

# The Book of Revelation

*Author, audience, genre, and the four interpretive approaches — what the book actually is, and how to read it*

By Shane Gunn • Pleasant Springs Church, Henderson / Pinson, Tennessee

## ← Discipleship School

**Where this fits:** Lesson 2 of the Pleasant Springs *End Times* series, continuing from [Lesson 1 on the Rapture and the Parousia](#). Most Christians learn “prophecy” by reading Revelation as a coded forecast of the next twenty years. That is one approach — and the newest. This lesson introduces you to the actual first readers of Revelation, the first-century situation that produced the book, the apocalyptic genre that shaped John’s images, and the four interpretive approaches Christians have used for two millennia.

## WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

---

The last book of the Bible is the most misunderstood book in the Bible. It has been read as a secret code for the European Union, as a blueprint of the United Nations, as a forecast of nuclear war, as a prediction of microchips and barcodes, as a decoding manual for world political figures from Napoleon to Hitler to every American President. It has been used to sell more Christian fiction than perhaps any other biblical text. And in the process it has often been read as if **we** are its original audience, and **our** century is its principal subject.

We are not, and it is not. Revelation was written by a real man named John, on a real island called Patmos, sometime in the late first century, to seven real Christian congregations in what is today western Turkey, under a real Roman persecution. It was written in Greek, in the literary

form of Jewish apocalyptic (the same form as Daniel 7–12, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra), and its first readers would have recognized its images at speed. Our job is to read with them, not against them.

This lesson lays out the author, the audience, the genre, the four main interpretive approaches (preterist, historicist, futurist, idealist), and the key symbols. By the end you will know where every major Christian reading of Revelation stands, which approach Pleasant Springs Church commends, and why. And — as in Lesson 1 — you will know that brothers and sisters who read Revelation differently from you still belong to the same Lord.

*Greek NT (Rev 1:3): μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας καὶ τηροῦντες τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα, ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς.*

Revelation 1:3 (ESV): “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, **for the time is near.**”

## PART 1 — THE AUTHOR: JOHN ON PATMOS

---

### John the Apostle (c. AD 6–c. 100)

SON OF ZEBEDEE, BROTHER OF JAMES • FISHERMAN OF BETHSAIDA ON THE SEA OF GALILEE • ONE OF THE TWELVE • “THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED” • CARED FOR MARY AFTER THE CRUCIFIXION (JOHN 19:26–27) • FOUNDED / LED THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS C. AD 70–100 • EXILED TO PATMOS UNDER ROMAN PERSECUTION • REPORTEDLY DIED OF OLD AGE AT EPHESUS, THE ONLY APOSTLE NOT MARTYRED

Apostle

Ephesus

Patmos exile

The book itself identifies the author as “John” four times (Rev 1:1, 1:4, 1:9, 22:8). The earliest Christian tradition — Papias of Hierapolis (c. 130), Justin Martyr (c. 150), Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 180), Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria — is unanimous that this John is the Apostle John, son of Zebedee. Irenaeus’s testimony is especially important because Irenaeus was trained by Polycarp, who had been discipled by John himself.

A minority of modern scholars have argued that the author was a different first-century figure called “John the Elder” (based on Papias’s mention of both). The Greek of Revelation is more Semitic and less polished than the Fourth Gospel, which has fed this speculation. But the earliest tradition is clear and consistent, and the differences in Greek style are adequately explained by the different genre (Revelation’s apocalyptic Hebrew-inflected Greek is expected of the form) and perhaps by John’s circumstances on Patmos (without his Greek-speaking secretary).

**Patmos** is a small volcanic island in the Dodecanese, about 37 square miles, roughly 40 miles off the coast of modern Turkey. In the first century it was used by the Roman authorities as a place of banishment for political and religious prisoners — Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 4.12.69) lists it among such islands. John tells us plainly why he was there:

*Greek NT (Rev 1:9): ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης, ὁ ἀδελφὸς ὑμῶν καὶ συγκοινωνὸς ἐν τῇ θλίψει καὶ βασιλείᾳ καὶ ὑπομονῇ ἐν Ἰησοῦ, ἐγενόμην ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ καλουμένῃ Πάτμῳ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ.*

Revelation 1:9 (ESV): “I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

**The words to notice:** John calls himself a *brother* and *fellow partaker* — not a safely-raptured observer — in the “tribulation, the kingdom, and the patient endurance” that characterize life “in Jesus.” Tribulation was John’s present experience. It was the present experience of the seven churches. That pastoral situation frames everything the book says about tribulation and persecution.

