

FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRU *the* BIBLE

GOD'S  
*Grand*  
FINALE

AN INTRODUCTION  
TO REVELATION

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

# GOD'S GRAND FINALE

## AN INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

I have always loved to read a good mystery, detective story.

When I was a young man in ministry, on Sunday evenings after the church service, I would go home and relax by reading a good mystery. About one o'clock in the morning I'd get to the place where the villain has tied the heroine to the railroad tracks and the train is coming along down the tracks. She is in a desperate situation.

Where's the hero? Will he rescue her in time? But wait—he's in that old warehouse down by the pier, tied to a chair under which is a stick of dynamite with the fuse already lit.

You know I can't leave the hero and heroine in that kind of position even if it's one o'clock in the morning. But, since it is time for me to go to sleep, I peek over at the final page. A different scene greets me there. The hero and the heroine sit out on the porch of a lovely cottage with a white picket fence.

Then I would turn back to the place where I stopped reading, and say to the hero and heroine, "I don't know how you are going to get out of it, but I tell you this: It's going to work out all right."

We look around at a dark world today and wonder how it's all going to end. Well, all we need to do is turn to the last book of the Bible, the Revelation. What we read there tells us it's going to work out all right.

It doesn't look that way. In fact, it looks like the devil is having a high holiday in the world. But God is going to work it out. God Himself will gain control—in fact, He has never lost control—and He is moving to the time when He is going to place His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, upon the throne of His universe down here.

Anyone who takes an optimistic view of the world situation isn't thinking clearly. The world is in a desperate condition. However, I'm no pessimist, because I have the book of Revelation and I can say to every person who trusts Christ, "Don't you worry. It's going to work out all right." God is coming out on top and you want to be with *Him*. You're on the side that looks to be losing now, but we're not on the last page yet.

So let's take a closer look at the world as it is today. These are dark and difficult days. People feel desperate, skeptical, and doubting. Leadership is failing in every field—government, politics, science, education, military, and entertainment. Educators have lost control of their campuses. Business is managed by tycoons. Actors dominate the media outlets. Listening to them for only a brief time reveals they have nothing worthwhile to say. No one has any solutions. No one is leading us out of this moral morass and tangled up mess.

We're also living in one of the worst eras in the history of the church. The church offers no solutions for the problems of this hour. There was a phenomenal growth in church membership, especially after World War II, but that lasted only a few years. It was a church on fire for God. It had wealth and was building tremendous programs, but then it began to lose ground, and today the church hardly influences the contemporary culture at all.

It doesn't take much to see that a great crisis is coming. People talk about it all the time. As a result of this foreboding, there has been a growing interest in the book of Revelation.

Revelation is the 66<sup>th</sup> book of the Bible—the last one. This means we need to know 65 other books before we get to this place. Having a working knowledge of all the background of the Bible will give Revelation context. If you know the facts and the feel of Scripture, that will help, too.

Although good expositors differ on the details of Revelation, generally Revelation has been interpreted through four major systems.

1. The *preterist* interpretation says all of Revelation has been fulfilled in the past. This methodology says Revelation only described the events in the writer, John's, day, under the domination of either Nero or Domitian. The purpose of the book of Revelation was to bring comfort to the persecuted church of that day and was written in symbols that the Christians of that period would understand.
2. The *historical* interpretation says the fulfillment of Revelation is going on continuously in the history of the church, from John's day to the present time. It isn't prophetic but talking about current events. While this does apply to the seven churches John wrote to, we shall see Revelation is obviously prophetic.
3. The *historical-spiritualist* interpretation is a refinement of the historical theory. It says the two beasts are imperial and provincial Rome and that the point of the book is to encourage Christians. According to this theory, Revelation has been largely fulfilled and contains only spiritual lessons for the church today.

