

(S) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. Today, we will study the book of REVELATION - INTRODUCTION - part 2. We will continue to learn about the method of interpreting the book of Revelation.

POINT 3. THE BOOK OF REVELATION IS ARRANGED IN A PROGRESSIVE ORDER.

Note that the seven parts of the book of Revelation is arranged in an *ascending, climatic order*. There is progress in the end-time (eschatological) emphasis.

First. The progressive message throughout the book.

Although the seven parts of the book run parallel and span the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, there is a progression in the message of each part.

The message of part 1: chapter 1-3. Wherever there is a Christian church, it is a lampstand, shining the light of Christ and the gospel in the midst of the darkness of this godless and wicked world.

The message of part 2: chapter 4-7. Wherever a Christian church witnesses for Christ, there the world persecutes the church, because it refuses to be conquered by the light. The persecutions and trials of the Christian churches are overruled for the good of the churches, because the throne is always in heaven and not on earth.

The message of part 3: chapter 8-11. Wherever and whenever a Christian church is persecuted, Christ sees the blood of the martyrs and hears the prayers of Christians and warns the wicked world through his trumpets of judgements.

The message of part 4: chapter 12-14. The struggle between the Christian churches and the wicked world indicates a deeper spiritual conflict between Christ and his enemies, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet.

The message of part 5: chapter 15-16. All people who refuse to listen to God's trumpets of judgement will be destroyed by God's bowls of wrath.

The message of part 6: chapter 17-19. Satan and his helpers always seem to be victorious, but in reality they are always defeated.

The message of part 7: chapter 20-22. Christ and the Christian Church will be victorious and inherited the new earth in which there will be only righteousness. The book of Revelation gives Christians the real philosophy of life as well as the real interpretation of world-history.

Second. The progressive emphasis on the final judgement day.

Although the seven parts of the book run parallel and span the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, there is a progression in the emphasis on the events just before the second coming of Christ. In chapters 1-11, the final judgement is only announced and introduced, but in chapters 12-22, the final judgement is actually described. Chapter 1:7 *announces* the final judgement, chapter 6:12-17 and 11:18 *introduces* the final judgement and chapter 14:14-20 and 16:1-21 *describes* the final judgement in symbolic language, while chapter 20:11-15 drops much of the symbolism and *teaches* the final judgement.

Third. The progressive emphasis on the new heaven and new earth.

Although the seven parts of the book run parallel and span the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, there is a progression in the description of the Church triumphant, first in heaven and then on the new earth. The description of the new heaven and new earth in chapter 21-22 is far more complete than its descriptions in the previous parts, like for example the promises made by Christ in the seven letters to those who overcome, the symbolic picture of the multitude in white robes standing before God's throne (7:9-17) or the symbolic picture of the 144 000 standing on the new Mount Zion (14:1-5).

POINT 4. THE BOOK OF REVELATION IS AN APOCALYPTIC BOOK, THAT IS, A BOOK WHICH REVEALS.

There is a great likeness between the book of Daniel in the Old Testament and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. Both are books which reveal God's mind and purposes.

First. The book of Revelation reveals the course and significance of history from God's point of view.

The book of Revelation is unique in the whole New Testament. It does not contain prophetic proclamations in the name of the Lord after the manner of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. It also does not relate history after the manner of the historical books of the Bible. Although the book of Revelation is not a historical book, it is certainly concerned with *history*. It is concerned, not with describing history of the past, but with *revealing what may be expected to take*

place throughout the history of mankind between the first and second coming of Christ. Therefore, the book of Revelation is a book of *revelation*! By making use of visions, signs, symbols and numbers, it appears to be *mapping out the major principles operating within the course of the history of the Christian Church* in this non-Christian world and to be *showing the significance of God's history* in man's world. By means of special visions, God reveals to the apostle John what his purpose for the Church and the world is. Like the author of Genesis chapter 1-11 and the book of Daniel, the apostle John is concerned not only with the history of God's people, but with the history of all the nations and kingdoms and rulers of the world as well.

