

New Testament Survey

Unit 317 – Foundations 3

Week 6 – Session 1
General Epistles (John)



A. The First Epistle of John

This epistle was written by the apostle John, one of the original 12 disciples. It is not clear who the intended readers were, beyond that they were known sufficiently well to John to be termed 'my little children', and that they were being challenged by false teachers and teachings. Since John spent a fair amount of his time in the province of Asia, eventually being exiled to Patmos, these may well be inhabitants of that region of Asia Minor, possibly the seven churches mentioned in the Revelation.

What we know about John's life:

- He grew up in Galilee
- John first followed John the Baptist
- John and his brother James both followed Jesus
- He was in Jesus' inner circle
- He knew the high priest
- He saw the empty tomb with his own eyes
- Stayed in Palestine for some time
- Moved to Ephesus
- Was exiled to the Island of Patmos
- Was known as the 'son of thunder' early on and yet also comes to be known as the 'apostle of love'

Background and purpose:

The four-fold purpose of this writing is clearly stated:

1. To bring joy (1:4)
2. To guard against sin (2:1)
3. To guard against error / deception (2:26)
4. To bring assurance of salvation (5:13)

Certain people who had once been part of the Christian community had now left. This withdrawal convicts them over never having been part of the church. In fact, they are termed anti-Christ (2:18). They deny that Jesus is the Christ. They deny that Christ has come in the flesh. This hints at gnosticism (hatred of the flesh as something inherently evil) and Judaism (denial that Jesus is the Christ).

The Epistle to the Colossians shows that Jewish and gnostic elements could combine.

Gnosticism also emphasised a special initiation into a higher form of knowledge. This could lead to a depreciation of faith as the qualification for salvation, becoming 'mere' faith. John insists that by faith all men have knowledge of God through the Spirit, and do not need men to 'teach' them anything.

This dualism of flesh and spirit led to an alternative morality. The false teachers not only upheld strange doctrines, but were examples of ungodly living, too.

Not all of 1 John is polemical. Much seems aimed at encouragement and reassurance. Christians should pursue their family connections with God and with one another. This can be done by imitation of Christ, or reproduction of the life of Christ, his character and power, in daily life. Such imitation is based on a commonality with Christ: a common life, a common way, a common commandment to love, common treatment from the world, common freedom from sin.

Outline of Contents:

The letter does not have any particular form or structure. The argument is followed in a progressive sense, from one short topic/allusion to the next. The scheme is (very concisely) as follows:

- Knowledge of the incarnate word of Life gives fellowship with God.
- However, there are conditions to maintaining such fellowship (e.g. confession of sin).
- Proof of knowing God and having fellowship with him is in being obedient to his commandments.
- Believers should love God rather than the system of this world.
- Although the spirit of anti-Christ is already evident, believers have an anointing that is an antidote to false teaching.
- Expect the coming of Christ, be pure, you will be like him then.
- Abide in him, and thus be free from sin.
- Obligation of brotherly love.
- Abiding in Him gives confidence in prayer.
- Test all spirits against the truth of the incarnation.
- Love the brethren, as God loves you.
- Perfect love casts out fear.
- Faith has power to overcome the world.
- There is sufficient testimony to the Son of God to warrant unconditional faith in him.

Characteristics:

1. Much use is made of **repetition**. Subjects are returned to again and again. The word “know” features prominently as well as concepts such as love (4:8, 16), light (1:5) and life (5:11-12).
2. There is a **simplicity of structure and style**. Sentences and vocabulary are simple.
3. The **language is often blunt and severe**. John knows no 'grey' areas.
4. There is **no use made of the Old Testament** at all.
5. **Christology is derived solely from the polemic** (the fight). Thus incarnation and redemption by blood are major themes, with no mention being made of the resurrection, among other omissions.

B. The Second and Third Epistles of John

2 John:

This is essentially a warning to 'the elect lady and her children' to beware certain false itinerant teachers. These deny the true humanity of Jesus. Fellowship must be refused to those who would gain entrance to the church and promote this line of thought, as though they were orthodox Christian teachers.