The system we know today as amillennialism has, for the most part, adopted this view. But this view dissipates and defeats Revelation's purpose. When I was in seminary, I studied the amillennialist view of Revelation in both Greek and English. It was amazing to see how the facts of the Revelation could be dissipated into thin air by just saying, "Well, these are



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symbols.” But what are they symbols *of*? No one could say. Some very strange and unusual interpretations rise out of this viewpoint. One interpreter sees Luther and the Reformation in a symbol that to another student pictures the invention of the printing press! In my opinion, interpretations of this type have hurt and defeated Revelation’s purpose.

Another theory I was introduced to as a young man was known as postmillennialism. The postmillennialists believe the world would get better and better, that the church would convert the whole world, and then Christ would come and reign. Well, that viewpoint is almost dead today. After two world wars, a worldwide depression, and the crises through which the world is passing, there are very few who still hold that viewpoint.

By the time I enrolled in seminary, every professor was an amillennialist, that is, they didn’t believe in a Millennium. Most disillusioned postmillennialists ran to this view for cover.

4. The *futurist* interpretation is the view held by all premillennialists and is the one which I accept and present to you. It sees Revelation as primarily prophetic. Most premillennialists follow a certain form of interpretation that conforms to Revelation. (We will see this in the outline of the book.) It begins with the revelation of the glorified Christ. Then the whole history of the church is given. Then, at the end of chapter 3, the church goes to heaven and we see it, not as the church anymore, but as the bride which will come to the earth with Christ when He comes to establish His Kingdom—that thousand-year reign John will tell us more about. It will be a time of testing, for at the end of that period Satan will be released for a brief season. Then the final rebellion is put down and eternity begins. This is the viewpoint of Revelation which is generally accepted.

In our day, many critics of this interpretation not only attempt to discount but will belittle the premillennial view. They say this futurist viewpoint is brand new. I’ll admit that it has been fully developed, as have all these other interpretations, in recent years, but history testifies that we have been looking for Christ to come again since He left.

Many scholars from the past were looking for Christ to return. They were not looking for the Great Tribulation, they were not even looking for the Millennium, but they were looking for *Him* to come. This expectation is the very heart of the premillennial viewpoint as we hold it today.

**Barnabas**, who was a co-worker with the apostle Paul, has been quoted as saying, “The true Sabbath is the one thousand years ... when Christ comes back to reign.”

**Clement** (A.D. 96), Bishop of Rome, said, “Let us every hour expect the kingdom of God ... we know not the day.”

**Polycarp** (A.D. 108), Bishop of Smyrna and finally burned at the stake there, said, “He will raise us from the dead ... we shall ... reign with Him.”

**Ignatius**, Bishop of Antioch, who the historian Eusebius says was the apostle Peter’s successor, commented, “Consider the times and expect Him.”

**Papias** (A.D. 116), Bishop of Hierapolis, who—according to Irenaeus—saw and heard the apostle John, said, “There will be one thousand years ... when the reign of Christ personally will be established on earth.”

**Justin Martyr** (A.D. 150) said, “I and all others who are orthodox Christians, on all points, know there will be a thousand years in Jerusalem ... as Isaiah and Ezekiel declared.”

**Irenaeus** (A.D. 175), Bishop of Lyons, commenting on Jesus’ promise to drink again of the fruit of the vine in His Father’s Kingdom, argues: “That this ... can only be fulfilled upon our Lord’s personal return to earth.”

**Tertullian** (A.D. 200) said, “We do indeed confess that a kingdom is promised on earth.”

**Martin Luther** said, “Let us not think that the coming of Christ is far off.”

**John Calvin**, in his third *Institutes*, wrote: “Scripture uniformly enjoins us to look with expectation for the advent of Christ.”

**Canon A. R. Fausset** said this: “The early Christian fathers, Clement, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus, looked for the Lord’s speedy return as the necessary precursor of the millennial kingdom. Not until the professing Church lost her first love, and became the harlot resting on the world power, did she cease to be the Bride going forth to meet the Bridegroom, and seek to reign already on earth without waiting for His Advent.”

