Revelation: The Big Picture

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"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 1:3

No portion of God’s word has evoked more conjecture, diversity of opinion, and general confusion among professed Christians than the Book of Revelation. Without question, believers today are not a little skeptical about Revelation. In fact, contemporary attitudes toward Revelation are dangerously close to, shall I say, irreverence. Many modern Christians have concluded that Revelation is incomprehensible; consequently, they tend to avoid it and treat it as if it doesn’t exist.

Why do we distrust this particular book? Why are we so hesitant to study and attempt to understand it? What is it about Revelation that has led to this contemporary paranoia and allergy? I fear that modern attitudes toward the final book of the Bible are largely reactionary. The myriad of weird and eccentric interpretations coupled with the the dogmatism with which proponents of a particular position have promoted their views has left many Christians, I believe, convinced that Revelation is not only hard, but impossible to understand.
Disillusioned by the scare tactics of those who exploit Revelation to frighten little children into making a decision for Christ; disenchanted by the religious charlatans who have capitalized financially on the public’s natural intrigue with the prophetic; frustrated by the date setters who have used the book to make specific predictions that never came to pass; and weary with those who postulate an entire theology from this eschatological book, modern Christians have opted for a philosophy of despair concerning Revelation. I don’t believe, however, that the Book of Revelation was providentially canonized just to keep people guessing. Like the other sixty-five books of the Bible, the Book of Revelation is "profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness." In fact, I believe that as the return of our Lord nears, and as conditions in the modern world increasingly parallel the environment in which the Christians in Asia Minor lived, Revelation will assume a new level of relevance and meaning. Moreover, Revelation is the only book in Scripture that promises a specific "blessing" to those who hear and obey it’s message (1:3). With such a promise, the study of this book must be as much of a priority as the study of Romans, Ephesians, or the Gospel of John.

Four Views

Revelation is one of four books written by the apostle John, the Christological champion of the New Testament. Like his Gospel and three epistles, Revelation is concerned with the person and work of Jesus Christ. While John’s Gospel, however, focuses on the identity of the Lord Jesus as the
Divine Son of God, Revelation focuses on His post-resurrection glory and His ultimate and certain return. The ascended Christ is both the source and the subject of this important book (1:1).

Revelation is, admittedly, unusual. The world of Revelation seems strange and foreign to those of us who live in the modern world. There are no automobiles, microwave ovens, grocery stores, schools, or televisions in this book. Revelation, on the contrary, describes a world of angels, demons, lambs, lions, horses, and dragons. Two monsters emerge from its pages, one with seven heads and ten horns who rises from the sea, and the other with the horns of a ram and the voice of a dragon who rises from the earth. It portrays a world of thunder, lightning, hail, fire, smoke, and blood. Such dramatic imagery is unconventional, to say the least.

But Revelation is God’s word. It is imperative, therefore, that believer’s study its pages and digest its principles. The quest to understand Revelation is honorable. In fact, it is as basic and fundamental to healthy discipleship as a passion to understand Genesis, Isaiah, or First Peter.

Students of the Scripture disagree concerning the proper interpretation of Revelation. Though interpretations vary considerably even within the different categories, there are basically four interpretive views.

(1) THE PRETERIST VIEW: Preterists believe that the book
was written near the end of the reign of Nero (A.D. 54-68). They tend, consequently, to ascribe fulfillment of the prophecies to the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), the fall of the Roman Empire, or both. The "preterist" view argues that the phrase "...things which must shortly come to pass" (1:3) makes an immediate fulfillment essential. Early dating (A.D. 67-68) is crucial to the preterist’s argument.

The preterist view, furthermore, asserts that the book was written to encourage believers who were suffering persecution in the early church period. Although preterists apply the fulfillment of Revelation’s prophecy to A.D. 70, they believe that the principles of conflict and encouragement presented in the book have a wider application to Christians in subsequent eras.