Outline:

- The elder greets the elect lady and her children (1-3)
- Abiding in the Truth is the basis for walking in love (4-11)
- The truth is the basis of Christian fellowship (12-13)

Content:

John encourages fellowship between believers who share the same beliefs as outlined in his previous letter (1 John). However, in encouraging believers to not welcome false teachers into their homes, it resulted in the pendulum swinging to far and then NO ONE was welcomed into their homes. Thus it turned out that the believers were not even hosting missionaries and travelling ministers at all and John wants to correct this.

3 John:

The third book of John is written to address this pendulum swing, and encourage the believers to not just cut off the act of hospitality but to just be wise.

Outline:

- The elder addresses Gaius in love (1)
- Love must prevail in the circle of the truth (2-12)
- Peace should prevail among friends (13-14)

Content:

John uses the good example of one the believers named Gaius (the recipient) who was faithful in walking in truth (3 John 3-4) and showing great hospitality (3 John 8). Demetrius who was a good example of following Christ. Diotrephes, who was not to be followed as an example, was not willing to help, gossiped, rejected advice and truth (3 John 9-10).

Memory Verse

1 John 3:18-19 (NLT)

“Dear children, let’s not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. Our actions will show that we belong to the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before God”.

New Testament Survey

Unit 317 – Foundations 3

Week 6 – Session 2
The Revelation



A. Introduction to REVELATION

Authorship:

The author of Revelation repeatedly identifies himself simply as "John" (1:1, 4, 9; 21:2; 22:8). The Greek form of this name represents a common Hebrew name *Yochanan*, which identifies the author as a Jew. The fact that the author makes no attempt to build himself up, but simply refers to himself as John, "your brother" (1:9), is strong evidence against pseudonymity. Writers claiming to be apostles usually spared no efforts to classify themselves as such. It appears that the writer was someone so well known to the churches that his name alone was sufficient for identification.

The New Testament mentions several Johns which could be considered: John the Baptist is obviously not a possibility, for he was dead. John Mark is an unlikely candidate, for no early Christian writer believed he wrote Revelation, and his book is identified by his surname rather than by the name John. There was also a John who was a relative of Annas the high priest (Acts 4:6), but we have no evidence that he was ever even a Christian. The only other John prominent enough to be considered is the disciple John, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee.

Every Christian writer until the middle of the 3rd century, whose works are extant today and who mentions the matter at all, attributes Revelation to John the apostle. Examples include:

- Justin Martyr at Rome (c. A.D. 100 - c. 165; *Dialogue With Trypho* 81)
- Irenaeus at Lyons (c. A.D. 130 - c. 202; *Against Heresies* iv. 20. 11)
- Tertullian at Carthage (c. A.D. 160 - c. 240; *On Prescription Against Heretics* 36)
- Hippolytus at Rome (died c. A.D. 235; *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* xxxvi)
- Clement of Alexandria (died c. A.D. 220; *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* xlii).

Purpose:

The book refers to itself as a **revelation** (1:1), a **prophecy** (1:3), and an **epistle** (1:4-6). It is thus intended to make known previously unknown truth, to be understood as an authoritative word from God and to be a communication from a figure of authority in the church to members of the church.

Information concerning hidden and future things is never communicated in Scripture purely for the sake of satisfying curiosity. The aim here is to warn, comfort and strengthen the church. There is not only assurance that the future entails ultimate victory for the believer, but also an ethical imperative based upon personal submission to the sovereign God.

Key themes:

- Jesus is the Davidic **king**; the world is God's kingdom (reign).
- God is **present** with his people, even in injustice (temple).
- God will **set** the world **right** (judgement, new creation).

Genre and Recipients:

The book is, “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1), so we call it *Revelation* or the *Apocalypse* (*apokalupsis* = Greek for revealing.). A couple of hundred years before Christ, the Jews had developed an **Apocalyptic** genre. They developed this style from Daniel and other OT books where angels or dreams revealed why Israel was suffering so much: it was actually a huge battle between the God who wanted to govern the world wisely through his people and the monsters that wanted to run the world and so attacked and oppressed God’s people to retain their power. Apocalyptic literature was full of symbols, numbers, angels, beasts, battles, judgement and the hope of the ultimate victory of God’s people. The closest genre in our culture would be Fantasy—like Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. You know those stories where evil powers manipulate dehumanised orcs to war against people, destroying creation as they go?