**Dr. Elliott** wrote: “All primitive expositors, except Origen and the few who rejected Revelation, were premillennial.”

**Gussler’s** work on church history says of this blessed hope that “it was so distinctly and prominently mentioned that we do not hesitate in regarding it as the general belief of that age.”

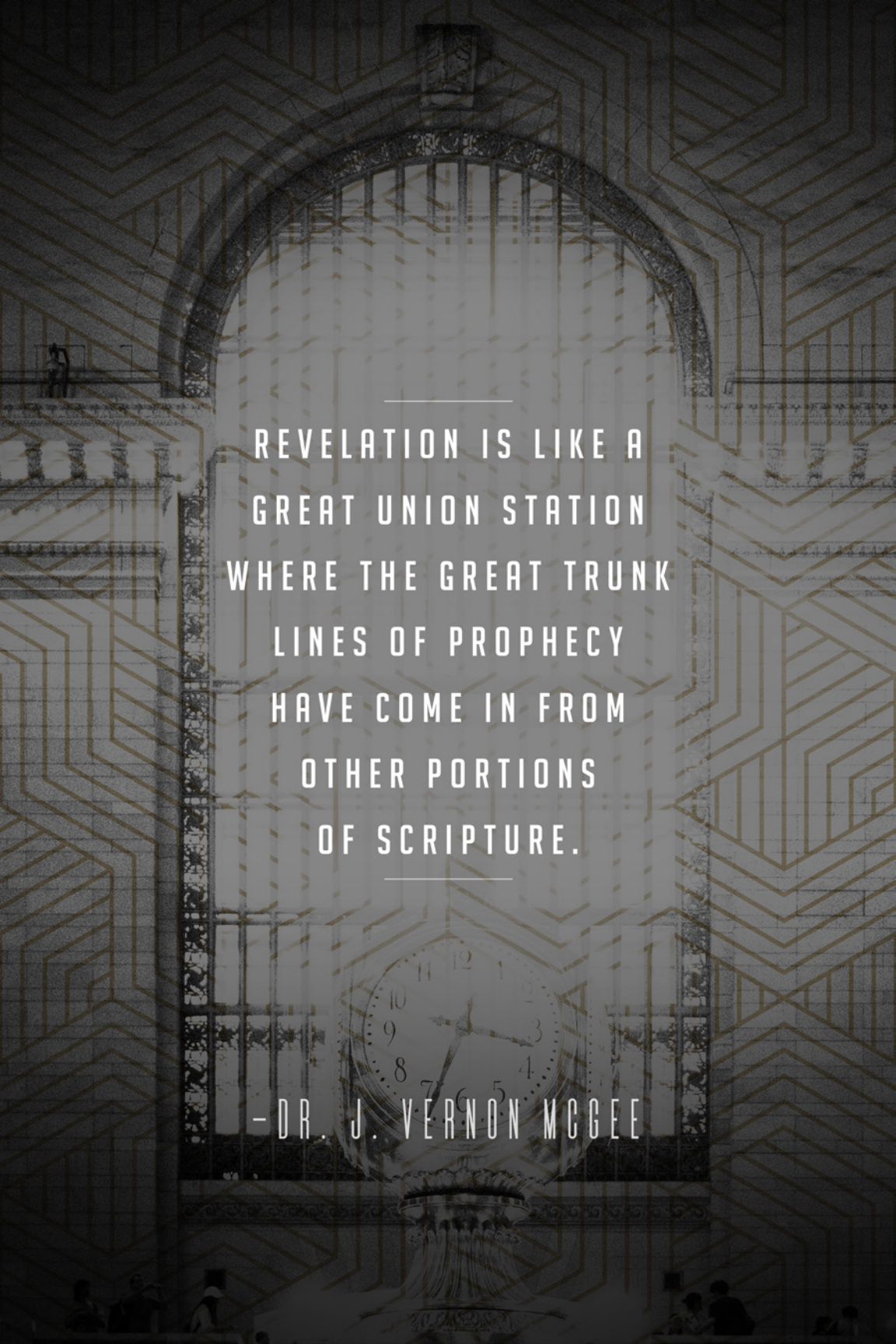
**Chillingworth** declared: “It was the doctrine believed and taught by the most eminent fathers of the age next to the apostles and by none of that age condemned.”

