

# **An Overview of the Book of Revelation**

## **Introduction**

In this overview I am attempting to present the book of Revelation in language that is not symbolic (i.e., explain the symbols as best we can) so that anyone reading this will have a better understanding of what the book is teaching. I am writing this without justification for any of the content, but simply making an attempt to bring to the reader a narrative of the book that is understandable for our time in history. I am not trying to write a commentary, and therefore, I have left out a lot of detail about the visions, only presenting the main idea of each. It should be helpful to have the text of the book readily available. Reading the actual text will help fill in some detail that I am not including.

Most of my information has been taken from Homer Hailey's book "Revelation, an Introduction and Commentary" which is based largely on the writings of many scholars who are listed in the Bibliography at the end of his book. If the reader wants to obtain more information about the symbolic nature and justification for my narrative, it may be obtained from Homer Hailey's book or those listed in his Bibliography. I have also used information from L.L. Stout in his book "Outline of the Book of Revelation", as well as "A Commentary on Revelation" by John T. Hinds.

There are several interpretations of the book which are well recognized by scholars, but most cannot be supported by clear teaching in other parts of the New Testament. There is a good summary of these views in the "Neal-Wallace Discussion on the Thousand Years Reign of Christ" page 29, and Homer Hailey's book page 48.

The view that best defines the book is that it was written to encourage the Christians of John's day. The book describes the judgments and wrath of God upon unregenerate men. While it is true that the concern for the Christians of John's day was the persecution from the Roman Empire with its emperor worship and lust for physical things, the same judgments and wrath is meted out to nations throughout history, including our own time. Consider Sodom, the Canaanites, Israel, Judah, and all the rest of the ancient nations; when, due to spiritual decay, they were no longer fit to continue, God removed them. A society abandoned to idolatry and its consequent morals, as was the Roman Empire of John's day, is spiritually dead. In such a society, morals decline to the lowest level; the family collapses, schools breed anarchy and rebellion, business ethics are forgotten, and entertainment becomes base, until the world is strangled in its own death blood and suffocated by its own stench. These judgments of the book are not the final judgment of saints and sinners, but are an ongoing judgment upon nations that are not obedient to the laws of God. America and other nations of the present time would do well to take note of the warnings put forth in the Revelation letter.

The message of the book is an assurance of victory and triumph – the triumph of truth and righteousness for the saints who hold the truth, and the defeat and ultimate destruction of Satan along with his followers and helpers.

The purpose of the book is to reveal through symbols the nature and character of the great conflict breaking forth between the divine forces and principals of truth and the forces of evil. The eternal plan of God is revealed in different ways within the book; from the coming of Christ to the destruction of Satan and his helpers; then finally the conclusion of His plan, salvation of the saints.

It is helpful to have an understanding of the Old Testament, particularly the prophets and especially the prophets Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah and their use of symbols and signs, which I do not attempt to deal with in this document.

It is also helpful to have an understanding of the conditions under which the Christians lived at that time, which were suffering, persecution and death, and their spiritual needs which were encouragement and assurance of victory in the midst of trials. This will give the reader more insight into the purpose and symbolism of the book. Not that anything revealed in the book would give them relief from their present suffering, persecution and death. Not even that the adversaries would be removed in their lifetime.

There is a “Historical Background” in Haley’s book (page 59) that is worthwhile reading before any study of the book of Revelation is undertaken. It shows the severity of the suffering that the Christians were undergoing, and, hence, the reason for the judgments described in the book. Briefly: for more than seven centuries Rome had been developing from a group of tribes and city-states in northern and central Italy, and the growing acceptance of the emperors as divine was a very powerful religious force. Rome’s goal was to dominate the world. She built an empire based on force, an empire whose rule was absolute. All within her domain had to be loyal to the emperor and Rome. The century before Christ saw the empire torn by strife and civil wars, which resulted in the collapse of the old city-state form of government. This was replaced by the development of an imperial rule that would endure for four or five centuries. The wars produced wretched conditions in the east; taxes, plundering and a broken and depressed spirit left that section in shambles. Possibly this helped prepare the way for the gospel, for the people despaired of this earthly life and sought consolation in religion and philosophy which held out the possibility of a better life beyond the grave.

In chapter 1 verse 1, Jesus Christ signified (i.e., via symbols), by his angel, unto his servant John, the things that must shortly come to pass. It seems that the statements “shortly come to pass”, “the time is near” and “I come quickly” indicate that the events described in the book are soon to happen. This does not appear to be the case. These statements are better thought of as when the series of symbols would begin to be fulfilled, and the saints would need their instruction to aid them in successfully overcoming temptations. These statements provide strong motivation for obedience in keeping the things heard. For the things to be revealed – the woes, the fears, the battles, and the hope – were in the near future, not in the distant future. It is well agreed among scholars that the judgments described in the book take place from the first persecutions under Nero in 64 AD to the final peace under Constantine I in 313 AD. This timeframe is the height of power and the fall of the Roman Empire which Satan used to persecute the church. The saints are being assured that God remembers them and will, in time, defeat the adversary. The saints will be with him eternally if they overcome. This is not only true for the saints of the first century, but also for us in the present time.

The particular instruments through which the satanic forces and powers of John’s day warred against the saints have long since fallen. But the message of that defeat continues to instruct and encourage God’s people today and will always sustain them when they face similar conflicts.

Some of the prophecies are yet to be fulfilled; examples of these are the passing of the present order, the resurrection, the judgment, and the final reward of the righteous and punishment of the wicked.

Let the reader of Revelation always bear in mind that what John sees is a vision in which symbols are pictures of ideas and all take place in John's vision and not on the earth. Even though some of the visions depict things happening on the earth, everything depicted is in John's

vision. It is much like a stage play that depicts things happening apart from the stage; it is important to keep this point in mind as you study the book. Also, it must be kept in mind that the visions shown to John are all symbolic of things that would happen to the earth and unregenerate people. Even though most of the book describes the judgment brought upon the Roman Empire, nothing described actually happened to it in the way it is described but is symbolic of the eventual demise of the Empire.