Apocalyptic literature such as *First Enoch* or the *Assumption of Moses* was written as if some ancient character (e.g. Enoch, Moses, Solomon, Baruch) had been given a message long ago and told to seal it up to help the writer’s own generation. Revelation is different: it is written by John (1:1) about things that were about to happen right then (1:1). He is told not to seal it up, because people need it now (22:10). In some ways, it looks more like a letter, with an opening greeting (1:4), and closing exhortation (22:6-22) and salutation (22:21).

The letter is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor (1:4)—western Turkey today. The churches are named in 1:11, and each one gets a specific message from Jesus (Rev 2–3). They are suffering persecution from without and struggles within, and they need to hear afresh the good news of what God is doing in his world. As you read the book, ask what it would have meant *to them* in their time. We cannot understand what it means to us if we do not understand what Jesus was saying to them.

So, the Book of Revelation is a letter written in apocalyptic style to encourage and challenge the early Christian churches. They need to know that God is reigning (governing his world), that his purposes will be fulfilled. Even if evil rulers resist his reign and hurt his people (just as they did to Jesus), God’s purposes for his creation will be fulfilled in the end.

Outline of Contents:

1. Prologue	1:1-8
2. John's vision of Christ on Patmos	1:9-20
3. Letters to seven churches	2:1-3:22

There is a pattern common to all the letters:

- Description of the Lord
- Appraisal of the church
- Commendation or censure (or both)
- Warning where necessary
- Promise to the overcomer

4. Vision of God enthroned	4:1-11
5. Vision of the Lamb and scroll	5:1-14
6. The seven seals opened	6:1-8:1
7. The seven trumpets sounded	8:2-11:18
8. The seven signs in heaven and earth	11:19-14:20
9. Seven bowls of God's anger	15:1-18:24
10. The seven last things	19:1-22:5

These are:

- Coming of the Lord from heaven
- The marriage of the Lamb
- The binding of Satan
- The millennial reign of God
- Final rebellion of Satan
- The last Judgement
- The new heaven and new earth

11. The epilogue	22:6-21
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Interpretation:

There are four major approaches to understanding the Book of Revelation. By far the majority of evangelical and Pentecostal believers accept (as did most revival movements during the last 2000 years of church history) the futurist view.

(i) **The Preterist view – Past**

This view maintains that the book was aimed at and relevant only for its own time. It depicts the struggle between the early church and the power of the Roman empire. The problem with this view is that the clearly depicted last things do not have a place in that struggle or in its subsequent history.

(ii) **The Historicist view – Present**

This view attempts to discover certain events in church history in the visions which are recounted. The book would then be a guide to the development of church history, the present being somewhere in its pages. The problem with this view is that identifying the visions with particular moments in church history is a subjective process.

(iii) **The Futurist view – Future**

There are two points of view here. The **dispensational** which sees in John's summons to heaven in 4:1 a secret rapture of the saints, and the **non-dispensational** which does not attempt to force the material into such chronological compartments. The problem with this view is in ascertaining exactly how much of the work is still to take place in the future. The aim of the work is to reveal things that were, that are and that are to come (1:19). However, it is probably the most likely approach to a realistic interpretation.