**Dr. Adolf von Harnack** wrote: “The earlier fathers—Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, etc.—believed it because it was part of the tradition of the early church. It is the same all through the third and fourth centuries with those Latin theologians who escaped the influence of Greek speculation.”

These quotes prove that from the days of the apostles and through the church of the first centuries, the interpretation of the Scriptures was premillennial. Premillennialism is not new but was the belief of outstanding men of the early church.

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REVELATION IS LIKE A  
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The book of Revelation stands out in six striking and singular features.

1. Revelation is the only prophetic book in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, seventeen prophetic books speak of Christ's return and only this one in the New Testament.
2. John, the writer, reaches farther back into eternity past than does any other writer in the Bible. His Gospel opens with this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Then he moves up to the time of creation: "All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1:3). Then, when John writes the Revelation, he reaches farther on into eternity future and the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
3. Revelation promises a special blessing to the readers of this book: "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near" (Revelation 1:3). It is a blessing *promise*. Also, a warning at the end of the book tells those who tamper with its contents: "For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book." (Revelation 22:18-19). That warning ought to make these wild and weird interpreters of prophecy stop, look, and listen. It's dangerous to say anything to mislead people looking to God for help. Unfortunately, the most popular prophetic teachers in our day have gone out on a limb. This has raised a very serious problem, and later on we will have repercussions from it.


4. Revelation is not a *sealed* book. Daniel was told to seal the book until the time of the end (see Daniel 12:9), but John is told: “Do not seal the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is at hand” (Revelation 22:10). To say that Revelation is impossible to understand is to contradict this. It is not a sealed book. In fact, it’s probably the best organized book in the Bible.
5. Revelation is a series of visions expressed in symbols which deal with *reality*. The literal interpretation is always preferred unless John makes it clear it’s otherwise.
6. Revelation is like a great union station where the great trunk lines of prophecy have come in from other portions of Scripture. Revelation does not originate or begin anything, but it brings to complete conclusion what began somewhere else in Scripture. It’s critical to a right understanding of the book to be able to trace each great subject of prophecy from the first reference to the terminal. At least ten great subjects of prophecy find their fulfillment here. This is why you need to know the rest of the Bible to understand Revelation. More than 500 times, it alludes to or references the Old Testament. In its 404 verses, 278 contain references to the Old Testament. In other words, over half of this book depends on your understanding of the Old Testament.

Revelation is like an airport with ten great airlines coming into it. We need to understand where each began and how it was developed as it arrives in Revelation. The ten great subjects of prophecy which all land in Revelation are these:

1. **The Lord Jesus Christ**—He is the subject of the book. Some might be fascinated with the beasts and the bowls of wrath, but the real subject of Revelation is the Sin-bearer. The first mention of Him is way back in Genesis 3:15, as the seed of the woman.

2. **The church** does not begin in the Old Testament. The Lord Jesus first mentions the church in Matthew 16:18: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”
3. **The resurrection and the translation of the saints** (see John 14; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Revelation teaches what will happen to those believers in Christ Jesus who have already died at the time of His appearing. This is a great encouragement and comfort to us as our reunion with our loved ones is not more distant than when Jesus comes for His own.
4. **The Great Tribulation**, spoken of back in Deuteronomy 4 where God says His people would be in tribulation.
5. **Satan and evil** (see Ezekiel 28:11-18).
6. **The “man of sin”** (see Ezekiel 28:1-10).
7. The course and end of **false Christianity** (see Daniel 2:31-45; Matthew 13).
8. The beginning, course, and end of **the “times of the Gentiles”** (see Daniel 2:37-45; Luke 21:24). The Lord Jesus said Jerusalem will be trampled down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.
9. **The second coming of Christ**. According to Jude 1:14-15, Enoch spoke of that, which takes us back to the time of the Genesis record.
10. **Israel’s covenants**, beginning with the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. God promised Israel five things, and God says in Revelation that He will fulfill them all.