Second. The book of Revelation reveals the sovereignty of God in all the affairs of man.

God is sovereign over the Christian Church everywhere in the world, sovereign over all the empires and their emperors, sovereign over all the false religions and enemies of God, sovereign over all events and at all times in history right up to the second coming of Jesus Christ! God sits on his throne in majesty and glory (ch. 4). He gives to Jesus Christ all the power to control all humans and their history on earth. He gives him the power to bring human history to its appointed goal (ch. 5)! Whatever the threat against Christians may be, God's purpose cannot be thwarted! The reason why certain governments today forbid the preaching from the books of Daniel and Revelation is that they undermine confidence in human governments in general and undermine support to proud tyrants in particular!

Third. The book of Revelation reveals Jesus Christ, the Conqueror, going out to conquer.

The book of Daniel described human history in terms of the rise and fall of four human empires, which issue into the rise of the eternal kingdom of God (Dan ch. 2 and 7)! The first coming of Jesus Christ marked the powerful coming of the kingdom of God onto the earth (Mk 1:15). By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a cosmic battle had been won. According to John 12:31-32, when Jesus Christ was lifted up on the cross and finally into heaven, the prince of this world was driven out of his powerful control over the nations (Dan 10:13,20-21). And according to Colossians 2:15, by his death, Christ disarmed the powers and authorities and triumphed over them! The book of Revelation takes up the theme again and shows Jesus Christ as the Conqueror over the dragon and his three assistants, the beast, the false prophet and the great prostitute Babylon. In chapter 1, it shows Jesus Christ standing majestically between all the local churches on earth. In chapter 5, it shows Jesus Christ worthy and able to open the seven seals, which reveal seven principles operating in human history. In chapter 6, it shows Jesus Christ riding out on a white horse in order to conquer the world. In chapter 12, it shows Jesus Christ snatched away from the onslaught of the dragon and snatched up to God and his throne, from where the dragon is hurled down onto the earth. In chapter 19, it shows Jesus Christ again riding out on a white horse in order to judge the world. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords and strikes down all his enemies in the final battle.

POINT 5. THE BOOK OF REVELATION REVEALS BY MEANS OF VISIONS, SIGNS AND SYMBOLS.

In the book of Revelation, the visions, signs and symbols ultimately have *symbolical* significance. Throughout the book of Revelation, God reveals his mind and purposes through the means of visions, signs, symbols and numbers. In visions, John *sees things which are not literally real*, as for example "horses with heads that resemble lions and spewing out fire, smoke and sulphur" (9:17). *Although the symbols in the visions are not literally real, they represent literally realities in history that far surpasses the literal reality of the symbols.* In visions, John also sees things, which no longer exist in literal reality, as for example the second temple of Jerusalem, which John had to measure while exiled on Patmos (11:1). The picture seen in visions is one thing, but the ultimate spiritual significance and reality is another thing!

In chapter 1, John sees in a vision a picture of someone like a son of man standing among seven lampstands, holding seven stars in his right hand. Chapter 1:20 explains that the 7 lampstands are *symbols* that represent all the churches (7 churches) in the world and the stars are *symbols* that represent the literal angels or messengers of these churches.

In chapter 5:6 John sees in a vision a lamb that looked slain but stood in the centre of the throne. It had 7 horns and 7 eyes. Literally this would be a monster, but symbolically it is a beautiful symbol of the literal Christ who conquered death, who has all power in heaven and on earth and who sees everything that happens on earth. Chapter 5:5 explains that he is Christ the Messiah (the Lion and the Root) and chapter 5:6 explains that he is present and works through the fullness of the Holy Spirit (the 7 spirits) everywhere on earth.

Chapter 11:8 shows that Sodom and Egypt are *symbols or figures* of Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified.

Chapter 12:3-4 shows a picture of a red dragon and chapter 12:9 explains that this is *a symbol* of Satan.

Chapter 15:1 explains that the 7 bowls containing the 7 last plagues are *symbols* of God's final judgements on earth.

Chapter 16:13-14 explain that the 3 frogs are *symbols* of real demons working through the rulers on earth.

Chapter 17:8-10 says that the visions in the book of Revelation call for a mind of wisdom to understand them and explains that the 7 heads of the beast is *a symbol* of the wicked political power of Rome during the time of John as well as *a symbol* of the wicked political power of rulers and kings throughout history.

Chapter 17:15 explains that the waters on which the prostitute sits is *a symbol* of the nations in the world together with their cultures.

Chapter 22:15 explains that dogs are *symbols* of evil people who practise magic arts, who are sexually immoral and who kill other people. These examples show that the visions and signs in the book of Revelation *symbolise other literal realities*, which really exist and which are far greater than the reality of the symbols.

What is important to realise is that the book of Revelation itself teaches us to interpret the visions and signs not literally, but *symbolically*. The symbols represent real and historic organisations, people and events, which occur again and again in world-history!

POINT 6. THE BOOK OF REVELATION REVEALS BY MEANS OF NUMBERS.

Just as in the book of Daniel, the numbers in the book of Revelation have symbolic significance rather than numerical significance.

The number 7 is *the number of divine perfection and completion*, always attaining God's purpose. For example, in chapter 1 the 7 lampstands and 7 stars *represent* the 7 churches and their messengers and chapter 2:7 makes clear that all the churches in the world and in history from the first coming to the second coming of Christ are included. In chapter 2 and 3 the 7 letters do not describe 7 consecutive periods of church history, but rather represent Christ's messages to every church in the world and in history, which at different times in their history may experience the same conditions that are written in these letters. Just as the lampstands and stars are not to be interpreted literally, but symbolically, likewise the number seven is *not to be interpreted numerically, but rather symbolically*.

The outward structure of the book of Revelation is governed by the number *seven* and the book is divided into 7 parallel parts, each describing principles operating in human history from a different point of view.

The number 3 is generally *the number of the Triune God*. Nevertheless God is one! The number three is symbolic! The 3 evil spirits coming out of the mouths of the dragon, beast and false prophet symbolise a devilish trinity.

The number 4 is *the number of the 4 wind directions and symbolically represents the universe or earth*. For example, the 4 good angels standing at the 4 corners of the earth hold back the 4 destructive winds of the earth (7:1). The 4 evil angels bound at the great river Euphrates kill a third of people on earth with 3 divine plagues of fire, smoke and sulphur (9:14,18). The New Jerusalem has 3 gates on each of its 4 sides symbolising that people from every nation on earth may enter the Christian Church (21:13).

The number 3½ is *the number of proclaiming God's Word amidst affliction*. During the Old Testament period, there was one period of 3½ years which God's people could never forget. It was a period of drought in which the wicked king Ahab and his wife Jezebel persecuted God's prophets while Elijah and 7000 other prophets did not bend their knees before the idol Baal. By comparing 1 Kings ch. 17-19 and James 5:17 with Revelation 11:6 we can see that the apostle John was thinking of these 3½ years! The number 3½ years is also represented by the number 'a time, times and half a time' (12:14), 42 months (11:2; 13:5) and the number 1260 days (11:3; 12:6). Chapter 12:5-6 clearly shows that this period *begins* with the first coming of Christ and chapter 11:2-12 clearly shows that this period *ends* with the very short period of persecution just before the second coming of Christ. Therefore in the book of Revelation the number 3½ years symbolically represents the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ, which is simultaneously the period of affliction and persecution of the Christian Church (Jn 15:18-21; 16:33) and the period of proclaiming the gospel powerfully in the whole world (11:7; Mt 24:14). This long main period is followed immediately by a very short period of 3½ days, during which the beast that comes up from the Abyss will kill the two witnesses and silence the voice of the gospel (11:7-11; 13:7). The beast that comes up from the Abyss (11:7) represents the antichristian world in its final phase.

