

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

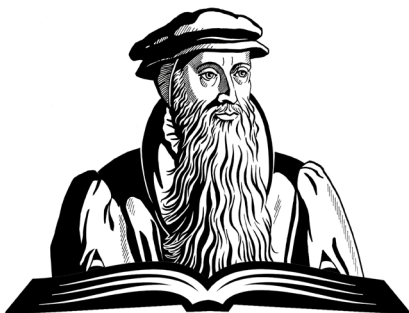
by Rev. William Macleod

Module 7:

ESCHATOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

Lecture 4

INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 7 ~ The Doctrine of Last Things

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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

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Module 7 ~ Lecture 4

Interpreting the Book of Revelation

We now come to our fourth lecture in eschatology. Our topic for today is Interpreting the Book of Revelation. The book of Revelation has proved mysterious to many. It's language and imagery are graphic. It's quite different from other books of the New Testament, but there are similar parts of the Old Testament where we find this apocalyptic language, for example, in sections of Ezekiel and of Daniel. Some theologians and commentators avoid Revelation because of the special difficulty of interpreting its imagery. Calvin, for example, provided no commentary on it. However, it's in the Scriptures, it's there for a purpose, and indeed, when properly approached, it can provide us with great encouragement. It's there for our benefit, and particularly to encourage us in difficulties, and in times of persecution.

There are essentially four different approaches to interpreting this book. First of all, there's the preterist view. This approaches the book of Revelation by regarding it as describing past events. Everything in the book happened already, the preterists argue, in the first century AD. The destruction of Jerusalem features prominently in this interpretation. They say that the writer was concerned about the evil of the Roman Empire and its persecution of the church. He uses graphic imagery to express his conviction that God will intervene to deliver his church. This type of interpretation is favored by liberal theologians. There is, of course, some truth in this approach. A number of the passages are descriptive of events which took place in the first century. Also, it is right to ground the book firmly in the first century, as it was a book written then for the church as it existed at that time, as well as for the church down through the centuries. It's right to see the book of Revelation as providing encouragement for persecuted first-century believers. However, confining the book to the events which had taken place in the first century fails to take account of the book's own testimony concerning itself at the very beginning: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which much shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John"—Revelation 1, verse 1. Here we are clearly told that the book deals with future events, "things which must come to pass."

Then secondly, there's the historicist view. This approach sees the book of Revelation as setting out a panoramic view of history from the first century till the second coming. Such commentators see it as a continual story from John's day till the end of the world. This approach has been a common one in the Christian church down through the centuries, and it would be followed by some of the Reformers. But there is much conflict as to how the various episodes in church history are to be related to the book. Different interpreters follow this approach, but come up with very different interpretations. The lack of consensus does not help to convince that this approach is right. Also, it tends to treat European history and ignores the rest of the world. However, again, there is some

truth in it, insofar as it lays stress upon the book as prophesying the future.

Then thirdly, there's the futurist view. The futurist view sees all of the book of Revelation, from chapter four onward, as referring to the end of the world. The book is not concerned with happenings in John's day, or since, but all of it has to do with future events, the events surrounding the return of Christ. This view is helpful in emphasizing the second coming and the return of Christ, which are of central importance in the book, but it's wrong in detaching the book completely from the present and the past.

Fourthly, the idealist or poetic view. This view emphasizes that the book is concerned with encouraging persecuted Christians in the first century and since then. Graphic language is used to describe, in imaginative ways, the triumph of God. The symbolic language is not to be taken as what will actually happen, but simply a poetic way of describing the ultimate victory of Christ and his kingdom. While there is certainly truth in this overall idea and purpose, the problem, again, with this view is that the first verse of the book claims that it is actually prophecy.

So then, how are we to interpret the book? The best approach is as follows. None of the views that have been given are entirely satisfactory, though there is a grain of truth in them all. So how are we to interpret the book? I believe that William Hendriksen, in his brief commentary, entitled, *More than Conquerors*, helps us greatly in interpreting Revelation. I do not follow all his interpretations, but his general outline is very helpful. He begins by seeing the book as written to encourage first-century Christians who were suffering severe persecution, and of course, to encourage the rest of us down through the centuries. So in this, he partially follows the preterists, seeing some of the events as actually having taken place, even before John wrote. He follows the idealists in seeing it as a book to encourage, not simply to reveal secrets. He appreciates the historicists with their emphasis on history foretold, and the futurists with their stress on the second coming. However, essentially he sees the book as consisting of seven sections which are parallel, and each of them spans the New Testament dispensation from the first to the second coming of Christ. Numbers are very important in the book, and seven is the perfect number, and the number of the church. Much of the language is, of course, symbolical, and characteristically apocalyptic and should not be taken literally.

We shall now look briefly at the book and notice its various sections. So the first section one, chapters 1 to 3. This section describes Christ in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, which represent the church. Christ is presented in his exalted glory as the King and Head of the church, and actively involved in ruling and defending it. The seven churches in Asia were indeed real churches in first-century Asia Minor. However, they also are representative of the churches in all ages till the return of Christ. Seven, as we noticed, is the complete and perfect number, and the number of the church. These letters are highly relevant for the churches of today, both rebuking the evil in the church, and encouraging the churches to be faithful, and stand for Christ in dark days, and in days of persecution.

The second section, chapters 4 to 7, this section describes the book with the seven seals. First, we are given a vision into heaven, and there we see the throne that rules heaven and earth. What an encouragement this is, when there are powerful, persecuting forces in the world. Look up! God reigns, let the earth be glad—Psalm 97, verse 1. Then a scroll is pictured in the hand of God on the throne. And this scroll obviously contains the purposes of God with regard to the world, and especially his church. Initially, none was found worthy to open the book. But then the Lion of the tribe of Judah steps forward and takes the book, and opens the seal. This Lion is none other than Christ, the Lamb of God that was slain to take away the sins of the world. He appears "as it had

been slain”—Revelation 5, verse 6.

So this takes us right back to Calvary. The opening of the seals is the unfolding of God’s purposes, or the rule of Christ in the New Testament dispensation. He shall rule till his enemies be made his footstool. This section ends with the church of God saved, and at rest and peace in heaven: “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before he throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes”—obviously heaven—Revelation 7, verses 14–17.

The third section is chapters 8 to 11. This section describes the seven trumpets of judgment. The previous section describes the tribulations through which God’s people pass in this world. So the seals of trial and persecution render necessary the trumpets of judgment. In answer to the prayers of the suffering church, God sends down through the centuries his plagues on land, sea, and air. So again, this section parallels the previous one. The prayers of the godly offered with incense from the altar of Christ’s sufferings are heard and their persecutors are punished. Christ is ruling, restraining, and conquering his enemies. Again, the end point is the final judgment: “And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; and shouldest destroy them which destroy the earth”—Revelation 11, verse 18.

Section four is chapters 12 to 14. The first half of Revelation that we have just looked at describes the struggle of the church on earth, how it is persecuted, and how it is avenged, protected, and ultimately victorious. The second half of Revelation, to which we now turn, describes the deeper spiritual background. Christ and his church are persecuted by Satan and his allies. This section, chapters 12 to 14, describe how the woman and the man child are persecuted by the dragon and his helpers. The birth of the man-child obviously refers to Christ being born, so this takes us back to the beginning of the New Testament age. The child Christ ascends to heaven, but the dragon makes war with the woman and her seed, which is, of course, the church. Christ and his church are persecuted by the dragon, representing Satan.

With regard to the beasts of chapter 13, I would deviate somewhat from Hendriksen, and follow the traditional Reformed interpretation, which sees the beasts representing antichrist. The first arises out of the sea, which is representative of the nations—a fearful, persecuting beast, and having the characteristics of a leopard, a bear, and a lion. This would seem to represent the Roman Empire which terribly persecuted the early church. It should also be seen as the persecuting governments of today. The beast from the earth is represented as looking like a lamb with two horns, and speaking like a lion. This appears to represent the papacy. The Pope claimed to be in the place of Christ, who is the Lamb of God. He pretends to be gentle, but speaks like a dragon, arrogantly claiming to be the mouthpiece of God, and infallible as he speaks *ex cathedra*. He too and his false church persecute the true children of God, who suffered greatly at the hand of this false lamb and its inquisition. This is the same individual as the little horn in Daniel 7, verse 8. The number of the true church is seven, but the number of the false church—the church of the antichrist, is six, six, six—Revelation 13, verse 18. It is short of seven, and it’s defective, and what is vital is missing.

“Babylon is fallen”—Revelation 14:8. Babylon is the church of the antichrist, and the opposite

of the New Jerusalem, which is the church of Christ. Again, this section ends with the judgment of the wicked and the followers of the beasts and dragon at the end of world history: “And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs”—Revelation 14:19–20. As the followers of Christ, we are on the winning side.

Now section five, chapters 15 and 16. This section describes the seven vials or bowls of wrath poured out upon the followers of the dragon and the beasts. It parallels the opening of the seven seals of trial, and the sounding of the seven trumpets of judgment. This section describes what will happen to those who persist in rejecting the gospel. On them will be poured the seven last plagues of God’s wrath. First, we are told of the sea of glass, and those who are victorious over the dragon and the beasts. The picture here is drawn from the Israelites at the Red Sea, having had victory over the Egyptians, singing in triumph. So now, “they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name?”—Revelation 15, verses 3–4. The vials of wrath were poured upon the earth, the sea, the rivers, the sun, the seat of the beast, etc. All who reject the light of the gospel will perish. The nations gather against the true church to destroy it, in the great battle of Armageddon, but Christ returns to deliver his people in the final judgment. We are told that “the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found”—Revelation 16:19–20. Again, the end to note is God’s wrath upon the apostates. The plague which comes upon them, the plagues are exceeding great, much worse than those that came on the land of Egypt.

Now section six, chapters 17 to 19. This section describes the fall of the great Harlot, Babylon, and the beasts. Chapter 17 describes the woman arrayed in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold and precious stones, “having a golden cup in her hand, full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication”—verse 4. This Babylon the Great, drunk with the blood of the saints, rides on a beast full of the names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads are interpreted as the seven hills on which the city is built—obviously, again, a reference to Rome. The ten horns are ten kings who reign with the beast. They make war with the Lamb. We think of how the emperors of Rome set themselves against the Christian church in the early centuries. Later on, the Roman Popes took their place, and persecuted the true church of God. Some interpret this great city, as Hendriksen does, as the world and its opposition to the church. The world is pleasure-mad, luxurious, arrogant, and the center of antichristian culture and persecution. I believe, however, with the majority of the Reformers and Reformed theologians before the twentieth century, that it is better to see Babylon as the false church—the Roman Catholic antichrist, the pretend bride of Christ that deceives many with their sacraments, claims of infallibility, pretends to be able to forgive sin, and asserts that there is salvation to no one but those who are in its membership, and persecutes the true saints of God. If Babylon is equated with the world, it is difficult to distinguish it as a city from those who mourn over its fall, that is, the kings of the earth and the merchants. If Babylon the Great is equated with the Roman Catholic Church, it is easy to see how its fall causes sorrow to those who obtain their wealth and power through trading with it. The Roman Catholic Church is an institution of vast wealth and influence, right up to the present day. The Whore stands in stark contrast to the bride of Christ—the true church. And if the New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, is the church, why should the Harlot, or false bride, not be the false church?

But then, Christ appears: “And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God”—Revelation 19, verses 11–15. War against the Lamb and his followers is doomed to failure. The beast and the false prophet, and those who receive the mark of the beast, that is, the followers of the beast, are cast into the lake of fire. Christ and his church will always win.

Next, section seven, that’s chapters 20 to 22. This last section of the book deals with the locking up of Satan in the bottomless pit, and later with the judgment of Satan, and of all mankind, and the final state—the appearance of the New Jerusalem and the new heavens and the new earth. Now, I would like us to look particularly at Revelation 20. This chapter is important, because we find here reference to the thousand years, or the millennium, around which the various eschatological views have arisen, and so we must devote more time to it. Essentially, there are three views, though obviously, there are many variations of these three views.

First, there is premillennialism, and this is the understanding that Christ will one day return to reign on this earth as King in Jerusalem, and his reign will last for a thousand years. This view was common in the early church, and it had the name, Chiliasm. It was revived by the Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation. It became popular among some in the nineteenth century, due to the teaching of Edward Irving, and was the view of Robert Murray M’Cheyne, Andrew and Horatius Bonar, and also was the view of C. H. Spurgeon. Dispensationalism, which is also premillennial, became the view of the Christian Brethren, and the Fundamentalists of America, and would predominate in evangelical circles in the twentieth century, due to its being popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible, and by radio and TV evangelists. We will look at this view in more detail in a later lecture.

The second view is postmillennialism. This is the view that there will be a prolonged period of blessing, of great spiritual prosperity for the church of Christ, which would be equated with the thousand years, though it is not to be taken literally as one thousand years. After the blessed millennium, there will be a falling away spiritually, a time of fierce persecution, and then Christ will return. So the return of Christ is after the millennium—postmillennialism. This is the view that was common among the English and Dutch Puritans, and also the early Scottish and American theologians. It would be the position held by Jonathan Edwards, the Hodges, the Alexanders, B. B. Warfield, and many other classical Reformed theologians.

Then the third position. We’ve looked at premillennialism—Christ coming before the millennium; postmillennialism—Christ coming after the millennium; and now amillennialism. This is the view that there is no millennium, or rather, that the whole New Testament age is to be seen as the millennium. This would be the commonest view held today by Reformed theologians. This view was promoted by Dutch and Dutch American theologians of the twentieth century, such as Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkof, and William Hendriksen. It tends to be pessimistic in outlook, expecting things to get worse and worse till Christ returns, which could be very soon. It would seem to have been influenced somewhat by the drastic effects of the higher criticism movement in the nineteenth century, evolutionary thinking, and rationalism, which came into the churches and de-

stroyed the mainline churches, and it was further exacerbated by the two devastating world wars that took place in the twentieth century.

Revelation 20 begins with an angel binding the dragon, the old serpent, obviously a reference to the one who deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden. To make it completely clear, we are told that the one bound was the devil and Satan. The angel has a key and a great chain, and binds Satan for a thousand years. Further, we are told that the angel cast Satan into the bottomless pit and shut him up—obviously locked him in with a key, and set a seal upon him in the pit, so that he could deceive the nations no more until the thousand years be fulfilled, and then he must be loosed for a little time. Some take the language in Revelation literally, but we must be very cautious against doing that since much of the language is obviously symbolical. You cannot, for example, tie a spirit with a chain. It requires a body for somebody to be chained, and the devil has no body. So the chain, the lock, and the seal are pictures, and also the thousand years should simply be viewed as a long period of time.

So the question arises as to when was or will this binding of Satan be done? Hendriksen takes us back to the Gospels, and sees the binding of Satan as that which Christ did on the cross. He refers to passages such as where Christ says, “No man can enter into a strong man’s house, and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the strong man; and then he will spoil his house”—Mark 3, verse 27. He sees Christ as the One who bound Satan, and this gospel can then be preached and Satan’s kingdom plundered. Before the death of Christ, the whole world lay in heathen darkness, apart from the tiny land of Israel. But following Christ’s ascension comes the day of Pentecost, and then the missionary expansion of the church rapidly spreading across the Roman world. So this position is certainly a sane and sensible position, and much can be said in its favor. There are, however, a few problems. This passage states, Revelation 20, states that the devil is locked up and sealed in a bottomless pit, and therefore unable to move around the world and deceive the nations. Yet Peter states plainly, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” Surely Satan cannot be both locked up and walking around devouring people. We are told that he is unable to deceive the nations for a thousand years. Yet Christ warns that if it were possible, the very elect would be deceived—Matthew 24:24. And Paul warns us of the need for the shield of faith to quench the fiery darts of the wicked one—the dragon—Ephesians 6:16. We look around the world today and we see billions of men and women deceived by the devil, following Islam—the false prophet Mohammed, following Buddhism, Hinduism, atheism, and Roman Catholicism. Surely evolution is a great deception of Satan, and yet how widely it is accepted today. Amillennial theologians will argue that the situation is much better than it was in the Old Testament times. And that, of course, is true, though more than half the world was just in as much darkness for 1,500 years after the death of Christ as it was before.

A further problem is that the passage specifically states that before the end, Satan will be loosed for a little season. If Satan was bound by the great historical redemptive act of Christ on Calvary, how can he be loosed without undoing the victory of Christ on the cross? Surely Christ’s death on the cross is a once-for-all crushing of the serpent’s head. For those who follow the amillennial interpretation, they explain it as things getting really bad before the end. But surely, it has been really bad many times in the past, with Muslim persecution, and Roman Catholic persecution, with the darkness of the dark ages. How could it possibly get worse?

Well, let’s look then at postmillennialism. In the postmillennial understanding, this millennium is in the future, and coincides with the promises of an age of great blessing foretold in the Old Testament. For example, in Psalm 72, where it is said of Christ, “He shall have dominion also from

sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him”—Psalm 72, verses 8–11. Now this has never happened up to the present. This future millennia would also involve the conversion of the Jews described in Romans 11, and will result in “life from the dead”—Romans 11:15—for the Gentile world.

Let us look further then at how postmillennialists understand Revelation 20. Verses 1 and 2 tell us of a future day when heaven will intervene in the history of the world, and Satan will be greatly restrained and restricted. His ability to deceive will be largely reduced. False religions will largely disappear. Liberal theology will have little appeal, and evolution will be seen as nonsense. Christ was enthroned in heaven at his ascension and reigns—reigns at present. But now his enemies will clearly be seen to be his footstool. The gospel will be preached with power, and most people will be saved. During this period of triumph, the martyrs who died for the cause of Christ will reign with him, in the sense that they will be seen universally to have been on the right and winning side. There will be a spiritual resurrection, a life from the dead for the church, which for so long has been struggling against atheism, unbelief, and heresy. The second death of hell will have no power over the true Christians. The Lord’s people will be priests and kings in the spiritual sense. But then, at the end of this period, Satan will be loosed, deceive the nations again, and stir up intense persecution against the true people of God. When it seems that the church is about to be exterminated, Christ will return and destroy his enemies. The great white throne will be set up and the final judgment will take place.

This was the classical Protestant understanding of the passage, however, we must not be too dogmatic. Prophecy is notoriously difficult to interpret. God often takes us by surprise. One thing we must understand is that there will never be shortcuts to salvation. The way to be saved is always the same. Jesus said, “Ye must be born again.” Paul responded to the question of the Philippian jailor, “What must I do to be saved?” with a clear answer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved, and thy house”—Acts 16:30–31. Every individual, whether Jew or Gentile, must repent and believe the gospel to be saved. The book of Revelation reveals, as William Hendriksen rightly states, that Christians are more than conquerors. Chapters 20 to 22 declare complete victory for Christ and his church, and the destruction of all his enemies, including the dragon, that old serpent the devil and Satan. It tells us of the blessed future state of Christians, and the miserable lake of fire awaiting unbelievers. Amen.