Revelation is *not* a difficult book. The liberal theologian has tried to make it a difficult book, and the amillennialist considers it a symbolic and hard-to-understand book. Even some premillennialists try to demonstrate it as weird and wild.



Let the  
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Actually, Revelation is the most *orderly* book in the Bible. It organizes itself. John puts down the instructions given to him by Christ: “Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this” (Revelation 1:19)—past, present, and future. The book then divides itself in series of sevens, each in orderly division. No other book in the Bible organizes itself like that.

Revelation is also to be taken literally. When a symbol is used, it will be so stated. Also it will be symbolic of *reality*—the reality will be more real than the symbol, because John uses symbols to describe reality.

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**This is an all-important principle to follow:  
Let Revelation say what it wants to say.**

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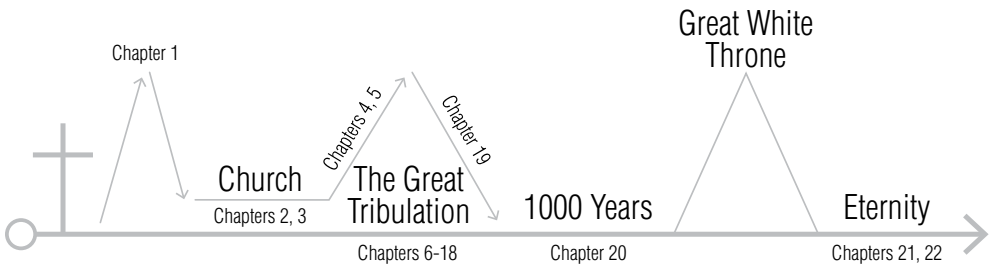
Now, the wonderful pictures John describes for us are symbolic of reality, but not a reality that is currently taking place. The church is set before us in the symbol of seven churches, which were real churches in existence in John’s day. I have visited the ruins of all seven of them and have spent many hours there. I would love to go back tomorrow. To examine the ruins and study the locality is a wonderful experience. It has made these churches live for me, and I can see how John was speaking into local situations but also giving the history of the church as a whole.

Then after Revelation 3, the church is not mentioned anymore nor is it the subject again for the rest of the book. “*Does this mean the church goes out of business?*” Well, it leaves the earth and goes to heaven, and there it appears as the bride of Christ. When we see her in the last part of Revelation, she is not the church but the bride.

Then beginning with Revelation 4, everything moves to the future from our current perspective. So when anyone reaches in and pulls out a revelation—some vision about famine or wars or anything of that sort—it just does not fit into the picture of our

day. Let John tell it like it is. In fact, we need to let the whole Bible speak to us like that—just let it say what it wants to say. The idea of making wild and weird interpretations is one of the reasons I enter this book with a feeling of fear.

A danger we need to avoid is thinking Revelation can be put on a chart. If it includes all it should, it is so complicated nobody will understand it. But if it is so brief that it can be understood, it doesn't give enough information. Here's a brief sketch to simplify the different stages of the Revelation and also give the overall picture.



As you can see, it begins with the cross of Christ and His ascension.

In chapter 1, we see the glorified Christ.

In chapters 2–3 we see the church.

In chapters 4–5 we see that the church is in heaven.

Then on earth the Great Tribulation takes place, chapters 6–18.

In chapter 19 we see that Christ returns to the earth and establishes His Kingdom, and chapter 20 gives us the thousand-year reign of Christ.

Then the Great White Throne is set up, the place where the lost are judged, and in chapters 21–22 eternity begins. That is Revelation.

The subject of this book is very important to see. Let's keep in mind this book is a revelation of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels you see Him in the days of His flesh, but they do not give the full revelation of Jesus Christ. There you see Him in humiliation. Here in Revelation you see Him in glory. You see Him in charge of everything that takes place. He is in full command. This is the *unveiling* of Jesus Christ (quoting H.H. Snell):

**He is the Lamb, at the center,  
around which everything else is drawn.**

**He is the foundation on which everything lasting is built.**

**He is the nail on which everything hangs.**

**He is the object to which everything points.**

**He is the spring from which all blessing proceeds.**

**The Lamb is the light, the glory, the life, the Lord of heaven and earth, the source from which all fullness of joy is known.**

**We cannot go far in the study of Revelation  
without seeing the Lamb.**

**Like direction posts along the road to remind us that He, who did by Himself purge our sins, is now highly exalted and that to Him every knee must bow and every tongue confess.**

To that grand statement I say *hallelujah!* For the Lamb is going to reign upon this earth. That is God's intention and purpose.





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# THE CHRIST OF THE REVELATION

According to the instructions Jesus gives to him, John divides Revelation according to Jesus' role.

In Revelation 1:18, the Lord Jesus speaks as the glorified Christ: "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death. Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this."

He makes four grand statements about Himself:

**I am alive.**

**I was dead.**

**I am alive forevermore.**

**I have the keys of hell [the grave] and of death.**

Then Jesus gives John his outline: "Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this."

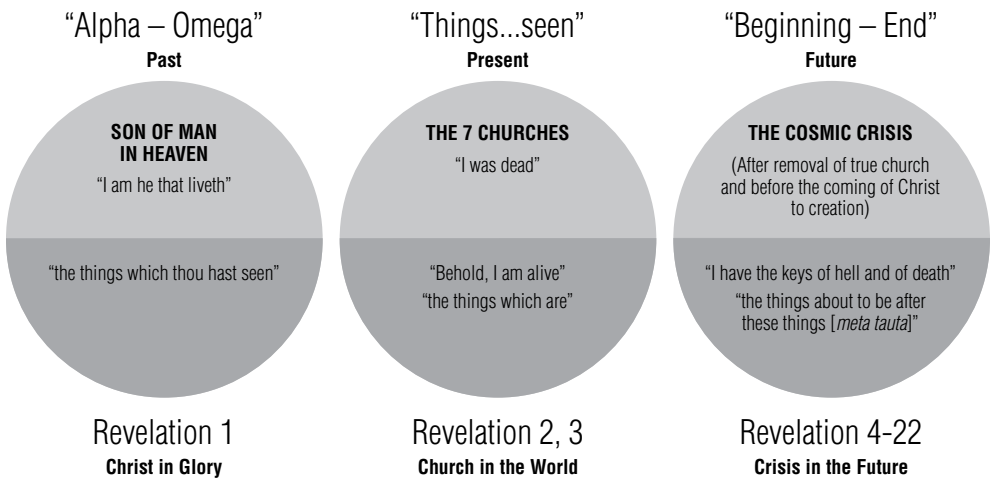
**Write what you saw, John.** That is past tense, referring to the vision of the Son of Man in heaven, the glorified Christ in chapter 1.

Then He says, *“I was dead, and, behold, I am alive.”* And His instruction is, **Write the things which are.** This is present tense, referring to Christ’s present ministry that we’ll see in Revelation 2-3. The living Christ is very busy *doing* things today. He is the Head of the church. The reason our contemporary church is in such a mess is because the body has been decapitated. It is no longer in touch with the Head of the church.

Thirdly, Jesus Christ said, “I have the keys of [hell] and of Death.” When we get to chapter 5, we’ll see no one could be found to open the book but one—the Lord Jesus Christ.