The primary argument against the Preterist position concerns the dating of the book. Was it written in A.D. 67-68 during Nero’s reign, or, as most Bible students and church historians agree, in A.D. 81-96 during the reign of Flavius Domitian? In the light of the fact that John’s Gospel and three Epistles were written near the end of the first century (A.D. 90’s) and the fact that Paul’s apostleship, not John’s, was in the fore during Nero’s reign, the argument for the later date seems more plausible. Obviously, if Revelation was written in A.D. 96, then it could not have been fulfilled a quarter century earlier in A.D. 70. Substantial arguments can be made for both dates, but the sheer discrepancy and uncertainty of the autographic date should give the believer pause before he embraces the preterist view dogmatically.
Personally, I struggle with the idea that a prophetic book like Revelation (1:3) has no future relevance. Yes, there are Old Testament books aplenty that must be interpreted only in terms of past history (with, of course, an application of spiritual principles to every successive era - Rom. 15:4), but the tone of those books is primarily historical. The tone of Revelation, on the contrary, is prophetic. Seeing the prophetic nature of this book, is it reasonable to assume that the last book of the Bible has no direct relevance to believers who lived after A.D. 70?

Though I do not mean to imply that all preterists who consign Revelation to the past are reacting against man’s natural fascination with the future, on the one hand, and man’s natural fear of the unknown, on the other hand (such an implication would be to disregard the substantive arguments of preterism), yet it is possible that some have opted for the preterist view simply in reaction to the weird and frightening way some Bible teachers have explained the book. Whether or not this position is hermeneutically accurate, I can understand the psychological attraction of the preterist view.

(2) THE FUTURIST VIEW: While the preterist relegates the events of the book to the past, the "futurist" puts the majority of the book in the future. He believes that chapters four to twenty-two describe events that will be rapidly fulfilled at the Second Coming of Christ. The futurist expects a final crisis at the end of time. This view is popular among
those who subscribe to some form of Dispensationalism. Distinguishing between "the things that must shortly come to pass" (chapters one to three) and "things which must be hereafter" (chapters four to twenty-two), this is probably the most pervasively popular view in mainstream Christianity today.

The futurist view, however, has several inherent problems. First of all, it fails to make an immediate application to the believers to whom John wrote. The futurist’s "out there" interpretation (with nineteen of the book’s twenty-two chapters to be fulfilled in the future) seems remote to the immediate needs of the Christians in Asia Minor. Secondly, because the book describes future events through the use of symbolism and unusual imagery, and because the book is by its very nature "prophetic" (1:3; 22:18), it is difficult, if not impossible, to speak with absolute certainty and dogmatism. These two factors - i.e. that the book is written in the language of symbolism, not history, and that the book deals with the future, not the past - tend to make me cautious about swallowing what appears to be someone’s particular opinion. For example, someone may say, as I have heard, that the ten horns represent the ten nations that compose the European Common Community, or that Babylon represents the resurrected Roman Empire, etc. They proceed to insinuate that interpretation into the entire book, constructing an elaborate system of end-time social, political, economic, and religious events. Are they correct? Maybe. Or, maybe not. The sheer uncertainty of such a grid constructed outside of Divine Revelation and imposed upon
the text gives me pause to accept it "lock, stock, and barrel." I don’t know if the ten horns represent the ECC. They very well might. But they might not. As long as I’m unsure, I personally hesitate to be dogmatic. This danger of sensationalism and speculation is intrinsic to the futurist view.

Sadly, the sensational and intriguing appeals to popular culture. Most people want a Bible teacher to tell them what all of the images and symbols mean, to paint the symbolic in concrete historical terms. But because the future hasn’t happened yet, it is unwise to be dogmatic.

(3) THE HISTORICIST VIEW: The "historical" view contends that the book of Revelation chronologically describes human history from the ascension to the Second Coming of Christ. Some historicists divide the book into three distinct sections, according to John’s three visions: (a) Chapters 1-3 describe ecclesiastical, or church, history from the first century to the return of the Lord; (b) Chapters 4-11 describe social and environmental events between the two advents of Christ; (c) Chapters 12-18 describe political and economic history between the ascension and the Second Coming.