One is cautioned to be careful to avoid explaining each aspect of a symbol. Neither should he look for literalism in the symbol, for some are grotesque when viewed literally. Some of the images and symbols in the book are explained but some are left veiled or semi-veiled. The unexplained portions force the interpreters to rely upon their own judgment, or the judgment of others for conclusions, applications, and explanations. Those symbols that are explained, as in chapter 1 verse 20 where the mystery of the seven stars (angels of the seven churches) and seven golden candlesticks (seven churches) is defined, cannot be misunderstood. Symbols, signs, and images are used to express ideas; one must look through John's particular vision, with its symbols and images, and strive to grasp the idea in the mind of God as He revealed it to John the writer.

Another important thing to keep in mind as you go through the book is that the references to Babylon refer to the Roman Empire and Mount Zion or New Jerusalem both refer to the church. These references were used to keep the enemies of God from understanding the message of the book.

As I study the book of Revelation, I am constantly wondering when these things are going to happen. But then I am reminded that the admonition to Christians in the book is not relief from persecution, but if they (and we) overcome the trials of life on the earth they will be rewarded in heaven with God.

It seems that my introduction, as well as the entire document, has exceeded my original intent of creating a "short" overview of the book or Revelation. Therefore, I have placed at the end of this document several short overviews of the book (page 20). You may be interested in viewing these overviews before continuing on with this document in order to obtain an overall view of the book. Each overview attempts to address different approaches to understanding the book and is meant to show the meaning of the book at a very high level. Hopefully, with the combination of overviews, you can obtain some understanding of what the book is telling us. Also, on page 19, there are some definitions that are helpful for the understanding of the book.

**Chapter 1** – The scope of Christ’s ministry and His present glory are revealed. As King and Priest, He holds the destiny of the churches in His hand as He walks among the congregations.

Verse 1 “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show unto his servants, even the things which must shortly come to pass: and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John.” John was in the spirit on the Lord’s Day, saw visions in heaven, and is given the charge to write what he sees.

These are two important concepts to keep in mind while studying the book of Revelation. First the revelation signified by the angel addresses the symbolism of the book. Second, that John was in the spirit, and the visions he saw and wrote about were shown to him in Heaven, the spirit world.

**Chapter 2 and 3** - John stood with Jesus among the seven churches of Asia beholding their conditions, problems, and possibilities of victory through their Lord. John heard and wrote the Savior’s words of commendation, condemnation, warning, and promises of reward to those who would overcome. Though variously expressed, the reward is victory over the enemy now and eternal life hereafter.

In these two chapters there are seven churches mentioned. From its repeated use in Scripture, we observe that almost beyond question “seven” stands as the numerical symbol of the complete or perfect. These seven churches are selected by the Lord as congregations which possessed the qualities characterizing various congregations throughout history. Therefore, it is not to be concluded that there were only seven churches in the entire province, for there were also Troas, Colosse, Hierapolis, and possibly others. The seven churches of Asia represent all the churches for all time.

**Chapter 4** - a door is opened in heaven giving to John, and through him to Christ’s persecuted saints, a vision of the throne and the majestic court of the Ruler of the universe. As the saint beholds this wondrous scene and catches its spirit, he is prepared to face persecutions, tribulations, and even death if need be. He is strengthened in the assurance that the great God and His victorious Son rule in every realm of creation and that through them he can be victorious under any circumstance and any earthly conflict. The faithful saint, in his faith and the strength of the Lord, has nothing to fear, for ultimately victory is his.

John first sees a throne in heaven with God sitting upon the throne.

Around the throne are 24 elders who represent the 12 patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. They represent the redeemed of both covenants now united through Christ.

Before the throne is a sea of glass which indicates the preeminent or supreme nature of God and marks the differential between creature and Creator, between believer and God. The sea will exist until the present order shall have passed away and the saints are at home with God (21:1); for we shall be like him (1 John 3:2).

Around the throne are four living creatures; a special order of heavenly beings, probably the highest and closest to the throne, who serve God’s majestic will. They praise God day and night and will usher in the 4 horsemen (6:1-8), the 7 bowls (15:7) and are among those who commend God’s judgment against the Harlot (19:4). They maintain constant vigil over all God’s creation. When they give glory and honor and thanks to God, the 24 elders fall down before God to worship him.

## **Chapters 5 – 20**

This section of Revelation is where the triumph of truth and righteousness for the saints who hold the truth, and the defeat and ultimate destruction of Satan along with his followers and helpers is described. The key to this section is the sealed book that God is holding in his hand. The closed seals signify that it was originally purposed in the mind of God. Its contents have been neither made known nor altered. This book symbolizes God's eternal purpose for man's salvation, the grand scheme of redemption. This plan was formulated in the mind of God and was a mystery – something unknown or hidden – until revealed. God purposed or planned that this salvation which existed as a mystery should be brought forth and made known in the fullness of time (Eph. 1:9-10).

Some commentators see in chapters 6 – 20 at least six different descriptions of the plan of God from the beginning to the final judgment. I tend to agree with other commentators who see at the end of each description of judgments people left to reap the consequences of the judgments. Not until chapter 21 is there a description of the final judgment. These commentators see in the narrative two sections in which the plan of God is outlined. These are judgments against the current power, the Roman Empire, and will be repeated with any nation throughout history for those who do not follow the laws of God.

Chapters 6 – 11 provide the first revealing of God's plan through the destruction of Satan and his helpers.

John is told in 10:11 that he must prophesy again, therefore

Chapters 12 – 20 provide the second revealing of God's plan through the destruction of Satan and his helpers.