So chapters 4–22 deal with the future, and Christ said to John, **Write the things that you are about to see after these things.** After what things? After the church things. These events happen after the church leaves the earth. He will let us know when he gets to this part. You can’t miss it—unless you follow a system of interpretation that doesn’t fit into Revelation.

The fallacy of the hour is reaching into this third section and pulling these events up to the present. This gives rise to the wild and weird interpretations we hear in our day. Instead, let’s follow what John tells us. He gives us the past, present, and future of Revelation.



- I. The *Person* of Jesus Christ—Christ in glory, chapter 1
- II. The *Possession* of Jesus Christ—the church in the world is His, chapters 2–3
- III. The *Program* of Jesus Christ—as seen in heaven, chapters 4–22

The last section deals with the fulfillment of all things on this earth. This is what makes Revelation such a glorious and wonderful book.

In the first division of Revelation we will see the person of Christ in His position and glory as the Great High Priest who is in charge of His church. In the Gospels we find Him to be meek, lowly, and humble. He subjected Himself to His enemies on earth and died on a cross. But we discover a completely different Jesus Christ in Revelation. Here He is in absolute control. Although He is still the *Lamb* of God, His wrath is revealed, and it terrifies the earth. When He speaks in wrath, His judgment begins upon the earth.

The person of Jesus Christ is the theme of this book. When the scene moves to heaven, we see Him there, too, controlling everything. Not only in Revelation but in the entire Bible, Jesus Christ is the major theme. The Scriptures are both theocentric and Christocentric, God-centered and Christ-centered. Since Christ is God, He is the One who fills the horizon of the total Word of God. We need to keep this in mind especially as we study Revelation.

The Bible as a whole tells us what Jesus Christ has done, what He is doing, and what He will do. Revelation emphasizes both what He *is doing* and what He *will do*.

The last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, closes with the mention of the Son of Righteousness, yet to rise (Malachi 4:2). It holds out a hope for a cursed earth—the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. Revelation closes with the Bright and Morning Star (Revelation 22:16), which is a picture of Christ at His coming to take the church out of the world. The Rapture is the hope of the New Testament, just as the incarnation of Christ was the hope of the Old Testament. Revelation completes the revelation of Christ.

**THE BIBLE** AS A WHOLE  
TELLS US WHAT  
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Notice also the tie between Genesis and Revelation, the first and last books of the Bible. Genesis presents the beginning, and Revelation presents the end. Note the contrasts between the two books:

**In Genesis the earth was created;  
in Revelation the earth passes away.**

**In Genesis was Satan's first rebellion;  
in Revelation is Satan's last rebellion.**

**In Genesis the sun, moon, and stars were for earth's government; in Revelation these same heavenly bodies are for earth's judgment. In Genesis the sun was to govern the day; in Revelation there is no need of the sun.**

**In Genesis darkness was called night;  
in Revelation there is "no night there"  
(see Revelation 21:25; 22:5).**

**In Genesis the waters were called seas;  
in Revelation there is no more sea.**

**In Genesis was the entrance of sin;  
in Revelation is the exodus of sin.**

**In Genesis the curse was pronounced;  
in Revelation the curse is removed.**

**In Genesis death entered;  
in Revelation there is no more death.**

**In Genesis was the beginning of sorrow and suffering;  
in Revelation there will be no more sorrow and no more tears.**

**In Genesis was the marriage of the first Adam;  
in Revelation is the marriage of the Last Adam.**

**In Genesis we saw man's city, Babylon, being built;  
in Revelation we see man's city, Babylon, destroyed  
and God's city, the New Jerusalem, brought into view.**

**In Genesis Satan's doom was pronounced;  
in Revelation Satan's doom is executed.**

Genesis opens the Bible not only with a global view but also with a universal view—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). The Bible closes with another global and universal book. The Revelation shows what God is going to do with His universe and with His creatures. There is no other book quite like this.


Jesus tells the church, “And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last” (Revelation 22:12-13).

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are both gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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