Though the historical view is fascinating, it, too, has inherent difficulties. Like the futurist view, the historical view cannot speak in concrete historical terms. Historians are unable to identify specific historical events corresponding to the symbols of the book. Just the possibility that one has not considered all of the historical
options, prohibits one from speaking with absolute certainty. It is impossible to know exactly where we are on the historicists timeline.

(4) THE IDEALIST VIEW: This view is also called the symbolic or allegorical view. The "idealist" sees Revelation as a panorama of the cosmic conflict between good and evil over the span of human history, with good triumphing in the end. This view contends that Revelation is written in symbolic language not because it is a secret code to be unlocked or an esoteric puzzle to be solved, but because it is concerned to teach general spiritual principles regarding the spiritual warfare in which the believer is involved. These principles had a specific application to the seven churches in Asia Minor. They also have a wider application to believers in every age who find themselves in the throes of spiritual conflict. This universal warfare between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world will be consummated when the Risen Christ returns, "riding a White Horse" (Rev. 19:11), to vanquish His foes and bring everlasting peace and safety to His people.

What are the problems inherent to the idealists approach? In all honesty, very few. Though Dispensationalists argue that this approach errs because it doesn’t interpret the text literally, I respectfully beg to differ. Literal interpretation does not necessarily mean "physical" interpretation. The idealist view, as a matter of fact, is true to the principles of grammatical and historical interpretation and consistent with the the symbolic and prophetic nature of the book.
I concede that a potential danger intrinsic to the idealist view is the tendency to spiritualize excessively. The futurist expresses a legitimate concern when he rejects this allegorical approach to the book on the basis that it encourages exaggerated spiritualization. For example, the individual who proceeds to make the rainbow, the sea of glass, the gems, etc., represent certain spiritual truths has taken liberties to read meaning into the text (*eisegesis*) instead of allowing the text to speak for itself (*exegesis*). The rainbow John saw was, we must assume, a rainbow; the sea of glass, a sea of glass, not "the sea of God’s love." When the Holy Spirit gives editorial comment on a metaphor or symbol, the Bible student has the right to insert a definition on the imagery; when He doesn’t, we must not venture into speculation and conjecture. For example, it is appropriate to say that the "lake of fire" is the eternal abode of the wicked. Revelation 20 teaches that categorically. It is not appropriate to say, however, that the "sea of glass" represents the attributes of God. Scripture gives no such indication.

Certainly, all four views have merit, and a combination of the four may be closer to the truth than any one view by itself. Regardless of the particular view one adopts, the book of Revelation describes certain general principles that speak to all believers alike. Understanding this "big picture" is the key to interpreting Revelation.

The Goal of Revelation
The book of Revelation was not written to satisfy man’s curiosity of the future, but to give strength and hope to God’s persecuted people. John’s goal is to encourage the weary Christians in Asia Minor to persevere in faith in the face of tremendous external opposition. Consider his greeting: "I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:9). Notice three facts inherent in John’s words. (1) Notice where he was. He was in Patmos, a small rocky island about sixty miles off the coast of Asia Minor in the Agaean Sea. Patmos was a Roman penal settlement where prisoners who were considered dangerous to civil order were exiled. (2) Notice why he was there. John had been exiled to Patmos "for the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ." He was suffering, in other words, persecution for Christ’s sake. He was being punished for his convictions. (3) Notice how he refers to himself. He calls himself "your...companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ." Two phrases are especially significant: the phrase "companion in tribulation" and the phrase "patience of Jesus Christ."

The word "companion" is koinonia, translated elsewhere in the New Testament by the word "fellowship." It means "to share in common." John shared something in common with the believers in Asia Minor. What did he share? "Tribulation", one of the key words of the book. These members of the seven local Christian assemblies in Asia Minor were
suffering severe persecution in their respective communities. They were experiencing reprisal and recrimination because of their refusal to worship idols, to glorify Caesar, and to participate in the pagan rituals that were such a viable part of social life. John said, "I, too, am suffering for the cause of Jesus Christ. I share your struggles." Exiled to Patmos for the word of God, John shared tribulation in common with these early believers.

John shared something else with the saints in Asia. He shared the benefits of kingdom living with them, and the common commitment to Jesus Christ as the Lord and King of His kingdom, as the phrase "the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" discloses. The word "patience" (hupomone) means perseverance, steadfast commitment, faithfulness, and endurance. This word will also resurface frequently throughout the book (13:10; 14:12). By employing the word "patience" in his greeting, John gives us a clue regarding his purpose in writing to these persecuted Christians. He is concerned to encourage them to persevere in the face of very intimidating opposition. The phrase "the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" is both a subtle reminder of the commitment they had made to be true and loyal to the Lord Jesus and an encouragement to persevere in view of the fact that he was in the battle with them. I am, he said, "your companion in tribulation" [viz. "I share your trouble"] and "your companion in patience" [viz. "I share your commitment"].

What was the nature of their tribulation? Revelation 2:9-10,
the message to the church of Smyrna, defines it in terms of "persecution." Smyrna was a microcosm of the greater regional conflict. The believers there had already suffered persecution in the form of "poverty" and slander ("blasphemy"). More intense sufferings, Christ informs them, were coming: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days; be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (v. 10).

Persecution took the forms of boycott and unemployment (13:17), slander, incarceration, physical torture, and martyrdom. Because early Christians refused to burn incense before the bust of the Emperor and say "Caesar is Lord," they became the objects of the most inhumane treatment. Some were even used as human torches to illumine Nero’s gardens and made sport for the gladiators and lions. In fact, a member of the church at Pergamum named Antipas had actually died at the time of writing (2:13). The environment in which these early Christians sought to live out their faith was openly hostile and antagonistic toward Christianity. The pressure to conform to popular culture was great; the penalty for resisting was greater still.

So Revelation is book for the persecuted saints of God. The late Elder Len Dalton summarizes the purpose of Revelation in the following helpful paragraph:
"The chief value of the book seems to lie in its testimony to the faith and hope of persecuted Christians and in the comfort and inspiration it has brought to sorrowing and oppressed souls in every age of the church. It points up to the fact that there will be an end to the sorrow and conflict, that the enemies of the saints will be punished, and that the followers of the Lamb will be blessedly rewarded." (The Divine Library, p. 143).

So, John, exiled on Patmos Island for Christ’s sake, writes the Christians of Asia Minor who were also in the trenches of spiritual conflict and encourages them to persevere in the faith. Understanding this basic setting of background information is essential. But how does he encourage them?

A Heavenly Perspective

John encourages the weary saints of Asia Minor by giving them a heavenly perspective on their sufferings. He helps them to rise above the details of personal struggle to see "the big picture" that God had shown him. Revelation is, in other words, a window into the invisible yet real world of heaven, an unveiling of the mysterious for the comfort and encouragement of those who are in the fray of the battle now. In the book of Revelation, John describes the mysterious world that God had shown him. Such a view into heaven had given John a fresh perspective on his own sufferings. But God had not given John this supernatural experience for his own benefit, but for the persecuted and weary saints of God. Because of the tendency to exaggerate troubles and to lose one’s focus, the Lord uncovered the
window s of heaven and permitted his servant John to peer inside and describe the eternal dimension to those weary Christians embroiled in temporal conflict. Revelation is essentially a window into the unknown for the benefit and encouragement of those who are confined to the realm of the tangible. In more specific terms, the encouragement John has to offer these weary first century believers is expressed in the five major themes of the book: (1) The Glory of Christ; (2) The Sovereignty of Christ; (3) The Worship of Heaven; (4) Spiritual Warfare; (5) The Second Coming of Christ. When these five dominant themes are put together, the big picture emerges. The following is a distillation and crystallization of the "big picture":

Revelation is the drama of the Risen Christ, ruling His world, worshiped by His creatures, vanquishing His enemies, vindicating His church, and bringing them everlasting rest in His immediate presence.

Each of the respective parts of that summary will unfold as we proceed. Such a vision would inevitably instill courage and infuse strength into the hearts of the foot soldiers in Christ’s kingdom.