## PART 2 — WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN? THE DATE DEBATE

---

Two candidate dates divide serious scholarship, and the choice decisively shapes the interpretation. Both have legitimate evidence.

**The Late Date — c. AD 95, under Emperor Domitian (reigned 81–96).** This has been the majority view since Irenaeus, who wrote explicitly: “The apocalyptic vision... was seen no long time ago, but almost in our own generation, at the close of Domitian’s reign” (*Against Heresies* V.30.3). Eusebius, Jerome, and the mainstream later tradition follow Irenaeus. Under this view, the persecution in view is Domitian’s late-first-century campaign against Christians who refused to offer incense to his statue or address him as *dominus et deus* (“lord and god”).

**The Early Date — c. AD 68–70, under Nero (reigned 54–68) and the Jewish War.** Kenneth Gentry’s *Before Jerusalem Fell* (1989), R. C. Sproul’s *The Last Days According to Jesus* (1998), and a growing body of New Testament scholarship (including Ben Witherington, John A. T. Robinson) argue for this date. The evidence: Revelation 11:1–2 describes an *existing* Temple being measured and its outer court being trampled by the Gentiles — a description that makes no sense after AD 70 when the Temple was destroyed. The number 666 (Rev 13:18) corresponds, by Hebrew gematria, to the name “Nero Caesar” (נרון קסר = nrwn qsr = 50+200+6+50+100+60+200 = 666). The persecution language fits Nero’s savage 64–68 crackdown after the Great Fire of Rome, in which Peter and Paul were killed.

**Why the dating matters:** If Revelation was written *before* the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, then much of its prophetic content — especially the judgment on “Babylon” in chapters 17–18 — can plausibly refer to Jerusalem’s impending destruction. This is the partial-preterist reading. If it was written *after* AD 70, then “Babylon” must be Rome (not Jerusalem), and the book cannot be a prophecy about Jerusalem’s fall because that was already history.

**Pleasant Springs’ position:** we lean toward the early date (c. AD 68), while recognizing that many faithful readers still prefer Irenaeus’s testimony. Either date is compatible with the approach we will commend below.

Revelation is explicitly addressed to seven specific first-century congregations in the Roman province of Asia — the western third of what is now Turkey. Read Rev 1:4, Rev 1:11, and Rev 2–3. This is not a generic letter “to the church universal.” This is *mail* to seven named churches in seven named cities, and each of the seven letters (Rev 2:1–3:22) names their specific situation, their specific sins, and their specific strengths.

#### EPHESUS (REV 2:1–7)

##### **The mother church of Asia — but had “abandoned her first love”**

The commercial and religious capital of the province, home of the Temple of Artemis (one of the Seven Wonders), a fiercely hostile pagan environment, the church of Paul’s three-year ministry (Acts 19) and later of John himself. Doctrinally sharp, orthodoxy-defending, but grown cold. Christ commends their discernment and warns them to repent and return to first love or lose their lampstand.

#### SMYRNA (REV 2:8–11)

##### **Persecuted and poor — but “in reality rich”**

A wealthy port city with a strong Jewish community that was hostile to the Christians (Rev 2:9). A generation later, the aged Polycarp (disciple of John, bishop of Smyrna) was martyred here — burned at the stake on 23 February AD 156. Christ warns that some will be imprisoned for ten days; he says nothing of escape, but rather “*be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*”

#### PERGAMUM (REV 2:12–17)

##### **“Where Satan’s throne is”**

Pergamum was the first city in Asia to receive an imperial cult temple (for Augustus, 29 BC), and had a massive altar to Zeus-Sōter. “Satan’s throne” is likely the imperial cult, the Zeus altar, or both. Antipas had already been martyred there (Rev 2:13). The church’s problem was internal compromise with pagan practices (eating meat offered to idols).

#### THYATIRA (REV 2:18–29)

##### **A “Jezebel” teaching compromise**

A smaller trade city, famous for its purple-dye guilds (Lydia in Acts 16:14 was “a seller of purple goods from Thyatira”). The church was growing in love and faith and perseverance, but tolerated a false prophetess — symbolically named after Ahab’s wicked queen — who was teaching sexual immorality and idol-meat compromise.

