be violated and must be viewed in the broader context of the whole Word of God. Any interpretation of a text that does not harmonize with the rest of Scripture should be discarded, no matter how tempting or fascinating.

Allow the Bible to Decode Its Own Symbols

“And he saith unto me, The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues” (Revelation 17:15).

“The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth” (Daniel 7:23).

It is characteristic of Scripture to define its own symbols. For example: John saw waters as a symbol. The angel later told him that water represents many people of different nations. Daniel saw a series of beasts. The angel told him that the beasts represent kingdoms.

Approach the Bible with an Attitude of Teachable Dependence on the Holy Spirit’s Guidance

“But God hath revealed them [spiritual realities] unto us by His Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the

things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:10-14).

God Himself is the source of all truth. No human being ever really *discovers* truth. Rather, God *reveals* it. Therefore, the attitude with which we come to the Bible matters much. We need to be more humble than intelligent, more sincere than educated. While a bright and disciplined mind can be highly beneficial, if that’s all we have, truth is out of reach to us. We need more than human wisdom to truly understand the rich spiritual treasures of the Bible. We need divine guidance. And that means we need to study the Bible with a sense of our own weakness and total dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Be Willing to Obey What You Learn

“If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of Myself” (John 7:17).

“But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22).

The Bible is not intended to merely satisfy curiosity or stimulate us intellectually. Nor is it meant to supply us with ammunition to blast other people. The Word of God aims for individual hearts for the dual purpose of salvation and transformation. Its truths are meant for obedience. Truth beckons us to harmony with the principles it reveals. Those who study the Scriptures with no intent to obey the Lord are destined for confusion and deception.

Maintain a Christ-Centered Focus

“Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).

The great central theme of the Bible, the subject around which every other in the whole book clusters, is Jesus Christ. Jesus as Creator and Sustainer. Jesus as Savior and Lord. Jesus as Father and Friend. All true Bible study is ultimately a quest to know Him, the One in whom our deepest hopes and truest identity find realization. Doctrine, theology, prophecy and history—all are invested with practical significance only when Jesus occupies center stage.

It’s really quite simple, this decoding of prophecy. We don’t have to guess. We don’t have to stretch the imagination. We don’t have to conclude that the beast is the person who happens to be on our nerves when we read those verses. All we need to do is let the Bible speak for itself by looking at its own interpretation of its symbols, pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, willingly submit to what we learn, and keep our focus on Jesus.

With this basic formula for Bible study, we’d like to invite you to prepare yourself for an exciting and enlightening journey into the prophecies of Revelation.

Study 1

Revelation—A Book of Open Secrets



Unlocking Revelation

It is strange, don’t you think, that the one book of the Bible called *The Revelation* is viewed by so many people as a series of unsolvable mysteries? Even some Bible scholars have concluded that this book of symbolic prophecies is a *concealment* of truth rather than a *revelation* as its title claims.

Is it really impossible to decode the meaning of a series of strange cartoon-like images? Is God actually trying to keep the climactic events of the future a secret by veiling them in cryptic symbolism? If He is, then we might as well conclude that the title of the book is intended by the Lord to be a divine joke, a bit of stale heavenly humor. After all, what could be more funny than to keep the future a secret while claiming to reveal it.

On second thought, it’s not funny at all. Especially since Revelation is unmistakably clear on at least one point: there are some very serious issues at stake at the end of the world, not the least among them being our eternal salvation. Can you imagine how *unfunny* such a joke would be?

“At the end of time,” God explains, “there’s going to be a sinister beast (one of Revelation’s symbols) with a terrible mark to enforce (another symbol), and if you follow this beast and receive his dreadful mark, you’ll be lost and suffer My wrath.”

Then comes the not-so-hilarious punch line:

“And I’m *not* going to tell you who the beast is or what the mark is. Good luck!”

Ha. Ha. Ha. Real funny.

Right?

Wrong!

It makes no sense at all. God doesn't operate that way. The Bible says He wants all of us to be saved and none to be lost (see 2 Peter 3:9). Why then would He deliberately make it impossible for us to understand the crucial issues we will be facing at the end of time, issues of judgment and destiny?

The fact is, He wouldn't, and He hasn't.

Yes, Revelation is a highly symbolic book. But while its meaning will always be a mystery to God's enemies, it is intended to be an opening of divine secrets—a disclosure of vital end-time truth—to those who love God and want to be ready for the return of Jesus.

Concealed or Revealed?

The first three verses of Revelation express God's desire that we understand its symbolism: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto Him, to shew unto His servants things which must shortly come to pass; and He sent and signified it by His angel unto His servant John: who bare record of the Word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand" (Revelation 1:1-3).

What are the first five words? "The Revelation of Jesus Christ."

And what is it intended to reveal? "Things which must shortly come to pass."

The book of Revelation is a foretelling of future events from John's day to the end of time. This is why, in 1:3, John refers to the visions he received as *prophecy*. A prophecy is a prediction of something to come. Revelation is composed of eight basic prophetic visions, given to John by Jesus through an angel-guide, with the intent that we would understand the future of our world.

At first glance, it appears to many readers that Revelation is a disorganized, hit-and-miss collection of random visions. Consequently, the relationship between the visions seems unclear. Actually, Revelation is a masterpiece of literary organization. And once its system of order is seen, so much that was difficult to grasp becomes clear.

Part of the problem for the average reader is the chapter divisions. The way the book is divided into chapters has made it difficult for us to notice the natural breaks that exist in the book. As a result, we have not readily discerned the author's intended relationship between the visions.