Theme #1
The Glory of Christ

Revelation might be called "the Drama of the Risen Christ." It is a dramatic presentation of the post-resurrection and post-ascension activity of the Lord Jesus Christ. In all candor, it is more dramatic than Star Trek or Return of the Jedi. It is not written in theological abstractions and
formulas, but in concrete realities and images. What a story problem is to Mathematics, translating the abstract into real life terms, Revelation is to theology. I Corinthians 15 states the unequivocal theological truth that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead and is alive today. Revelation illustrates that truth.

The book is a Christological gem. Read the description of the glory of Christ in Revelation 1:13-16. Who is this man among the lampstands?

"Look ye saints, the sight is glorious; see the Man of Sorrows now; From the fight returned victorious, every knee to Him shall bow."

To encourage these beleagured and tired soldiers of the cross, John reminds them, first of all, that the Lord Jesus is alive. He was not the victim of the cross, but the Victor! Calvary was not the ultimate tragedy, but the unequivocal triumph! Further, in His risen glory, He moves among the candlesticks, superintending the affairs of each local church. He knows all about each one - both in terms of their respective virtues and vices. He is mindful of their suffering, their condition, and their needs.

Though the early believers knew theologically that Christ was alive, it would be easy for them, in the trenches of persecution, to lose a sense of the reality and the relevance of that truth. They needed a new awareness of the Lord Jesus Christ in His risen glory. They needed the reassurance
that He was indeed alive, the conqueror of death and the grave. Revelation was the Lord’s prescription for their need.

**Theme #2**
The Sovereignty of Christ

Revelation reveals something else about the Lord Jesus Christ. He is not only alive; He is also sovereign. Revelation is the drama of the risen Christ, ruling His world. The word "throne" appears forty-six times in the book of Revelation. The throne, of course, is the emblem of sovereign authority. The One who sits upon the throne (4:2; 5:1-2; et al.) is in absolute control. What a comforting reminder to these persecuted saints! So long as Christ was in ultimate control, they could persevere.

**Theme #3**
The Worship of Heaven

Revelation portrays the Risen Christ, reigning upon His throne, receiving worship from His creatures. Among the many other things that it is, the book of Revelation is a manual for worship. It contains five separate worship scenes (4:8-11; 5:8-14; 7:9-17; 11:15-19; 19:1-9) in which John witnesses the worship of angels and disembodied souls made perfect. All heaven is jubilant before the Lamb that was slain. This glimpse into heaven, can’t you see, is carefully calculated to expand the perspective of these battle-scarred, road-weary Christians. By lifting their gaze heavenward, John brings perspective to their current plight, and, in the process of sharpening their focus on the eternal, gives them the incentive and the direction they need in
order to stand unflinching in the face of social pressure.

"The Christ whose name you wear," John says to these believers, "is both alive from the dead and active in the world. Furthermore, all heaven bows in adoring worship to Him." Such a reminder would serve to prompt the early saints to renew their commitment to worship Him, both through verbal praise and through the offering up of the entire life in His service. Such a worthy Savior deserved the honor and praise they could render.

Theme #4
Spiritual Warfare

Let's add the next theme to the emerging "big picture." Revelation is the drama of the Risen Christ, ruling His world, worshiped by His creatures, and vanquishing His foes and the enemies of His church. Warfare, or spiritual conflict, is a dominant theme of Revelation. Of the sixteen times the word "war" appears in the New Testament, nine are in the book of Revelation. The very tone of conflict is intrinsic to Revelation. Who can read the book and fail to notice the tension between good and evil, Christ and the dragon, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness? Obviously, Revelation depicts a battle.

But what battle does it depict? Futurists define it in terms of a final crisis called Armageddon. There may very well be a final crisis, but to define the warfare motif of Revelation in terms of that one future clash misses the more general principle that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are engaged
in a spiritual warfare of cosmic proportions against "principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). John wants the persecuted saints of Asia Minor to know that the societal opposition they have endured is more than a personal vendetta or culture war. He wants them to view their persecution in terms of the larger universal clash of righteousness versus unrighteousness, a conflict that is being played out on the theater of human experience.

Revelation 12 outlines this warfare dynamic vividly. It is a panorama of the cosmic conflict of the ages between the "Seed of the woman" and the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Let’s develop the warfare theme of Revelation 12. Verse one sets the context of battle in the spiritual dimension (i.e. the "heavenlies" of Eph. 6:12): "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven...." What did John see? He saw "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." This woman is Israel, i.e. the Jewish nation, from whom the Messiah was born (vs. 2,5). Israel "brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne" (v.5). Notice John also sees "a great red dragon" who "stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born" (v. 4). Do you remember Herod’s plot to slay the newborn King? It was more than one man’s dimented and paranoid attempt to protect the stability of his throne. Herod’s plot was an infernal attempt to sabotage the
fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose. In other words, this event, like the temptation in the wilderness (Mt. 4) and Peter’s rebuke of the Lord Jesus (Mt. 16:21-23), was a supernatural ploy to derail the Lord from His covenant assignment. When Jesus said to Peter, "Get thee behind me Satan, for thou art an offence [lit. a stumblingblock] unto me" (Mt. 16:23), He recognized the same diabolical logic in Peter’s words that He had endured at the hands of the devil for forty days in the wilderness. The bottom line is simply this: The cosmic conflict between Good and evil, between Righteousness and unrighteousness, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, between God and the devil, is played out on the theater of human existence. The dragon used Herod as his pawn to attempt to devour the Messiah at his birth.

Was he successful? No; the woman’s man child was "caught up to God and His throne." The ascension of Christ (which, by the way, is one of the dominant themes of Revelation) is the ultimate proof that Jesus was victorious at the cross. Israel, subsequently, "fled into the wilderness" where God had prepared for her temporary protection (v. 6). This speaks of the Lord’s providential care of the early church. Divine providence and supernatural intervention in the life of the church is the only explanation for the perpetuity of the kingdom of Christ in the hostile enemy territory that is the world.

Next, the scene shifts back from the terrestrial to the celestial: "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his
angels fought against the dragon..." (v. 7). It is a mistake, in my opinion, to attempt to apply Revelation 12 to any one historical occurrence. This chapter describes the cosmic conflict of the ages. Satan has, since he was deposed from his created position, waged war against the kingdom of God. It has always been his strategy to sabotage God’s program. Since he was unsuccessful in his attempt to exterminate the Messiah, he proceeds to make war with Messiah’s "brethren" and to deceive the whole world, knowing that he has but a short time (vs. 9-17). This is the story of human history: **God sending His Son through the nation of Israel; Satan attempting to destroy the Messiah; The Lord Jesus ascending to the throne of the universe; the devil deceiving the nations, persecuting Israel (v. 13), and declaring war with "the remnant of her seed" [i.e. the New Testament Church] who "keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."

Will he be successful? Not ultimately, for Messiah has won the war at the cross: "Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down which accused them before our God day and night" (v. 10). Praise be to God, Satan is a defeated foe!

But though he has lost the war, he now intensifies his efforts against the kingdom of God, for "he knoweth that he hath but a short time" (v. 12). In his fury, Satan unleashes contemporary assaults against those who "have the testimony of Jesus Christ" from his infernal arsenal (v. 15-
Lest Christians should be intimidated, however, John is careful to note that the Risen Christ intervenes on behalf of his church (see verses fourteen and sixteen). In fact, John says, early believers "overcame him." How? By "the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." Pleading the blood of Christ and wielding the sword of the spirit, these Christians achieved victory by faith over the devil. They were so committed to Christ that they were willing to die as martyrs for His name: "...they loved not their lives unto the death." They knew that even if Satan killed the body, he couldn’t exterminate the soul. Consequently, they stood faithful and resolute in the face of the most severe forms of persecution.

Why does John develop the warfare dynamic so vividly? Because he wants the believers in Asia Minor and in all subsequent eras to learn to interpret the world’s antagonism to the gospel in terms of the greater universal fray between the Supernal and the infernal. He also wants them to know that the war has already been won. Jesus met the enemy head-on at the cross, dealt the death-blow to the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15; Hab. 3:13; I Jno. 3:8; Heb. 2:14), and emerged victorious from death. He now reigns as the Sovereign King of kings. One day He will return, riding a "white horse" with the armies of heaven following, to vanquish His foes (and ours) forever. With that understanding, persecuted Christians gain perspective on their sufferings and incentive to persevere faithful to the end, regardless of the cost. That brings us to the final theme.
Theme #5
The Return of Jesus Christ

Revelation is a climactic book. It is the capstone of Special Revelation. It describes the drama of the risen Christ, ruling His world, worshiped by His creatures, vanquishing His foes, and bringing everlasting rest to His people. Set in the context of earthly tension, it rises to the climax of the Second Coming. The return of our Lord will be the apex of human history. It is the momentous event, the grand finale. When the Risen and Glorified Christ makes His triumphal entry, He will ride, not a "colt the foal of an ass" as He did in His first advent, but a great white horse. Then, every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord and King (Phi. 2:9-11). Then, every eye shall see Him (Rev. 1:7). Then, "in His times", God will "show who is the only Potentate, King of kings, and Lord of lords" (I Tim. 6:15). Then, He will come "without sin unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28). Then, shall be brought to pass the saying, "Death is swallowed up in victory" (I Cor. 15:54). Then, He will vindicate His righteous name and put to silence all of the "hard speeches that ungodly sinners have uttered against Him" (Jude 14). Then, when the last trumpet sounds, "the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15; cf. Dan. 2:44). What a day that will be!

The book of Revelation both begins and ends with a reference to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:7; Rev. 22:20). The response of the persecuted saints of God to this blessed hope has been for twenty long centuries, "Even
so, come Lord Jesus!

What does the Second Coming mean to those in the trenches of the fight of faith? It means rescue from "great tribulation": "These are they that are come out of great tribulation..." (Rev. 7:14). It means transport to a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God (Rev. 21). It means everlasting peace, joy, and repose in the immediate presence of King Immanuel. It means no more pain, nor death, nor sorrow or crying. It means no more death, nor sickness, nor disease, nor fighting. It means no more Satan and no more sin. It means the Beatific vision, for we shall see Him "face to face." It means, blessed be the name of the Lord, eternal rest. Ah, rest; what a glorious prospect! The hymnwriter said it poignantly:

"Mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war, She waits the consummation of peace forevermore; Til with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest, And the great church victorious, shall be the church at rest."

That's the message of Revelation.

Summary

The purpose of Revelation, "the big picture," is to encourage the persecuted followers of the Lamb to persevere faithful to the One who is alive forevermore in an environment that is antagonistic to Him. Through John, who himself was suffering reproach for Christ's sake, the Holy Spirit offers this encouragement by drawing the curtains of heaven and permitting them to see into the invisible world of spiritual
realities. This heavenly perspective has the effect of enlarging the vision of those who live in enemy territory, giving them the incentive to keep going. By reminding them of the end of the story, the Spirit of God encourages them to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. By allowing them to hear the redeemed throng of heaven singing the triumphant chorus of praise to the Lamb, they are encouraged to continue to praise Him on earth. By giving them a preview of coming attractions, the chief of which being the Second Coming of the Mighty Conqueror, they are motivated to be faithful unto death. Revelation helps our unbelief. It corrects our slide down the slippery slope of discouragement by reminding us that the Living Lord is in control of our difficult situation. Revelation bids us to "hold the fort."

After General Sherman had besieged Atlanta, General Hood, of the Confederacy, made a noble stand against Sherman’s troops at Alatoona Pass. As Sherman watched the battle from nearby Kenessaw Mountain, he noticed that General Hood began to prevail. To encourage his troops, Sherman heliographed a message down to his tired and beleagured army. The message read, "Hold the fort, for I am coming." As the General’s message passed from soldier to soldier, the army rallied to victory. This story became the motivation for one of Phillip Bliss’ most famous hymns:

"Hold the fort, for I am coming," Jesus signals still; Wave the answer back to heaven, "By thy grace, we will."
Revelation, the final chapter of Divine Revelation, is our Captain’s message to His beleagured troops, "Hold the fort, for I am coming." May you and I today take courage from his promise, waving the answer back to heaven in a new commitment to be faithful to Him, "By thy grace, we will."