#### **SARDIS (REV 3:1–6)**

##### **“A name that you are alive, but you are dead”**

Once the legendary capital of King Croesus’s Lydian gold empire, Sardis was by the first century a fading city with a reputation for overconfidence and a history of being taken by surprise attacks. The church’s problem was spiritual deadness masked by reputation. A few names had not soiled their garments; the rest needed to wake up.

#### **PHILADELPHIA (REV 3:7–13)**

##### **The faithful little church with an “open door”**

A small city founded as a mission outpost to spread Greek culture into the Anatolian interior. The Christian community there was small (“you have but little power”) but faithful; Christ had no rebuke for them. He promises to keep them “from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world” — a verse pretribulationists cite as a rapture proof-text, but which in context is a promise of *preservation through*, not removal from.

#### **LAODICEA (REV 3:14–22)**

##### **The “lukewarm” church**

A wealthy banking center, famous for its medical eye ointment, its glossy black wool, and its water supply — which came by aqueduct from hot springs at Hierapolis and cold springs at Colossae, arriving at Laodicea tepid and nauseating. Christ uses the physical image: their faith is neither the healing hot water of Hierapolis nor the refreshing cold water of Colossae — it is spittle-worthy lukewarm. Their boast of wealth is the exact opposite of their spiritual reality. No praise at all — only the tender invitation to open the door so Christ can come in.

**Why start here?** Because these seven letters, so specific and so situated, tell us what the whole book is doing. Revelation is not code for 2026. It is pastoral counsel to persecuted and

compromised first-century Christians who needed to know that Jesus was Lord, Rome was not, and the Lamb had already conquered. Whatever else we make of the visions in chapters 4–22, we must read them as John’s answer to the pastoral situation he names in chapters 1–3.

## PART 4 — THE GENRE: APOCALYPTIC + PROPHECY + LETTER

---

Revelation is a unique triple hybrid. It belongs to three overlapping genres, each with its own conventions. Missing any one of the three produces a distorted reading.

**1. Apocalyptic (*apokalypsis*, Rev 1:1 — “revelation, unveiling”).** The primary genre. Jewish apocalyptic writing was a flourishing tradition from roughly 200 BC to AD 200 — 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Testament of Levi, the Similitudes of Enoch, and in Scripture the second half of Daniel (chs. 7–12), parts of Isaiah (24–27, “the Isaiah Apocalypse”), Ezekiel, and Zechariah. Apocalyptic writing characteristically: (a) pulls back the veil to show the heavenly realities behind earthly events; (b) uses dense symbolic imagery (beasts, horns, numbers, horsemen); (c) addresses the persecuted, encouraging them that God will act; (d) presents stark dualisms (light/dark, beast/lamb, harlot/bride, Babylon/Jerusalem); (e) is often pseudonymous or pseudepigraphal (attributed to ancient heroes) — though Revelation is an exception, openly attributed to John.

**2. Prophecy (Rev 1:3; 22:7; 22:10; 22:18–19).** John calls his book “this prophecy” more than once. Prophecy, in the biblical sense, is not primarily future-prediction. It is forth-telling God’s word into a present situation with confident reference to what God is doing, has done, and will do. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Ezekiel are prophets. Their books contain some predictions, many denunciations, many calls to repentance, many promises of deliverance. Revelation is in this stream.

**3. Letter/Epistle (Rev 1:4–6; 22:21).** Revelation opens and closes with epistolary greetings, like Paul’s letters: “John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and

peace from him who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4); “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen” (22:21). This is mail. It has a specific sender, specific recipients, and a specific pastoral occasion.

**The deepest single mistake** most modern American readers make with Revelation is to read it as a *newspaper* — a straight prose description of future events disguised in symbols that must be literally decoded (the ten horns must be ten modern nations, the mark of the beast must be a literal microchip, and so on). But newspapers are not a first-century genre. Apocalyptic writing is. When John sees a dragon or a locust-army or a whore dressed in scarlet, his first readers did not ask “which modern thing is this code for?” They asked “what Old Testament image is John drawing on, and what is he saying about the power that is pressing on us right now?”

**An illustration:** Revelation 13 describes a beast from the sea with seven heads and ten horns. Every first-century Jew knew where that image came from: Daniel 7, where four beasts represent four successive kingdoms (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome). John is combining all four beasts into a single composite beast. The meaning is obvious to a first-century reader: this beast is the sum of all pagan empires that oppress the people of God, culminating in Rome, which is pressing on the seven churches right now. The beast is not a specific individual in the 21st century; it is the pattern of imperial persecution in every age.

## PART 5 — THE FOUR MAIN INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES

---

Christians have approached Revelation in four principal ways. Each has serious defenders; each has significant weaknesses; each captures something true. Pleasant Springs Church blends elements of two of them (as we will explain) while honoring brothers and sisters in all four.

### 1. Preterist (Latin *praeter*, “past”)

**Core claim:** Most of Revelation was fulfilled in the first century — either in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (partial preterism) or in the fall of Rome across the

next several centuries. The book is not a prophecy about our time; it is a prophecy about *their* time, already fulfilled.

**Variants:**

- **Partial preterism:** Most of the tribulation language was fulfilled in AD 70 / the fall of Rome, but the bodily Second Coming, resurrection, and final judgment are still future. Orthodox.
- **Full (or “hyper-”) preterism:** Even the Second Coming and resurrection were fulfilled in AD 70. Rejected by the historic Church as heretical on the resurrection.

**Key proponents:** R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (1998); Kenneth Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell* (1989); Gary DeMar; David Chilton.

**Strength:** Takes seriously the first-century audience, Jesus’s “this generation” (Matt 24:34), and the “the time is near” (Rev 1:3, 22:10) language.

**Weakness:** Full preterism denies the future bodily return of Christ, which the Apostles’ Creed confesses. Partial preterism is vulnerable when it has to explain how certain passages (e.g., Rev 20:11–15, the Great White Throne) were fulfilled in AD 70.

## 2. Historicist

**Core claim:** Revelation is a continuous chart of church history from John’s day to the Second Coming. The seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls each correspond to a specific period or sequence of events in Western history: barbarian invasions, the rise of the papacy, Islam, the Reformation, Napoleon, modernity.

**Key proponents:** Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), Martin Luther (sometimes), John Knox, Matthew Henry, Jonathan Edwards, Isaac Newton, Charles Finney, E. B. Elliott *Horae Apocalypticae* (1844). This was the **standard Protestant reading for about 400 years** after the Reformation, especially in its anti-papal form (the Beast = the Papacy, Babylon = Rome). Still the official position of Seventh-day Adventism.

**Strength:** Takes the church’s entire history seriously as the stage on which Revelation’s drama plays out. Connects deeply with Reformation-era struggles.

**Weakness:** Historicist readings have been repeatedly revised as history failed to match them. Each generation’s historicists identified the Antichrist with their own villain (Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, Gorbachev, Obama); none of those identifications

held up. The approach is now widely seen as eccentrically Western, ignoring the first-century audience, and historically overconfident.

### 3. Futurist

**Core claim:** From roughly Revelation chapter 4 onward, most of the book describes events still future from our vantage point — the tribulation, Antichrist, Armageddon, the millennium, the final judgment.

**Variants:**

- **Dispensational futurism:** Darby, Scofield, Walvoord, Ryrie, LaHaye. Pretribulational rapture, 7-year tribulation, literal millennial kingdom for Israel. See [Lesson 1](#) for this system's origin and critique.
- **Historic (non-dispensational) futurism:** George Ladd, Robert Mounce, Grant Osborne. Rejects the pretrib rapture, but reads most of Revelation's visions as future tribulation events culminating in Christ's return.

**Strength:** Takes the final, cosmic consummation of history seriously. Preserves the confidence that God is still going to act decisively.

**Weakness (especially the dispensational variety):** By pushing nearly all of Revelation into the future, it renders the book nearly useless for the first-century audience who was actually reading it under actual persecution. It also tends toward sensationalism, newspaper-exegesis, and failed date-setting.

### 4. Idealist (Spiritual / Symbolic)

**Core claim:** Revelation depicts the timeless spiritual conflict between the Lamb and the beast, the Bride and the harlot, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. Its images are not tied to specific historical events in either the past or the future; they are patterns that play out in every generation of the Church.

**Key proponents:** Augustine of Hippo (*City of God* XX, c. 425 — the fountainhead); William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (1940); Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (1993); G. K. Beale (eclectic-idealist), *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC, 1999); Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (2001).

**Strength:** Honors the apocalyptic genre (images, not predictions). Lets the book speak to persecuted Christians in every century — not just the first, not just the last.

Recognizes that the book’s central message (“the Lamb wins”) is the same for the first-century martyr at the Colosseum, the seventeenth-century Waldensian in the Alps, and the twenty-first-century Nigerian believer under Fulani raids.

**Weakness:** When pushed too hard, can evaporate into abstractions that lose the historical concreteness of both the first-century situation and the actual final consummation. Strongest when combined with preterist first-century grounding and futurist final consummation.

## PART 6 — KEY SYMBOLS IN REVELATION

---

A short guide to the most-debated images. In every case, the Old Testament background is the first place to look — John alludes to the Old Testament more than 500 times in 22 chapters.

**Seven** — Completeness, perfection. Seven spirits, seven lampstands, seven seals, trumpets, bowls. Taken from Genesis 1 and Israel’s sabbath-cycle.

**Twelve** — God’s covenant people. Twelve tribes + twelve apostles. The 144,000 of Rev 7 and 14 (=  $12 \times 12 \times 1000$ ) symbolizes the full number of the redeemed, not a literal 144,000 Jewish virgins.

**One thousand** — An immense, complete number. Used symbolically throughout Scripture (Ps 50:10 “the cattle on a thousand hills”; 2 Pet 3:8 “a day is as a thousand years”). The millennium of Rev 20 is read literally by premillennialists, symbolically by amillennialists.

**The Beast (Rev 13, 17)** — The imperial persecuting power. In John’s immediate frame: Rome, especially Nero (or Domitian). In idealist reading: the pattern of every persecuting

empire — Rome, Byzantium’s enemies, Islam, Hitler, Stalin, the CCP, any power that demands the absolute loyalty that belongs to Christ alone.

**666** — Rev 13:18 explicitly says this is the number of “a man.” Hebrew gematria of “Nero Caesar” in its Aramaic/Hebrew spelling (נרׁון קסר, nrwn qsr) yields exactly 666. Some early manuscripts read 616 — which corresponds to the Latin spelling (“Nero Caesar” without the second *n*, ntw qsr = 616). This textual variant is itself strong evidence that early Christians identified Nero with the number. Futurist attempts to decode 666 as an implanted microchip are modern.

**Babylon the Great (Rev 17–18)** — Most scholars: Rome, the city whose power and idolatry Revelation exposes. Some partial preterists: Jerusalem of the unbelieving Jewish establishment that rejected Christ and persecuted his Church, destroyed by Rome in AD 70. The internal evidence (“the great city, where their Lord was crucified,” Rev 11:8; “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus,” Rev 17:6) is debated.

**Armageddon (Rev 16:16)** — Har Megiddo, “the hill of Megiddo” in the Jezreel Valley of northern Israel. Historically a battlefield (Josiah died there, 2 Kings 23:29). Symbolically, the final gathering of the wicked powers against the Lord Jesus. Not literally a Middle Eastern tank battle; rather, the decisive confrontation pictured in prophetic symbol.

**The New Jerusalem (Rev 21–22)** — The redeemed people of God, dressed as a bride, coming *down* from heaven to the renewed earth. The book’s final image is not believers escaping the earth, but God bringing heaven to earth. This is the anti-rapture picture.

## PART 7 — THE MILLENNIUM (REVELATION 20)

---

Revelation 20 describes a “thousand years” during which Satan is bound in the Abyss and Christ reigns with the saints. This is the millennium. Three main Christian readings:

**Premillennialism** — Christ returns *before* a literal 1,000-year earthly reign. Held by the early Fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Lactantius, Methodius) as the dominant position for the first 250 years. Held today by George Ladd, Craig Blomberg, Wayne Grudem, and historic premillennialists.

**Amillennialism** — The “thousand years” symbolizes the entire age of the Church between Christ’s first and second comings. Christ is currently reigning in his kingdom; the binding of Satan refers to Christ’s work at the cross (Matt 12:29; Col 2:15). Augustine systematized this in *City of God XX* (c. 425), and it became the dominant Western view for the next 1,000 years. Held today by Anthony Hoekema, Kim Riddlebarger, Sam Storms, R. C. Sproul.

**Postmillennialism** — The gospel will gradually triumph in the world, producing an age of Christian dominance (the millennium, whether or not literally 1,000 years), at the end of which Christ returns. Held by Jonathan Edwards, B. B. Warfield, Loraine Boettner, Ken Gentry, Doug Wilson.

A brief observation: the question of the millennium is *separate* from the question of the rapture. A posttribulationist (Lesson 1) can be premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial. A pretribulationist is almost always premillennial. Do not let the two debates collapse into one.

## PART 8 — HOW PLEASANT SPRINGS READS REVELATION

---

Pleasant Springs Church commends what is sometimes called an **eclectic, idealist-preterist reading** of Revelation. We take the best from two of the four approaches and let them work together:

**From Partial Preterism** — we take seriously the first-century audience, the near-term fulfillment of much of the book’s imagery in Nero’s persecution (AD 64–68) and the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70), and Jesus’s “this generation” in Matt 24:34. John wrote to specific

Christians facing specific Roman persecution, and a responsible reading must account for that.

**From Idealism** — we take the recognition that Revelation’s images are *patterns*, not one-time codes. The beast is Rome and every subsequent persecuting empire. Babylon is Rome and every subsequent corrupt civilization that sets itself against the Lamb. The faithful witness of the saints is the pattern repeated in every generation. Revelation speaks to the church in AD 95, the church in 1525, the church in 1945, the church in 2026, and the church that will exist on the day Christ returns.

**A measured futurism** at the end of the book — we affirm that Revelation 20:11–22:21 describes events still future: the bodily return of Christ, the bodily resurrection, the final judgment, and the new heavens and new earth. These are not exhausted by AD 70 or by patterns in church history. They are the real consummation toward which the whole of Scripture points.

**On the millennium** — we are quietly historic premillennialists, with real sympathy for amillennialism. We think Rev 20 reads most naturally as a real reign of Christ on a renewed earth, but we are not dogmatic about the specific duration or shape. On this question especially, we respect brothers and sisters across the three views.

## OUR SUMMARY OF REVELATION

**Revelation is not a coded newspaper about 2026.** It is apocalyptic prophecy in letter form, written by the Apostle John from exile on Patmos in the late first century, to seven persecuted churches in the Roman province of Asia.

**Its central message is the Lamb has overcome.** Jesus Christ — slain, risen, ascended, reigning — is the Lord of history, not Caesar. His people may suffer terribly, but they are safe in his hand, and their suffering is the seed of their victory.

**It was first fulfilled in the first century** (Nero, Jerusalem, the Jewish War, the spread of the gospel despite persecution) — but because its images are apocalyptic

*patterns*, not one-time codes, it continues to speak to every persecuted church in every age.

**It looks forward** to a singular, personal, bodily, glorious return of Jesus Christ, a real bodily resurrection, a real final judgment, and a real renewed creation in which God will dwell with his people forever. This final consummation is still future; it has not been exhausted by AD 70.

**It is not a rapture manual.** It is pastoral medicine for a suffering church that has to keep going, not an evacuation plan.

## PART 9 — AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE OF KEY PASSAGES

---

Following Lesson 1’s method, let us walk briefly through the passages that matter most, asking each time: who wrote this, to whom, in what situation?

*Greek NT (Rev 1:1–3): ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἣν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει... μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες... ὁ γὰρ καιρὸς ἐγγύς.*

Revelation 1:1–3 (ESV): “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants **the things that must soon take place**... Blessed is the one who reads aloud... **for the time is near**.”

**Audience note:** Whatever Revelation is about, John tells his first-century readers that *they* are the “servants” to whom it is shown and that the time is “near” for *them*. If most of the book refers to events 2,000+ years after they read it, these words lose their plain meaning.

*Greek NT (Rev 13:1, 18): καὶ εἶδον ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον... καὶ ὁ ἀριθμὸς αὐτοῦ χξξ' [666].*

Revelation 13:1, 18 (ESV): “And I saw a beast rising out of the sea... Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.”

**Author note:** John is writing to Christians who need to *understand* this number — not as a riddle for the 21st century but as something they could decode. Hebrew gematria of Nero Caesar (נרנר קסג) = 666. In Latin spelling, 616. The variant 616 in early manuscripts is internal evidence that the first readers identified 666 with Nero. If the number meant nothing to them, the text’s command to “calculate” is pastoral nonsense.

*Greek NT (Rev 17:9–10):* ὧδε ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἔχων σοφίαν. αἱ ἑπτὰ κεφαλαι ἑπτὰ ὄρη εἰσίν, ὅπου ἡ γυνὴ κάθηται ἐπ’ αὐτῶν, καὶ βασιλεῖς ἑπτὰ εἰσίν· οἱ πέντε ἔπεσαν, ὁ εἷς ἔστιν, ὁ ἄλλος οὐπω ἦλθεν.

Revelation 17:9–10 (ESV): “This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come.”

**First-century cues:** Rome was famously built on seven hills; “the woman seated on seven mountains” had a familiar referent. The seven kings have been identified variously — five fallen, one currently reigning, one yet to come — but the candidates are all first-century Caesars (Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, and/or the brief successor emperors). Whoever these are, they are emperors John’s audience can *count*. This is not a code for 21st-century presidents.

*Greek NT (Rev 21:1–3):* καὶ εἶδον οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινὴν... καὶ τὴν πόλιν τὴν ἁγίαν Ἱερουσαλὴμ καινὴν εἶδον καταβαίνουσαν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἡτοιμασμένην ὡς νύμφην κεκοσμημένην τῷ ἀνδρὶ αὐτῆς.

Revelation 21:1–3 (ESV): “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down out of heaven from God**, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

**The direction of hope.** The vision ends with the new Jerusalem *coming down* to a renewed earth. God dwells with man *here*. The whole rapture/escape picture runs exactly backwards to the Bible’s own vision of the end. We inherit the earth. It does not inherit our ashes.

**1. Do not read Revelation as a newspaper.** It was not written for 2026. It was written to seven first-century congregations. When we read well, we read *with* those congregations, not over their shoulder toward our own time.

**2. Do not set dates.** Every generation of Christians who has set a date for the Lord's return has been wrong. "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt 24:36). The end will come when the Father sends the Son.

**3. Do not identify the Antichrist with your political enemies.** Luther's identification of the Pope as Antichrist, Napoleon-era Protestant identifications of Napoleon, twentieth-century identifications of Mussolini, Hitler, Kissinger, Gorbachev, various Presidents — every one of these has collapsed. The pattern of Antichrist is real and visible in every age. The identification of any one person as the Antichrist in a final sense is beyond our warrant.

**4. Do read Revelation as encouragement for faithful witness.** Revelation is medicine for persecuted Christians. Its primary pastoral message is: "The Lamb has overcome. Hold fast. Witness faithfully. Suffer well. You will reign with him." Every faithful reading of the book will deepen this encouragement, not replace it with speculation.

**5. Do expect a real end.** Over against any purely symbolic reading that evacuates the book's final consummation, we affirm a real bodily return of Christ, a real bodily resurrection of the dead, a real final judgment, and a real renewed creation. History is going somewhere, and the Lord will bring it there.

*Greek NT (Rev 22:20): Ἀμήν, ἔρχου, κύριε Ἰησοῦ.*

## SIMPLIFIED SUMMARY — WHERE PLEASANT SPRINGS STANDS

### REVELATION IN ONE PAGE

**Author:** the Apostle John, exiled to Patmos under Roman persecution (either Nero c. 68 or Domitian c. 95).

**First audience:** seven real Christian congregations in the Roman province of Asia — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea — each addressed by name with their specific strengths and sins (Rev 2–3).

**Genre:** Apocalyptic + Prophecy + Letter. The images are symbolic patterns drawn from the Old Testament and the Jewish apocalyptic tradition — not a prose prediction of modern events.

**Message:** The Lamb who was slain has overcome. Caesar is not Lord; Christ is. Faithful witness, even to death, is the path to glory. The Bride will be ready when the King arrives on his renewed earth.

**Pleasant Springs reads Revelation** as an *eclectic idealist-preterist*: most of its imagery spoke directly to the first-century crisis, its patterns recur in every persecuted generation since, and its final chapters look forward to the one real Second Coming and new creation still to come. We are quietly historic premillennial on Rev 20, open to amillennial readings, and unconvinced by postmillennialism.

**We do not teach:** that Revelation is a code for the 21st century; that any current political figure is the Antichrist; that the book teaches the pretribulational rapture (see Lesson 1); or that the bride escapes the earth rather than the Bridegroom returning to it.

Faithful Christians have read Revelation in all four of the ways we have described — and in most of the millennial variants — for many centuries. Augustine was idealist; the Reformers were largely historicist; the Plymouth Brethren were futurist; R. C. Sproul was partial preterist. These are all men who loved the same Lord and confessed the same gospel. Our reading seems to us the most faithful to the author, the audience, and the first-century situation; we commend it without apology. But we will not build walls inside the Body of Christ over it. “In the essentials, unity. In the non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.”

Whatever view you hold on these chapters, if you confess Jesus as Lord, crucified and risen, coming again — you and we are family, and we wait together.

## PRAYER

---

Risen Lord Jesus, Lamb who was slain, King of kings and Lord of lords, we thank you that you sent your servant John a vision in his exile and gave him a word for every persecuted Christian who has ever lived. Teach us to read it the way he wrote it. Teach us to hear it the way the seven churches first heard it. Keep us from the pride that makes Revelation a code for our own generation and from the timidity that makes it no word for us at all. When we are tempted to be afraid, draw our eyes to the throne. When we are tempted to compromise, remind us of Antipas. When we are tempted to despair, show us the Lamb. And when at last we come to the final chapter of our own lives, may we find ourselves numbered among those who have washed their robes and made them white in your blood, and may we cry out with your whole Church, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”  
Amen.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

---

1. Read the seven letters in Revelation 2–3 as a group. If John were to add a letter to Pleasant Springs Church today, what would he commend and what would he warn?

2. Which of the four interpretive approaches (preterist, historicist, futurist, idealist) have you most often encountered in preaching or teaching? What are its strengths, and what are its blind spots?

3. Revelation 1:3 says “the time is near” &mdash- to first-century readers. If the book is mostly about events 2,000+ years in the future, what does “near” mean? If the book was mostly fulfilled in the first century, what does this say to us who are reading it 2,000 years later?

4. The number 666 in the text is explicitly “the number of a man” (Rev 13:18). Hebrew gematria gives us Nero Caesar. Does this first-century identification — which the very early manuscripts’ variant 616 confirms — change how you hear the modern speculation about microchips and barcodes?

5. Revelation ends with the new Jerusalem descending from heaven to a renewed earth, not believers ascending from earth to heaven. How does this final image reshape the Christian’s hope? What does it mean for how you work, how you suffer, and how you expect God to act in your life between now and the Lord’s return?

## FURTHER READING

---

- **Four-views comparative:** Steve Gregg (ed.), *Revelation: Four Views — A Parallel Commentary*, Thomas Nelson, 1997 (rev. ed. 2013). The single best resource for seeing all four approaches side by side on every passage.
- C. Marvin Pate (ed.), *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, Zondervan Counterpoints, 1998
- **Idealist:** Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge UP, 1993 — short, brilliant, accessible

- G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC, Eerdmans, 1999 — massive eclectic-idealist commentary
- Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*, P&R, 2001 — Reformed idealist, pastoral
- William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, Baker, 1940 — the classic Reformed idealist commentary
- **Historic Premillennial / Eclectic:** George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, Eerdmans, 1972
- Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, rev. ed. 1998
- Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Eerdmans, 2001 — beautifully written pastoral introduction
- Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, 2003
- **Partial Preterist:** R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus*, Baker, 1998 — the most accessible partial-preterist introduction
- Kenneth L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation*, ICE, 1989 — the scholarly case for the early date
- Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, American Vision, 1999
- **Post-dispensational:** Matthew L. Halsted, *The End of the World as We Know It*, IVP Academic, 2023 (continued from Lesson 1)
- N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, Westminster John Knox, 2011 — readable devotional commentary
- **On the seven cities:** Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSOT/Eerdmans, 1986 — archaeological and historical background
- Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*, Abingdon, 1993 — short and excellent

**DOWNLOAD THIS LESSON**

---

[↓ Download PDF \(End Times Series, Lesson 2\)](#)

**Next in the End Times Series:** Lesson 3 — *The Millennium, Israel, and the Church*. We will look closely at Revelation 20, at Romans 9–11, and at the question of whether there is a distinct future for national Israel alongside the Church — the central point at which dispensationalism, covenantalism, and new-covenant theology diverge.

[← L1: Rapture & Parousia](#)

[Discipleship School →](#)

---

Pleasant Springs Church • Henderson / Pinson, Tennessee • Discipleship School • End Times Series Lesson 2  
Prepared by Shane Gunn • Scripture: LXX + ESV (Old Testament) • Greek NT + ESV (New Testament)