As we read Revelation, it is helpful to remember that the chapter divisions are not inspired by the Holy Spirit as is the book's message itself. When John wrote the book, he did not include chapter divisions. His own divisions are inherent in the progressions and shifts from vision to vision. The chapter divisions as we find them in the Bible were not added until some 1,100 years after John wrote Revelation. In some ways the chapter divisions as we now have them are helpful, namely for ease of reference. On the other hand, it is necessary that we study the book as a whole, and not get hung up on those divisions. We will then be more likely to understand its vital message as John intended it to be perceived.

The basic composition of the book is as follows:

Prologue (1:1-9)

This is a book of prophecies that will certainly come to pass. The climactic event is the second coming of Jesus Christ.

1. The Seven Churches (1:10–3:22)

Christ speaks to His church from the time of the apostles until His second coming, to counsel, to correct, and to promise rewards to the overcomers.

2. The Seven Seals (4:1–8:1)

Christ reveals the history of His church—its struggles and dangers—from the time of the apostles until His second coming.

Interlude: the 144,000 (7:1–17)

The sixth seal closes with the question, "Who shall be able to stand when Jesus comes?" An interlude occurs between the sixth and the seventh seal to answer that question by revealing the 144,000. The seventh seal then reveals the second coming of Christ.

3. The Seven Trumpets (8:2–11:19)

Christ reveals the fall of earthly kingdoms and the futility of human religion under the rule of Satan. Christ's kingdom alone is found worthy to reign.

Interlude: the Bittersweet Book and the Two Witnesses (10:1–11:13)

The first six trumpets reveal the activity of Satan through human systems to forward his malignant kingdom. An interlude occurs between the sixth and the seventh trumpets to reveal the movements of God through His people to preserve His Word and preach His message. When the seventh trumpet sounds, the kingdom of Christ is triumphant.

4. The War Behind All Wars (12:1–14:20)

Christ reveals the warfare between Himself and Satan, between good and evil, as it began in heaven and then was transferred to planet earth. Satan attempted to murder Christ as soon as He came to this world as our Savior, but Christ defeated him at the cross. Now the archrebel wars against the church of Christ, but will ultimately be defeated as the people of Jesus trust in His shed blood for salvation and bear testimony to God's power. The church will be nurtured in the wilderness during twelve hundred years of severe persecution and will then emerge as a remnant that keeps God's commandments and has the testimony of Jesus. Then will occur the final showdown between the church of Christ and the agents of Satan, who are symbolized by a beast that arises out of the sea and a beast that arises from the earth. The *mark of the beast* will be enforced upon the world and the people of Jesus tested.

Interlude: Final message, Final harvest (14:1-12)

An interlude occurs at this point to reveal the final message of Christ to the world through His church, symbolized by the proclamations of three angels, as the sea-beast and the land-beast endeavor to deceive the world. Then is revealed the final harvest that separates the saved from the lost of earth's population preparatory to the second coming of Christ.

5. The Seven Last Plagues (15:1–16:21)

Christ reveals the close of human probation, the final judgments that will come upon the world just prior to His second coming, and the battle of Armageddon.

6. The Fall of Babylon (17:1–19:10)

Christ reveals the corruption and final demise of this world's false systems of religion, symbolized by the ancient kingdom of Babylon, and calls His faithful people to separate from Babylon so as not to partake of her sins and share in her fate.

7. The Return of Christ and the Millennium (19:11–21:8)

Christ reveals His second coming, the end of Satan's reign, the millennial judgment of His enemies and their final punishment.

8. The Kingdom of God Established (21:9–22:5)

Christ reveals the re-creation of heaven and earth free from the results of sin, and the new Jerusalem as the eternal home of Him and His people.

Epilogue (22:6-21)

The prophecies of this book are true. Do not alter them by adding to or deleting any part of its message. Come and partake of the water of life that Jesus offers that you may be among those who inherit the kingdom. He is coming quickly!

The Blessing in Revelation

Not only can Revelation be understood, it also promises a great blessing to those who study its prophecies (see Revelation 1:3). There are many who are reluctant to study Revelation for fear of what they might learn. At first glance it does seem a bit scary—with the beast and the dragon and the time of tribulation, not to mention the human-sized hail, the sinking islands, the burning mountain and the great earthquake. Yet, John opens the book by saying that those who get into Revelation will be *blessed*, which actually means *to be made happy*.

"I don't get it," you may be thinking. "A scary beast, a dragon, a great earthquake—and all this is going to make me happy?"

Yes, that's what John says. And really it makes a lot of sense when you stop and think about it. What makes scary stuff so scary? The element of surprise, right?

If a friend or family member tries to sneak up behind you to poke your ribs and say, "Boo," the *boo* is robbed of its bang if you hear the prankster coming.

It's the element of surprise that makes scary stuff so scary. That's why God has given us the prophecies of Revelation—not to *scare* us, but to *prepare* us. Prophecy is God's way of saying, "I love you and want you to be prepared for the events that are soon to come upon the world like a thief in the night."

I don't know about you, but that makes me pretty happy. It puts prophecy in a new light—to *prepare* me, not to *scare* me. I like that, and it makes me eager to dive right in and unravel the symbolism.

But how? Do I just read it through and randomly assign whatever meaning seems exciting?

"The *beast* is Saddam Hussein. The *dragon* is his ruthless army. And the *white horse rider* is the President of the United States."

One woman said the beast of Revelation is her mother-in-law, obviously a slanted interpretation.

No, prophecy doesn't work that way.

The apostle Peter explains that "no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20). That is to say, the meaning of biblical prophecy is not a matter of individual speculation. The same God who gave prophecy has provided for its accurate interpretation by means of a special decoding system. The prophecies of the book of Revelation have only one correct interpretation, and there is only one way to discover it: ALLOW THE BIBLE TO INTERPRET ITSELF!