

**Advent series: The Book of Revelation**

In Advent, we look forward not just to celebrating the birth (2,000 years ago) of the baby Jesus, but also to the future day when the risen Jesus will return to earth once again, in triumph, to herald the arrival of a glorious new age under His rule. This December, we will be focusing on this 'second coming' of Jesus, and what it means for us, over the three Sundays up to Christmas.

To do this, we'll be looking together at the very last two chapters of the Bible: Revelation 21 and 22. Revelation is quite a complex book (!) and it is helpful to have some appreciation of the background.

It was written in the form of a letter, probably around 95 AD at a time of heavy persecution for Christians, as the Roman Emperor Domitian increasingly sought to force people to worship him— something completely incompatible with a Christian's unambiguous declaration that 'Jesus is Lord'. It would have been specifically intended to provide encouragement to those 1<sup>st</sup>-century believers to stand firm in their faith and not to compromise, but it also serves to assure Christians in every generation that God is bringing His purposes to a perfect conclusion and that good ultimately wins the victory over evil.

The writer's name is given as 'John', traditionally taken to mean that he was one of the original disciples of Jesus and the author of the fourth Gospel. We cannot be certain that this is the case, but it actually matters very little – because the very first verse makes clear that the words are straight from Jesus (i.e. John is simply a 'dictation secretary'...).

Revelation is what is known as 'apocalyptic' literature, with its meaning expressed through symbols and imagery. (A practical reason for this might have been that it prevented Roman authorities from understanding its 'subversive' message!) This means that interpreting it is not easy, and it is generally not a good idea to take the detail too literally.

Nevertheless, a 'big picture' view which I've found very helpful is provided in the book by Michael Wilcock (in the *Bible speaks today* commentary series), titled *I saw heaven opened*. He identifies a series of 7 complementary pictures or 'scenes', each with their own 7 elements (e.g. 7 letters to churches, 7 seals opened, 7 trumpets sounded and so on) – with '7' being a number indicating 'completion' or 'perfection'.

These 7 scenes then culminate in the glorious conclusion of chapters 21 and 22 – an '8<sup>th</sup>' scene describing the wonderful life we can look forward to as Christians after Jesus has made His triumphant return, a life in the presence of God with all things made new and paradise restored. But although we know that this *will* happen one day, we have no idea *when* that day will be, so we need to keep reminding ourselves about its coming and always to be ready...

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*[Below I've given the summary of the structure of Revelation as set out by Michael Wilcock, and also added some comment on 'The Thousand Years' mentioned in Chapter 20.]*

## Michael Wilcock's summary of the structure of Revelation

1:1-8	Prologue
1:9-3:22	Scene 1: The Church in the World <i>Christ at the centre of the church, followed by 7 letters to different churches</i>
4:1-8:1	Scene 2: Suffering for the Church <i>Christ at the centre of creation, followed by the opening of 7 seals</i>
8:2-11:18	Scene 3: Warning for the World <i>God hears the cry of His people, followed by the sounding of 7 trumpets</i>
11:19-15:4	Scene 4: The Drama of History <i>Including (13:1-15:4) 7 visions of cosmic conflict</i>
15:5-16:21	Scene 5: Punishment for the World <i>God's inescapable wrath, followed by 7 bowls poured out</i>
17:1-19:10	Scene 6: Babylon the Whore <i>Incorporating 7 words of justice</i>
19:11-21:8	Scene 7: The Drama Behind History <i>7 visions of ultimate reality, the final one being that of the 'new age' (21:1-8)</i>
21:19-22:19	Scene 8: Jerusalem the Bride <i>7 final revelations</i>
22:20-21	Epilogue

## The Thousand Years

Chapter 20 of Revelation describes a period of 'a thousand years' during which Satan (the devil) will be bound in chains and the saints will reign on earth with Christ. At the end of this period, Satan will be briefly released but then completely defeated, and the glorious new age (the 'new heaven and new earth' of Revelation 21 & 22) will begin.

There are three different theological views as to how this 'thousand years' should be interpreted, including how it fits in with the second coming of Jesus:

- *Premillennialism*: This is the view which takes the sequence of events as outlined in Revelation most literally. The second coming of Christ (including the bodily resurrection of believers) will *precede* this lengthy period (either exactly 1,000 years or not), which will then end with a second 'day of the Lord' when all evil is finally destroyed and the eternal new age begins.
- *Amillennialism*: On this view, the 'thousand year' period is taken more symbolically, and in particular is regarded not as a separate time that is still to come but as the age that we are in *now*, i.e. the period between the first and second comings of Christ. Satan's power has been broken by Jesus' death and resurrection, and His reign is already underway, although His eternal kingdom will not be fully established until His return.
- *Postmillennialism*: On this view, there is (as with amillennialism) only a single 'day of the Lord' ahead (i.e. Jesus' second coming). However, that will only happen *after* a lengthy period (whether exactly 1,000 years or not), which is clearly distinct from the age we are in now, and in which Christ (albeit not yet returned in bodily form) and His saints are completely in charge.

Differences in opinion over 'the millennium' are certainly not worth falling out over! But I think it is worth being aware of them, because (whether consciously or not...) they are tied in with the question of whether we should expect things to get 'better' or 'worse' before Jesus returns, including to what extent we might expect 'Revival'.