The number 6 is *the number of man* (13:18). The 6th seal introduces the final judgement day of *impenitent mankind* and affects 6 objects of creation as well as 6 classes of *wicked people* (6:12-17). The number 666 symbolises *the number of the antichrist* and his allies. Just as 6 never reaches 7, so 666 never reaches 777. God's enemies always try to be like God, but always fail. The number 666 represents the "failure upon failure upon failure" of the antichrist and *all the people who follow him*. It symbolises their failure to attain the perfection, which only God can give.

The number 10 is *the number of completeness*. The church of Smyrna will suffer persecution for 10 days, that is, for just as long as God has decided - no longer (2:10)! The number of angels around God's throne is 10 thousand times 10

thousand (5:11). The dragon has 10 horns (12:3), representing his rule over the sinful world through its smaller powers, namely through men in positions of authority in every area of human life (17:12-14). The beast out of the sea also has 10 horns with 10 crowns on his horns (13:1) and the beast on which the woman in chapter 17 rides also has 10 horns (17:7). The 10 horns represent 10 kings (17:12).

The number 12 is the number of fullness with regard to God's people. For example, in chapter 12 the woman has a crown with 12 stars on her head. She represents God's Old Testament people, the 12 tribes of Israel (12:1). In chapter 12:6 onwards, she represents God's New Testament people. In chapter 21, the wall of the New Jerusalem had 12 gates consisting of 12 pearls (21:21), with 12 angels at the gates and on the gates were written the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (21:12). This picture represents God's saved people from the Old Testament period. The wall of the New Jerusalem also had 12 foundations and on them were the names of the 12 apostles of Christ (21:14). This picture represents God's saved people from the New Testament period. In the New Jerusalem, the tree of life will produce 12 crops of fruit, one crop each month (22:2) and represents full and eternal life for God's people.

The number 24 represents God's saved people in heaven from both the Old and New Testament periods. Their white clothes are a symbol of their purification by Christ's blood and their crowns of gold a symbol of being conquerors that have overcome (4:4; 5:8-10).

The number 144 000 is the number of absolute completeness and fullness with regard to God's people. The 12 x 12 x 10 x 10 x 10 (7:4) sealed people represent the full number of Jews and Gentiles, whom God chose to save throughout world-history (Rom 11:25-26). Not a single one will be missing (Jer 23:4; Rev 21:27).

The number 1000 is the number of absolute completeness. Satan is bound for 1000 years, that is, 10 x 10 x 10 years, that represents the complete period God decreed to curtail Satan's influence on earth (20:1-3,7). Because Satan is bound at the first coming of Christ and Satan is released just before the second coming of Christ, the 1000 years is a symbol for the whole New Testament period from the first coming to the second coming of Christ.

Conclusion: The book of Revelation is a piece of art: It consists of seven parallel parts describing the main principles operating within the history of this world from the first to the second coming of Christ and each part takes this history a little further. It makes use of the wonderful symbolism of pictures and numbers representing *real* historical powers, institutions, persons and events. God not only created all things in wisdom (Ps 104:24), but also governs and controls human history in wisdom. The history of God's Church within the history of God's world is a piece of art. But because sin caused all the brokenness in human life and society, we cannot see that creation and history are a piece of art. God needs to *reveal* to us what the real issues in human history are and what the deeper underlying principles of human history are. The history of this present world is not just a blind series of unexplainable events. No, the history of this world is serious and meaningful, has a definite purpose and is very hopeful for Christians. The purpose of the book of Revelation is to encourage the Christians in their struggles on earth. The main message is that Jesus Christ has conquered and all people who belong to Christ are more than conquerors through him (17:14; Rom 8:37).

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. During the next week, read Revelation 17-22. Next week we will conclude the introduction to Revelation. **Second.** See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on www.dota.net
Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".