**Chapter 5** - God is holding a book in his hand closed with seven seals indicating that the plan of God is unrevealed and unexecuted. If it remains sealed his purposes are not realized and his plan is not carried out.

An angel asks who is worthy to open the book. No one is able to open the book except Christ who is defined as a Lamb who was slain. Being slain he provides salvation to the people of every nation. He has provided the acceptable sacrifice, defeated Satan, conquered sin and death, and fulfilled the purpose of God. The long-anticipated Messiah has come, and the words of the prophets and the hope of Israel have been fulfilled in Him. This was recognized by many angels, the living creatures, the 24 elders and thousands of the redeemed.

**Chapter 6** - we are introduced to Christ carrying out God's eternal purpose for man's redemption. As the seals are broken and the scrolls unrolled, the purpose of God is revealed.

The first seal is opened and reveals a white horse with Christ as the rider going forth through the gospel to conquer the souls of man according to God's plan – the preaching of the gospel.

The second seal is opened and reveals a red horse which symbolizes the persecution that would follow the preaching of the gospel which brought the saints and the world into conflict. The judgment symbolized by this rider is against the world of unregenerate people, but in such judgments Christians must necessarily suffer with the rest. Some examples of this are Stephen and Paul.

The third seal is opened and reveals a black horse which symbolizes grief, woe and mourning, the lot of persecuted saints who followed the preaching of the gospel. A scarcity of food is symbolized by the balance in the rider's hand and the eating by weight. The rider of the black horse symbolizes hardship and suffering through prejudice against Christians.

The fourth seal is opened and reveals a pale horse which symbolizes the judgment against the world of unregenerate people, but, again, in such judgments Christians must necessarily suffer with the rest. The judgments that fell upon society were a result of pagan rejection of the divine message.

The fifth seal is opened and reveals the souls of them who had been slain for the word of God. They are asking how long before their blood is avenged. They are told to wait a little time until all should be killed as they were. This is completed in 20:4.

The sixth seal is opened and reveals a great earthquake; the sun becomes black, the moon as blood and the stars falling from heaven. This is judgment language as used in the Old Testament. This is the judgment against the kings, princes, chief captains, the rich, the strong, bondman and freeman. It is a judgment against a persecuting world power.

**Chapter 7** - four angels now stand ready to bring destructive forces upon the unregenerate people of the earth. But they are told not to do so until the servants of God on earth are sealed on their forehead. They are sealed for protection. Those on earth are sealed, and they are assured of the welfare of the martyrs who had died in the faith.

There are 144,000 sealed which represents the total number of saints on earth at any given time.

John then sees a great multitude standing before the throne which no man can number. He is told that these were those who had come out of the great tribulation and had washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. These are the martyrs for Christ and all who are victors through Christ. They are with God who is protecting them.

**Chapter 8** - The seventh seal is opened, and there follows a silence in heaven about a half hour.

“About the space of half an hour” indicates dramatic suspense. A half hour is ordinarily a short period of time, but it seems long when one is waiting. The impressive pause focuses attention on heaven's interest as all wait in breathless suspense and expectation for what is to follow.

Seven angels are given seven trumpets.

Another angel is given the prayers of the saints which go up before God out of the angels' hand. The angel then casts from the altar fire upon the earth which is the heavenly response to the prayers of the saints. This fire sums up the judgments of the trumpets which are to follow.

The seven angels with the seven trumpets prepare to sound. The seven trumpets in the vision before us symbolize partial (1/3) judgments upon the wicked, serving as warnings of greater judgments to come. If these warnings are not heeded, and they are not, the sword of destruction shall come and destroy them.

The opening of the seven seals is now complete.

When the first trumpet sounds, hail and fire are cast on the earth and one third of earth, trees and grass are burnt up. This is judgment that affects the vegetation. It indicates suffering and destruction among the world of the unregenerate in which the seat of world powers operate. "A third part" suggests a large portion, but not a total destruction; life is still possible.

When the second trumpet sounds, one third of sea life and ships are destroyed. This is judgment upon a worldly society when its center of power is cast down and its economy falls with it.

When the third trumpet sounds, one third of the waters became bitter, and many men die. This symbolizes calamity, sorrow and bitterness of life for the earth's eminent men.

When the fourth trumpet sounds, one third of the sun, moon and stars are darkened. The removal of this partial light symbolizes the partial darkening of human wisdom and understanding.

The remaining three trumpets that are yet to sound are called Woe, woe, woe for them that dwell on the earth.

**Chapter 9** – The fifth trumpet, which is the first Woe, sounds, and Satan falls from heaven. He is given the key to the abyss. Satan opens the abyss and out comes smoke to pollute the air. Locusts are released and are told only to hurt men who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They should not kill them but only torment them. These men seek death but do not find it. This indicates that Satan is permitted to execute only that degree of power that God allows.

The sixth trumpet, the second woe, sounds and the four angels that were restrained in chapter seven are loosed that they should kill one third of men using armies of 200 million horsemen which are referred to as plagues. With each sounding of a trumpet or group of trumpets the judgments become progressively intense. Now in this sixth judgment a third of mankind is killed. There is no reference to the saints which implies they are not involved in this.

**Chapter 10** – This section (10:1 -11:13), before the seventh trumpet sounds, gives assurance that the witnessing of truth is not silenced during the trumpet soundings, but continues victoriously.

John is given a little book and told to eat it. It shall be sweet as honey in his mouth, but it shall make his belly bitter. The significance of John eating the little book and of its sweetness and bitterness seems to be that it is sweet to learn that God's cause would be victorious in His saints, but it was bitter to prophesy of their suffering and of the destructive judgments which would befall the wicked world.

John is now told (10:11) that he must prophesy again over many people and nations and tongues and kings, indicating additional prophecies to those already written in this first section of the book.

**Chapter 11** – John is told to measure the temple, the altar and them that worship therein. The church is referred to in the Epistles as "the temple (sanctuary) of God", God's place of habitation among men. In John's vision the temple is the church, in which are all the true worshipers. These worshipers are Christians who had been numbered, and now are measured, thus protected by the Lord. Only as one comes under the measuring rod of God, that is, His standard of truth and protection, does he find safety.

He is told not to measure the court outside the church as it has been given to the heathen. The court has been cast out of God's protecting care.

The holy city shall be tread under foot forty-two months; forty-two months indicates a limited time. The holy city is the new spiritual Jerusalem (the church) that comes down from heaven (21:2, 10). The vision indicates that although the faithful are numbered and measured, the church shall be despised and rejected of the Gentiles and trodden under foot for a limited time.

Two witnesses are next introduced. Expositors have given many answers as to the identity of the two, but it seems most likely that they are the apostles and prophets of the apostolic age. They are protected by God while completing the work God sent them to accomplish which is to establish the church, to preach the truth and to write it down. During the apostolic age the witnesses could not be destroyed.

After the church is established and the preaching completed, the beast from the abyss (which opened in chapter 9) will kill the two witnesses. The beast is identified in chapter 13 and 17:3, 7 as a great imperial world power standing in opposition to the kingdom of God.

After three and a half days (a number indicating trial, hardship and testing), the breath of life from God entered into the two witnesses. This symbolizes the resurrection and victory of the saints, a total and complete victory for His word of truth.

In indignation at the treatment of his witnesses, God's judgment is manifested in a great earthquake that destroys a tenth of the city and kills 7,000 persons symbolizing a gradual breaking up of the pagan world.

The seventh trumpet sounds and the third woe begins for them that dwell on the earth. It signals the completion of God's mystery which was looked for and sought by the prophets. The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and his Christ; the kingdom has been turned back to God where he shall reign forever and ever. The power and rule is in God's hand where it rightly belongs.

The temple of God in heaven is opened giving assurance to His people that he remembers them, and that he will keep his covenant with them.

Chapter 10, verse 7 says "in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then is finished the mystery of God". This mystery was God's plan for human redemption, which was conceived in His mind, after the counsel of His will, and summed up in Christ (Eph. 1:9 -11; 3:8 -11). Therefore, with the completion of the seventh trumpet, the first revealing of God's plan through its implementation against His enemies is complete.

### **Summary of this first section – chapters 6 - 11:**

Only Christ was worthy to take the sealed book out of God's right hand, loose the seals, and carry out the purpose of God to its consummation. As the seals were opened, we see the gospel being preached, the persecution that follows, the hardship and prejudice against Christians, and their suffering because of the world of unregenerate people. We see the souls of them who had been slain for the word of God asking how long it will be before their blood is avenged; this question will be answered in the next section. We see the judgment beginning, but the angels are told to wait until the servants of God are sealed. Seven angels are given trumpets to sound as warnings which are unheeded by the unregenerate people of the earth. The last three warnings, now described as woes, become stronger with Satan taking some limited control.



**Chapter 12** – In this section, chapters 12 – 20, there is the second view of God’s plan; John was told in 10:11, he must prophesy again.

Two signs are seen in heaven.

The first is that of a woman with child waiting to be delivered. The woman can best be thought of as the spiritual remnant of God’s people who, in faithfulness, had kept covenant with Him.

The second is a great red dragon, who is Satan, waiting to devour the child as it is born.

A man child was delivered and caught up unto God and unto His throne. The child is Christ and is caught up to God to establish His rule. The whole experience from birth to coronation is contemplated in the few words of this verse. Satan is not allowed to defeat the purpose of God by destroying the Christ.

There is a war in heaven where Michael and his angels go to war with Satan and his angels. In the conflict Satan is defeated and cast down from his high-handed control over men. This vision symbolizes a spiritual warfare which had been going on from the beginning, but reaches its climax in Christ’s victory over Satan. With Satan’s defeat, God’s purpose in providing salvation is now fulfilled.

There is a woe pronounced for the earth because Satan is cast down having a great wrath, knowing that he has a short time. He then persecutes the woman which is the church, the people of God. He attacks the church with a great stream of water which the earth swallows up. The symbolism of this attack is delusions in the form of lies, false impressions of invincible power, false religious teachings, false philosophies, false charges and malicious reports intended to destroy the church. But the church has withstood the assault of the serpent because a way has been provided for her deliverance, the protection of God.

Incensed by his defeats against Christ and the church, he then goes to attack the seed of the woman, which are individual Christians.

**Chapter 13** – The dragon rallies two allies through which he seeks to defeat and destroy God’s purpose, people and rule.

The first ally is a beast coming up out of the sea. This beast symbolizes the human societies or nations with their stormy upheavals, out of which the empires of the earth arise. It represented the Roman Empire in its power and opposition to the kingdom of God. It also epitomized the sum of the entire world’s political opposition to God and righteousness for all time. It was granted to this beast by Satan to make war with the saints. It seems without question that this beast is the fourth beast of Daniel’s vision (Dan 7).

One of the beast’s ten heads was wounded then healed which symbolizes an interruption of persecution. The death of Nero, who was the first to persecute Christians, ended the persecution for a while. The healing of the wounded head came with the revival of persecution under Domitian.

The second ally is a beast coming up out of the earth. This beast symbolized the pagan priesthood or emperor worship, backed by the sea-beast, the political power of the empire. This generally represented all false religion since the fall of the Roman pagan system. This beast is in subjection to the beast of the sea - as the pagan worship was dictated by the Roman political power. In most of the book the beast from the earth is called the false prophet.

This beast declared that “as many as should not worship the image of the beast of the sea, i.e., the Roman emperors, should be killed”. The power of death for those who refused to pay homage to “Augustus and Rome” rested in the magistrate and religious hierarchy. This put the Christians in the position where they must confess either Christ or Caesar as Lord, thus choosing between immediate death and a few added years of life before eternal death. The beast required that a mark be given to those who worshiped him. Only those who had the mark would be able to buy and sell which was a discrimination against the Christians even to the point of hunger or possible starvation.

Following the above descriptions of the beasts it is stated “He who has understanding (God does intend that we can understand) let him calculate the number of the beast; for it is the number of man”. The number of the beast, six-six-six, is the number of the beast of the sea (the Roman Empire), for it was his image that was to be worshiped, and not Satan. It represents that which is human, therefore, a human number. Being the number of a man, it stands for the complete and total failure of all human systems and efforts antagonistic to God and His Christ. All are doomed to ultimate and complete defeat and failure. Six falls below the sacred number seven so it can never be seven or reach perfection. To the Jews the number six was a symbol of dread and doom, so when it tripled, 666, it represented the completeness of doom and failure. God is saying that the beast is doomed as will be expanded in the next chapters. It is interesting to note that even in our day we use the number 6 in such expressions as “deep six” and “six feet under” to indicate things that are final.

**Chapter 14** – As is characteristic of the entire book, these visions shift from oppression and persecution to victory and judgment and back again.

This chapter is divided into three sections.

The first section presents the Lamb and His victorious saints on Mount Zion. Christ is the Lamb with 144,000 of his followers (those sealed in chapter 7) standing on the Mount. These are the redeemed on earth with Christ in the church. They had refused to declare Caesar as lord or deny Christ. The scene symbolizes security, permanence, and a victorious spirit of rejoicing enjoyed by the church on earth at any time, because the Lamb is in their midst.

The second section makes known the messages of three angels.

The first angel makes known that the gospel is preached to all nations, but this message goes unheeded.

The second angel declares that Babylon is fallen; the world-city of lust, Rome, which does not heed the warning of the first angel is doomed, for God’s wrath is about to be poured out upon it.

The third angel declares that those who worship the beast will receive the wrath of God and be tormented night and day for ever. Those who keep the commandments of God will rest from their labors.

The third section reveals the divine ingathering of the righteous and a judgment of the world. Christ appears sitting on a cloud. He first “reaps” the redeemed, then the condemned from the earth for judgment. The symbolism here is not the final judgment, but the end of the Roman Empire, its provincial Kings and Roman paganism. Similar judgments may be repeated in the history of nations.

**Chapter 15** – Seven angels are seen as a sign in heaven with seven plagues which are public calamities or heavy afflictions sent by God as punishment on men. These are the bowls described in this chapter. In these judgments, God reaches His goal for in the plagues the wrath of God is finished.

Those who were victorious from the beast are seen standing on a sea of glass, mingled with fire, singing with their harps. Having passed through the fiery trials on earth, they are closer to God. This would assure the saints to whom John was writing of their own victory. With this assurance and consolation for the saints on earth, the time had now come for the judgments to fall.

The seven angels are given golden bowls full of the wrath of God. It is evident that here are final judgments upon certain spiritual, political, and moral forces. What we see is a vivid dramatization of the fight God puts up from heaven in behalf of His church.

No one could enter the temple until the seven plagues were finished. When the tabernacle was erected, the glory of Jehovah filled it, and Moses was not able to enter it (Exodus 40:34ff). Likewise, when Solomon had completed the temple, the glory of Jehovah filled the house, “so that the priests could not stand to minister” (I Kings 8:10f). And so now, until the seven plagues would be finished, no one could enter the temple. The smoke from His glory was being vindicated by the smoke of His anger, demonstrated expressions of His great power.

**Chapter 16** – This chapter deals with God’s judgment against Satan, the beast of the sea, the beast of the earth and their associates.

The seven angels are told to pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God into the earth.

The first angel poured out his bowl and it became grievous sores upon those who had the mark of the beast. As in the human body, this is the corruption of the world breaking out.

The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea. It became blood as of a dead man, and everything in and on the sea died. The sea symbolized the whole society of mankind out of which the beast of the sea arose. This symbolizes the utter putrefaction of a dead society.

The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and fountains and they became blood. Since had poured out the blood of the saints and prophets, they are now given blood to drink.

The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun which would scorch the same men. This plague turned the sun into a source of blistering heat burning and painful, by which men were scorched. The source of light, intended to guide, warm, and cheer, is turned into an instrument of pain, for God “makes winds his messengers; flames of fire his ministers” (Psalms 104:4). They blasphemed God and would not repent.

The fifth angel poured out his bowl upon the throne of the beast and his kingdom was darkened. This indicates the loss of wisdom and understanding by which to guide the empire.

The sixth angel poured out his bowl upon the Euphrates River and it was dried up. The Euphrates here is not a physical or geographical location; it symbolizes a barrier or deterrent to invasion, which is now removed.

Unclean spirits, seen as frogs, are seen coming out of the mouth of Satan, the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth now called the false prophet. The objective of the unclean spirits is to gather the Kings of the whole world unto the war of the great day of God, the almighty (v 14) through the barrier that is now open.

Jesus says that he is coming quickly, and there is a gathering of the forces of God and Satan at a place called Har-Magedon (Armageddon). This symbolically describes a great decisive spiritual battle between the army of Satan and the forces of God, which would determine the fate of each. This battle is fought and won by the Lord (in chapter 19) in the complete defeat of the Roman Empire and paganism behind which Rome threw its total power.

The seventh angel poured out his bowl upon the air and a voice from the throne said “it is done”. Air would be an appropriate emblem of the prevailing influence or surroundings of the realm in which the wicked live, move, and breathe, being dominated by the devil. Thus the course of this world, which is itself evil, a life of trespasses and sin, ruled by the prince of its power, controlling his subjects by a spirit of rebellion and disobedience to God, is now brought under judgment.

The series of plagues is now complete. The cities of the nations fell and Babylon, the Roman Empire, was remembered in the sight of God, to give unto her the hot burning anger of His wrath. This scene pictures the collapse of the pagan world-city and its daughters, a description of which follows in chapters 17 and 18.

The islands and mountains were removed, and a great hail came down from heaven. In the fall of this great world power there would be no place for refuge, for all such places will have been removed.

These plagues did not introduce the final judgment. For after hail had killed whom it killed, there were those left who blasphemed God. The severest of divine judgments had now been poured out upon wicked and ungodly men, touching all phases and realms of Roman society and power. Only final judgment, which would bring all men, nations and wickedness to a total end, could surpass in intensity and finality judgments such as these.

According to one commentator with whom Hailey agrees (page 326), “No attempt to determine the special meaning of the objects thus visited by the wrath of God – the land, the sea, the rivers and fountains of the waters, and the sun – has yet been, or is ever perhaps likely to be, successful; and the general effect alone appears to be important”.

**Chapter 17** – The fall of Babylon, the world power, has been introduced in the previous chapters (12 – 16), and now the nature of the city, described as a harlot, and its complete fall are enlarged upon. In the following visions, the apostle shows us by means of symbolic pictures, what befalls Babylon, the beast of the sea, and the false prophet.

Satan has three approaches by which he seeks to destroy the work and people of God: (1) Political or brute force, symbolized by the beast out of the sea, (2) false religion, whether paganism or perverted revealed religion – apostates who hold and teach false doctrines – symbolized by the beast out of the earth, and (3) the world of lust, all that appeals to the flesh or mind represented by the harlot of this chapter.

An angel tells John “I will show you the judgment of the great harlot that sits upon many waters”. The harlot sitting upon many waters are “peoples, and multitudes, and nations and tongues (v. 15)”.

The harlot was arrayed with purple, scarlet, gold, precious stones and pearls. A name was written on her forehead “Babylon the great” which, to John’s readers, would have symbolized Rome which in turn symbolized the world of lust and seduction.

She was drunk with the blood of the saints, the martyrs who had offered their lives for Christ whether in the arena, under the sword, or on the fiery pile. They had been slain for the entertainment of the depraved and to satisfy the bloodthirstiness of their enemies.

She sits on a beast with seven heads and ten horns, both representing kings that would war against Christ and would be overcome (19:19ff). The ten horns represent future kings or kingdoms which will arise and join themselves to the world power, but eventually they will hate the harlot, burn her with fire, and destroy her.

**Chapter 18** – An angel from heaven cries mightily “Babylon the great is fallen”. God prepares to reveal the total collapse of the harlot, spiritual Babylon, the great world-city of pride, lust and corruption.

The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her which was an unholy, idolatrous political and economic alliance of kings for business and commercial advantage, through which their pleasures were purchased. They were made wealthy by the seductive power and influence which belong to riches, luxury, and unrestrained desire.

God’s people are told to come out of her. The exhortation is to come out from the influence of worldly lust so that there is no partaking of the sins of the world and the flesh.

She has glorified herself and lived luxuriously. Because of her boasting, the end comes to the great city for “she shall be utterly burned with fire” – totally destroyed (17:16).

The kings of the earth who have committed fornication with her, and the merchants who have become rich by her, fear to come near as they watch the smoke of her burning. From afar they weep and lament for her when they see the smoke of her burning. Their grief was selfish as they were thinking only of themselves not the destruction of Rome. She is destroyed in one hour which represents brevity and suddenness – in a brief moment her judgment has come.

Heaven and the saints are exhorted to rejoice over the harlot’s fall.

An angel threw a great millstone into the sea representing the complete and final judgment against the harlot city.

The silence and inactivity of the harlot city is emphasized by five aspects of normal life now completely extinct, (1) no sound of musical instruments (2) no craftsman or craft (3) no grain being ground for bread (4) no light of lamps (5) no wedding festivals.

In her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and all that have been slain upon the earth. Rome is a spiritual symbol, representing the world of lust and seduction. In this world-city, all God’s people from Adam to the present have been killed.

God has judged the harlot, and her smoke rises up forever and ever. She is cast into the lake of fire where the beast of the sea, the beast of the earth and Satan will be cast shortly. Satan is the only personal being in the group. The two beasts and the harlot are symbolic personifications of anti-God power, false religion, and seductive lusts of the flesh, the instrumentalities used by Satan in the war against God and His kingdom.

**Chapter 19** – God has avenged the blood of his servants at the hand of the harlot, and He is praised for His righteous judgment of the harlot.

The marriage of the lamb has come and the bride is now ready. A third woman is introduced as the bride of the lamb. With the removal of the harlot, the great enemy and rival of the church, the marriage of the Lamb has come; therefore let the saints “rejoice and be exceeding glad”. It is clearly revealed in Scripture that the church’s relationship to Christ is that of a wife. Those called by the gospel are the ones that are bidden to the marriage supper of the lamb. The harlot has been removed and the saints are ready to be married to Christ, but the actual supper or wedding scene is revealed in chapter 21.

Early in his visions John saw “a door opened in heaven” through which he had been caught up to behold the heavenly scene” (4:1); later “there was opened the temple of God that is in heaven,” that he might behold the ark of God’s covenant (11:19); afterward “the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony in heaven was opened,” from which came the seven angels with the seven bowls of wrath (15:5). Now John beholds the entire heaven opened so that Christ and His army might be seen as they emerge to do battle with Satan’s forces. None of these scenes were ever on the earth, but all were visions described in heaven.

Though the harlot has been destroyed, the two great enemies of God and man remain: the beast of the sea and false prophet. Christ, the warrior-king, conducts the war against these two enemies, engaging them in a decisive battle.

A white horse is revealed in heaven, with Christ riding on the horse, to make war against the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth, the false prophet. In his final appearance Jesus will come to judge and reward, not to wage war with His enemies. Therefore the judgment and battle in this vision are against the enemy forces in time, not at the end of time.

His robe is dipped in the blood of his enemies, symbolizing His prior battles with His enemies (14:20). An army in heaven follows Him clothed in white. They are the victorious saints. White symbolizes that the rider and His followers are righteous. A sword proceeds out of His mouth which is the word of judgment; not the word of the gospel by which men are converted.

Here in chapter 19:19 -21, we have now come to the actual battle of Har-Magedon which is fought to decide who is the King of Kings – Christ, or world-Caesars and potentates.

- In league with the dragon and the false prophet, the beast of the sea had called the kings of the world together to the great decisive battle of Har-Magedon (16:14 -16).
- The kings had aligned themselves with the beast to make war against the Lamb and His followers (17:12 -14).

In preparation for the battle, the birds are invited to the supper of the lord; to eat the flesh of kings, captains, mighty men, horses and their riders, and all men of the fallen empire. The scene is not literal but a vivid symbolic portrayal of the defeat of the Lamb’s enemies. The war and the victory are spiritual, as defeat comes to the spiritual forces of evil.

No battle is described. The beast and the false prophet are taken and cast into the lake of fire. The rest of the kings who aligned themselves with the beast are killed by the sword that came out of the mouth of him that sat upon the white horse.

The victory is won, and the defeat of the beast and his ally, the false prophet, is complete. The Roman power and the paganism which it supported are now destroyed forever. Was Rome and the other nations literally cast into the lake of fire? No, this is symbolic of the eventual destruction of Rome.

**Chapter 20** – with the destruction of the harlot, and the defeat of the beast and false prophet, Satan has lost his allies.

An angel is seen coming down out of heaven, having the key of the abyss (bottomless pit) and a great chain in his hand. The key and the chain are not literal. The key symbolizes power to bind, and the chain symbolizes that by which Satan is bound. The angel binds Satan with the chain for a thousand years and casts him into the abyss. One thousand must be interpreted symbolically as are other numbers in the book. It is a complete number which stands for an undetermined but full period of time. The abyss was the place dreaded by the demons, and apparently was their proper place of habitation (Luke 8:31).

John sees thrones with the souls – not bodies – of two groups of martyrs, (1) them that had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus, (2) those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark of the beast upon their forehead and upon their hand. These two are sharing the rule of Christ's victory for a thousand years, a full and complete period of time in the mind and purpose of God. The victory of the martyrs underneath the altar is symbolized as a resurrection. The rest of the dead who lived not until the thousand years are finished are not the dead awaiting a bodily resurrection; all that are in the grave shall be resurrected (John 5:28-29) not separated by one thousand years. As the cause for which the martyrs had died is symbolized by a resurrection, so "the rest" those killed with the sword of Christ in their war on behalf of the beast and paganism (19:21), shall experience a resurrection of their cause in the revived effort of Satan which will come toward the end of time through new allies, Gog and Magog. The first resurrection is the victory of the cause and principles to which the martyrs were faithful under the most trying circumstances, even unto death. They shall not be hurt by the second death which is the lake of fire (v 14).

The thousand years, which Satan is bound, refers to the entire dispensation of the gospel age. It symbolizes that period of victory beginning with Constantine, when Roman persecution ended, and continuing until sometime before the Lord's return. The devil's influence on earth is curtailed, so that he is unable to prevent the proclamation of the gospel of Christ (Mark 16:15-16). His power is curbed and his influence curtailed with respect to one definite sphere of activity, namely, "that he should deceive the nations no more" (20:3). However, his influence is not completely destroyed. On the contrary, within the sphere in which Satan is permitted to exert his influence of evil, he rages most furiously. He cannot destroy the church as a mighty militant force in the spreading of the gospel during the gospel dispensation. He is now restrained from deceiving the nations, trapping and controlling them as he did before Jesus came, for his power and the power of paganism are now broken. The abyss is not final; for when the appointed period, the thousand years, is finished, Satan is to be loosed for a little time.

After the thousand years, Satan is loosed from his prison. We can only suggest as to where or in what way Satan was loosed. The victors on thrones were those who overcame; and those who overcame did so by the blood of the Lamb, by holding fast the word of their testimony, and loving not their life even unto death (12:11). In the spirit of this faithfulness they bound Satan by overcoming him. When such a spirit and loyal devotion to the principles and cause of Christ no longer distinguish God's people, the restraining power is gone, and Satan is loosed once more.

John now prophesies that toward the end of time there would be a horde gathered and lead by Satan in a final furious effort to destroy the church. Satan no longer relies upon one great power, but now gathers his forces from all sources – the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog. Far

from a physical conflict, the battle will be a moral and spiritual one. Based upon the book of Ezekiel 38 we conclude that Gog of the land of Magog symbolized all the heathen enemies of God's people from the time of the prophets to the Roman Empire, all who sought to thwart His purpose and to destroy His King. Satan's Gog and Magog symbolize such forces and agencies as atheism, humanism, communism, materialism, astrology, and all manner of false and perverted religions.

Satan and his new allies surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city; and fire came down out of heaven, and devoured them. The camp of the saints would be the barracks of God's faithful army. The beloved city is the heavenly Jerusalem, the spiritual Zion, the church. The devil, man's great deceiver from the beginning, now reaches his final doom and eternal end. First, he was cast down to the earth (12:9), then into the pit of the abyss (20:3), and now into the lake of fire and brimstone, his ultimate end. His destruction has been gradual, but long-since determined in the mind of God, for the lake was prepared for him and his own (Matt 25:41). He now shares the lot of his allies – the beast, the false prophet, and the harlot.

Thus far in the book several scenes of judgment have been described, but none depicted the final judgment. There was a judgment of the nations on behalf of the saints (11:18), one of those who poured out the blood of the saints (16:5), one of the harlot (18:8; 19:2), one of the beast and the false prophet (19:11-21) and one of Satan (20:10). But all of these pertained to the period of Roman rule. John now brings the final judgment into view.

Christ is seen sitting on a great white throne. As Christ went forth on a white horse to conquer (6:2), and to make war against His enemies (19:11), He now is on the white throne to judge all men. All of the dead, from Adam to the end of time, are judged according to their works written in the book of life.

The sea, death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. To be consistent with the plan of the book, the sea should be considered symbolically as a mass of human society. Death claims the body when the spirit leaves it (James 2:26), whether the body is left to decay in the sea or on the earth. Hades, "the unseen", claims the spirit. In the resurrection, the spirit and the body of both the wicked and righteous will be reunited (I Cor. 15:52; I Thess. 4:13; I John 3:1-3).

Death, the last enemy to be destroyed (I Cor. 15:26), and Hades are now cast into the lake of fire which is the second death (v 14). And all those whose names were not found in the book of life were cast into the lake of fire. These are "the rest" who had fought with the beast and the false prophet.

The defeat of Satan and his forces against God and truth is total – complete and final.



## **Summary of this second section – chapters 12 - 20:**

Two signs are seen in heaven. The first is that of a woman with child waiting to be delivered. The second is great red dragon, who is Satan, waiting to devour the child as it is born. A man child was delivered and caught up unto God and unto His throne. Incensed by his defeats against Christ and the church, he then goes to attack the seed of the woman, which are individual Christian. The dragon rallies two allies through which he seeks to defeat and destroy God's purpose, people and rule. The first ally is a beast coming up out of the sea. The second ally is a beast coming up out of the earth. The Lamb and His victorious saints are on Mount Zion. An angel makes known that the gospel is preached to all nations, but this message goes unheeded. A second angel declares that Babylon (Rome) is fallen. A third angel declares that those who worship the beast will receive the wrath of God and are tormented night and day for ever. The seven angels are told to pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God into the earth. There is a gathering of the forces of God and Satan at a place called Har-Magedon (Armageddon). An angel shows John the great harlot that sits upon many waters. God has judged the harlot, and her smoke rises up forever and ever. Christ, the warrior-king, conducts the war against the beast of the sea and false prophet, and they are cast into the lake of fire. After a thousand years, the gospel age, Satan with new allies surrounds the camp of the saints and the beloved city. Fire came down out of heaven and devoured them. Satan, Death and Hades are now cast into the lake of fire. Christ is seen sitting on a great white throne judging the nations. One commentator (Hailey's book page 324) has well observed that the seven seals *reveal*, the seven trumpets *announce* and *warn*, and the seven bowls *execute*.

**Chapter 21** – This chapter portrays the final glory of the church as it comes to rest with God beyond time.

Chapter 20:11 states “the earth and heaven fled away, and there was found no place for them”. John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and the sea is no more. That which John now sees is a new heavenly order being readied.

The “sea is no more” indicates the removal of the body of society, the great sea in which the restless upheavals of men have cast up their mire as the nations rage against God.

John then sees the holy city, New Jerusalem, which is the church, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride. This represents the beauty and holiness of the redeemed church which at this point is still on the earth. The future of the church is described next as she will be presented to the Lord. There are no more tears, nor death, nor mourning, nor crying, nor pain; for the first things have passed away. God will make all things new and give them the water of life. Nothing will be lacking in the complete fullness and realization of all spiritual desires of the glorified soul in heaven. He that overcomes shall inherit these things but he that does not shall have their part in the lake of fire.

An angel shows John the bride, the wife of the Lamb, the holy city Jerusalem coming down from heaven. This is the new eternal order which John sees a second time and is now shown its description in the remainder of the chapter. In considering the description of the holy city, it must be continually borne in mind that this is a vision in which is set forth a majestic symbol of a great spiritual reality. Literally there never was, is not now, and never will be such a city; but there certainly will be that which the city symbolized, for God has declared it.

**Chapter 22** – The eternal God who had inspired the prophets had likewise sent His angel to show to His true bondservants the things that would “shortly come to pass”. The affirmation, “These words are faithful and true,” is therefore God’s testimony to the things revealed. Blessed is he who keeps (observes or pays attention to) the words of the prophecy of this book.

Jesus states that he is coming quickly. He states three times in this chapter that he is coming quickly.

John is told not to seal the words of the prophecy of this book, “for the time is at hand”. The time was near when the series of symbols would begin to be fulfilled, and the saints would need their instruction to aid them in successfully overcoming temptations. “For the time is at hand” provides strong motivation for obedience in keeping the things heard, for the things to be revealed – the woes, the fears, the battles, and the hope – were in the near future, not in the distant future.

The book was to be sent to the churches at that time (1:11), its content made applicable to all churches (22:16), its message was to be made known, its warnings were to be heeded and its hearers encouraged by the divine assurance of victory.

Jesus again says He is coming quickly with his reward to each man. This refers to the reward rendered to good and evil men at any coming of the Lord in judgment (as with the Roman Empire) and also to the reward rendered to each at His final coming.

He affirms that He is the beginning and the end. Those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb may enter the new Heavenly city. He again testifies that this book is written for the churches.

Jesus affirms that this book is to be accepted as Scripture. It has the stamp of God and of Jesus, with the added testimony of John that he had heard and seen these things which he had written. Now is added a warning from the Lord Himself that the prophecy of this book is not to be tampered with, either by deleting from, adding to, or changing it.

Surely, Jesus is coming quickly.

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