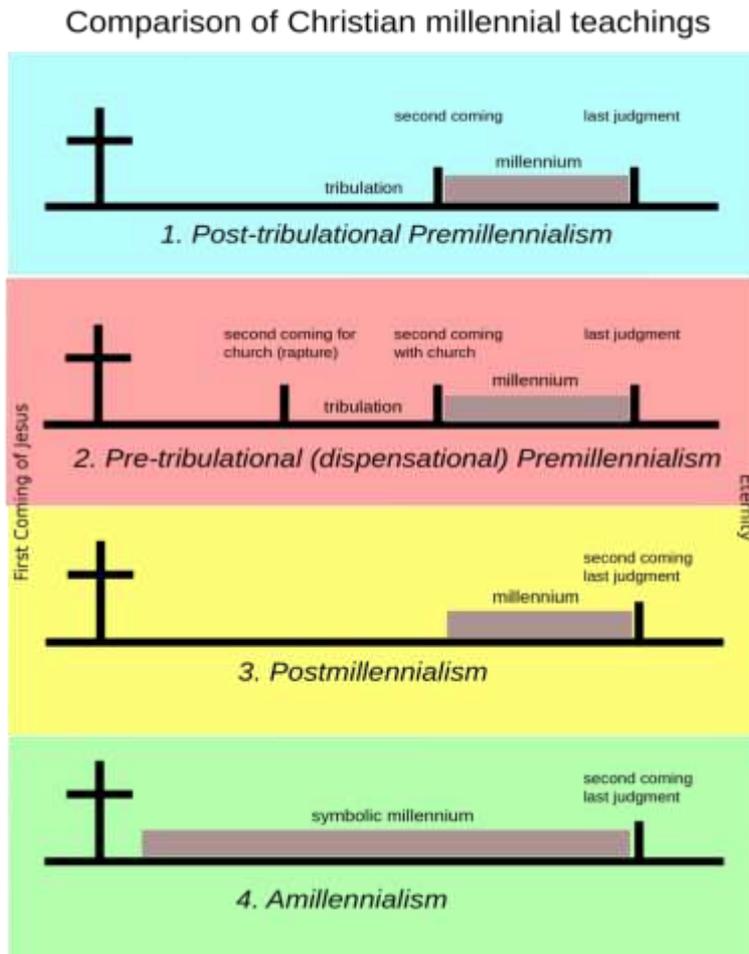
Within the framework of dispensational thinking is a variety of views on the millennial reign of Christ (Revelation 20) (millennialism). They are summarised below:

- **Amillennial:** 1000 is symbolic (like other numbers in Rev). Christ rules through his saints on earth now.
- **Postmillennial:** We gradually improve the world until Jesus is invited to rule. The 1000 years (symbolic?) follows.
- **Premillennial:** The 1000 years is future, when Jesus fights the big war and then rules from Jerusalem.

By AD 400, amillennialism was the accepted interpretation. Due to the nearly universal acceptance of Augustine's amillennial position, the issue was put to rest for the next twelve hundred years. It reopened with the pietist movement of the 1700s (e.g., Bengel), postmillennialism among the Puritans (Whitby, Edwards), and the dispensational Plymouth Brethren movement of the 1800s.¹ Postmillennialism lost support in the 1900s as two world wars undermined its evolutionary hope. Premillennialism gained popularity, particularly in USA. Amillennialism remains popular in mainstream churches and the academic world.

Within the broader scope of Millennialism there are also various views regarding a rapture of the saints and the timing of such an event:

¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 696.



- (iv) **The Spiritual view - Timeless**
 This is the classical **amillennial** position. The content of the book merely depicts the eternal and ongoing struggle between the forces of God and the forces of evil. No attempt should be made at a literal or chronological interpretation. The problem with this position is that, although the work abounds in symbolism, it implies a certain chronology (particularly at the end) and much of it demands a literal interpretation. At best it can be conceded that the central portion contains various parallelisms, depicting the same events from different angles.

Conclusion:

Revelation is an apocalyptic letter written to encourage the churches in Asia Minor to catch the vision of Jesus as earth’s true Lord, despite persecution from Romans, rejection from Jews, social pressure to confirm with those who worship idols and behave immorally. Only when we engage with what it meant to them can we understand and apply what it means to us.

The core message is that Jesus is Lord. But because he does not force his authority on the world, the evil rulers are still doing evil things against God’s people, just as they did to Jesus. We know that Jesus is back from the dead, that he has defeated evil, He is earth’s true King.

It is obviously not a simple matter to interpret this book. The reader may only attempt to do so with a spirit of complete humility and dependence upon God. The worst mistake that can be made is to so concentrate upon the events that the Christ of the revelation is ignored or obscured.

What needs to be remembered throughout reading and studying this book is it is about JESUS, the notions and ideas about end times cannot or should not surpass or push Jesus out of the centre of this book. It is an image of Jesus NOW not an image of Him yet to come, this is who He is at present.

Memory Verse

Revelation 1:1-2

“This is a revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants the events that must soon take place. He sent an angel to present this revelation to his servant John, who faithfully reported everything he saw. This is his report of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ”