

(Revelation) 04 Different Approaches to Interpretation

by David Pawson

David Pawson discusses the different approaches to interpreting the Book of Revelation, highlighting the Preterist, Historicist, Futurist, and Idealist schools.

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Scripture: Matthew 6:33

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Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of not limiting our interpretation of the Bible to just one approach. He argues that no single school of interpretation has the key to unlock the entire book of Revelation. Instead, he suggests that we should be flexible and use multiple approaches where appropriate. The speaker also discusses the different parts of Revelation and how they may have different meanings and applications. He concludes by suggesting that all four schools of interpretation can be helpful in understanding the book of Revelation.

Transcript

Now I want to use the afternoons to deal with the controversial issues about the book of Revelation. So it's going to be a bit heavier in the afternoons. We're dealing with the different ways in which people have treated this book and why there is such confusion as to how we understand and apply it.

So I don't apologize, but we're going to have to use our minds quite a bit this afternoon and think hard. You know the most common comment I get after I've preached is, well, you certainly gave us something to think about. It's said in a kind of mild tone of reproach which implies that people don't come to church to think.

But the greatest unexplored territory in the world is between your ears and we are exhorted to love God with all our minds. Now unfortunately, of course, the after-lunch session is normally the teacher's graveyard. There's something happens to our physical metabolism after we've had a good lunch which makes it jolly difficult.

I was told that if everybody who goes to sleep during sermons on just one Sunday in the whole of America, if you took them all and laid them on the ground in a straight line, head to toe like this, they would all be

very much more comfortable. That's what I was told. It's one of those facts which we ought to know.

Well, there it is. A friend of mine was preaching in a country church in England and his entire congregation was two, a farmer and his wife. During the sermon they both went fast asleep.

My friend didn't know what to do so he thought, well they must be tired so I'll just creep out and go home, which he did. But he met the farmer the next Thursday at market and he went up to him and apologised. He said, I'm sorry, I didn't know whether to wake you up but I thought you needed a bit of sleep so I left you there.

The farmer was quite angry. He said, we woke up at one o'clock in the morning and didn't know where we were in a dark church. Ah well, if you go to sleep and I see you doing this I will be very loving and assume you're praying for me.

Now then, let me introduce this first subject. I want to introduce you to the different schools of interpretation that have been applied to this book, which means that you can buy a book on Revelation and then buy another and they completely contradict each other because there have been so many different ways of approaching this book. Let me begin by illustrating this from the letters which we studied in the first session this morning.

These seven letters need to be applied, that's why they're in the Bible. They're not just a little bit of history for us, obviously. Why would God include in scripture a little bit of history that had no relevance to ourselves and where we are? But it's in the application of these letters that we run into differences of application.

It is obvious that these letters were written to churches in the first century AD in a place called Asia. But we need to apply them to churches in America today. How do we do that? Well now, I want to mention two ways in which it has been done by preachers and by Bible scholars and Bible students, one of which I can go along with and the other of which I simply cannot.

Let me deal negatively with the first one that I don't agree with. That is the theory that these seven churches were prophetic in the sense that they were each looking forward to a period in church history, and that between these seven churches you cover the entire history of the church from the first coming of Jesus to the second, and they flow on one from another. Therefore, the theory is that the first century AD was the Ephesus period of church history.

That moved on into the Smyrna period of the second and the third century when the church was under the greatest persecution. That's followed by the Pergamum period of church history when the Emperor Constantine was converted and the church became officially recognized and established, followed by the Thyatira period which is supposed to represent the Middle Ages of the church's history. The Sardis church represents the Reformation in the sixteenth century, moving on to the Philadelphia church, the missionary church with open doors before it, and the great missionary outreach in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It means that we are now living in the Laodicea period of church history when every church is only lukewarm. Now that's the theory. Hands up if you've heard preachers say that, so it's well known among you.

I'm sorry but I do not believe it. For a very simple reason, the entire church today is not like Laodicea. Some churches are, particularly those in the Western world, but if I took you to Borneo you wouldn't find that.

Far from it. There's not a trace of lukewarmness in some of the churches in the Third World. In other words, it's an artificial application of these seven letters to assume that each represents a period in time.

There are some striking parallels, but there are also some extraordinary differences. It ignores the fact that there are variations between churches even in one city. I believe I could probably take you to a church in this city, Kansas City, which is like one of the other six, or all of the other six.

Some indeed I could take you to are a mixture of two of them. But to say that we are all in the church of Laodicea is a pretty damning indictment, especially of the Third World church. As I speak to you, there are forty-five new Christians in the world every minute I'm talking to you.

You can work out from that how many new Christians there are every hour, and every day, and every week. There are two new churches every single week. The church has never grown so quickly as it is growing right now.

Over half the Christians who have ever lived are alive today. It is an astonishing growth. Now there are two-thirds of the population professing to be Christian, if not actually possessing the Holy Spirit.

So the church is not Laodicean in many parts of the world. It just doesn't fit. The one big problem with this view is that it makes six of these letters out of date for the church today.

There's no point in studying the other six letters if we're all in the condition of Laodicea. I think I've said enough to show that I believe this is an artificial application of scripture to say that each church is prophetic and is meant to represent one later period in church history. I believe the right application of these seven letters is that they all apply to different churches in space today.

Not to periods in time of church history, but all of these letters are relevant to the church today. Some churches are exactly like one of these. The church in Smyrna is almost an identikit copy of the church that Jesus wrote to.

But I could take you round other churches and show you that some are very like Sardis, others are like Philadelphia, and as I've said already, some seem to be a mixture of two or three. What we need to do is to read these letters as if we are looking in a mirror. Indeed, James says that reading the Word of God is like looking in a mirror, but the danger is that you forget what you saw when you move away from the mirror.

But these letters hold up a mirror to the church today and say, which kind of church are you? Bear in mind that the motivation behind Jesus writing these letters was to get them ready for big trouble that was shortly to come upon them. That is why I am teaching the book of Revelation wherever I get the opportunity. I believe there is great pressure coming on the worldwide church.

We shall be hated by all nations, says Jesus, and I can see it coming very quickly. I am urgently trying to prepare the church for persecution. In the western world we're not used to that and we're not ready for it.

But reading these letters tells us how a church can get ready, above all by seeing that it's not compromised either in belief or behaviour in any way that will allow that church to be undermined by those outside. Only holy, consistent, disciplined churches will survive when the trouble really hits. Now that introduces my major topic for this first session this afternoon.

Schools of Interpretation they're called. Groups of Bible teachers and scholars gather round these schools which have their own particular approach to the book of Revelation. That is mainly because the book of Revelation has so many predictions in it about the future.

I told you last night that there are fifty-six separate predictions about the future in this book. Over two-thirds of the verses have a prediction in them. Now the big question then arises, when will these predictions be fulfilled? When will these events happen? The answer to that question, a very simple question, nevertheless has become very complicated.

There are four different answers being given to the question, when are the events we are going to study tonight? In those middle chapters, when is the big trouble going to happen? Some say it has already happened, they're past. Some say they're present, we're in the middle of them. Some say they are future, they are yet to happen.

And some say they belong to no particular time at all but are applied to all time and to all situation. I'm going to give you the technical names of these different schools of interpretation because you'll come across them. Already some of you have shown me books about Revelation that you've bought and you wonder if they're all right and whether you should study them.

You need to ask, which school of interpretation does this commentator or preacher belong to? Then you'll be able to understand how he's handling the book. These then are the four schools of interpretation as far as Revelation goes. They've got technical names, don't be put off by that, but the labels are useful.

They are called the Preterist school, the Historicist school, the Futurist school, and the Idealist school. Very simply, they are giving a different answer each of them to when the predictions of Revelation were, are, or will be fulfilled. The Preterist is a very simple approach.

It simply says, these predictions were made to Christians in the first century. They were told these things will soon take place, therefore they must have happened shortly after the book was written. Therefore, they were fulfilled in the time of the Roman Empire, and therefore all the predictions in the middle of the book of Revelation are already past and history.

They refer to the persecution of the Church in the days of the Roman Empire. We are reading of something that is already behind us, which would be quite comforting if it were true. But that is the Preterist approach and therefore says, don't try and read anything into these predictions that applies to contemporary society.

We can draw inspiration from past crises and past events, but don't think you'll have to experience them in any way. That's the Preterist approach, that it all happened in the first century AD or soon afterwards. In other words, they were all fulfilled in the past.

I'm going to just state what they all hold and then we'll evaluate each view and try and see how much truth there is in each and how much there may not be. The second school, the Historicist believes that the central section of Revelation from chapter four through to chapter nineteen is in fact an entire history of the

Christian Church, that in the guise of symbols and pictures it's giving us an entire Church history from the first century to the last. Therefore, we're right in the middle of it.

There's a little argument as to whether we're living in chapter fifteen or chapter sixteen or chapter seventeen. Those who take this view are a little unsure. But they say we're right in the middle of it, that some have been fulfilled and some are still to be fulfilled because it's the whole of Church history.

If that were not complicated enough, there is another version of that. I've given you what is called the linear version, which means simply that the Church history is only gone through once from chapter fourteen through to chapter nineteen. But the most popular new idea that I find so widespread among pastors today is called the cyclic view of that Historicist position, that in fact the middle section of Revelation goes through the whole of Church history seven times over.

It is called the theory of recapitulation. I'm going to mention the main author of it because I find that every pastor has this book. A man called William Hendrickson has written a commentary on Revelation called *More Than Conquerors*.

He says that it's not just one Church history, it's seven and you keep going back to the beginning of the Church and coming to the end of the Church and going back to the beginning and coming to the end seven times over, and he argues his case. I'm afraid I have to say I'm not convinced, but this is the kind of variety of approach that we're getting now and it leaves a lot of confusion. The Futurist position reads Revelation four to nineteen, takes it seriously and indeed literally, and since hardly any of it has already happened, believes that that whole middle section is concerned with the future, the future to us, that it hasn't happened yet but that it will before Jesus returns.

That's the Futurist position. I hope I'm explaining all this clearly, but it's important that you're aware of so many different approaches because we must learn Revelation, we must use it to prepare for what is coming. But if we're confused about it, we're not going to be really able to do that.

So that's the Futurist position. The first century AD or shortly afterwards, the predictions are already passed. The whole of all the centuries AD from the first advent to the last, the present, the future, the last century AD whether we're living in it or not we don't know for sure, but it will be future to us and the end, end, end times.

Then there is the Idealist position that says you're all wrong. Those don't apply particularly to a past generation or to the present or to the future, they apply to anyone at any time. This approach takes them all very symbolically and very allegorically, a kind of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which is allegory of course, it never actually happened, it's a story with truth in it.

They take Revelation like this to mean that it's a picture of the eternal struggle between good and evil and between God and Satan. But the whole narrative contains the truth that in the end God wins over Satan. But it therefore can be applied to any age, anywhere, any time.

The word Idealist of course is a Greek word, it comes from the old Platonic idea that there is an ideal world and that world is more real than this one, and that in that ideal world there is this eternal struggle going on between good and evil. So it's not tying it to any particular period of time. These then are the four major schools which you'll come across.

Let me take just one picture from the book of Revelation and show how these four schools would interpret that one picture. I'm sure you've all heard of the Scarlet Woman. Towards the end of that middle section there's a vision of a horrible woman, a prostitute actually, clothed in the colour of blood, that's why she's called the Scarlet Woman, and she's riding on a dragon and we know the dragon is the serpent.

So how would these four schools of interpretation say what the Scarlet Woman means? Who is it? The Preterist school would say that the Scarlet Woman was Rome, the power of Rome. And sure enough, in the chapter that talks about the Scarlet Woman, it says that she actually sits on seven hills. Now of course, if you know Rome at all, if you've been to Rome you know it is founded on seven hills.

So people say, well it obviously is a reference to Rome. The whole of this book is about the persecution of Christians long ago in Rome and the Scarlet Woman is Rome, the imperial Rome, the emperor persecuting the Christian church. The historicist says, oh no, no, no, the Scarlet Woman is the Pope.

There's just a bit of sexual confusion here, but the Scarlet Woman is the Pope and that was the teaching of the Protestant reformers, Martin Luther. Reading the middle section as covering church history they said, when she appears that's the time when the Pope fought the truth in the Protestants. So Martin Luther had little hesitation in calling the Pope the Scarlet Woman.

It was a simple step from the imperial Rome to the Catholic Rome and that's how it came about. The Pope in Martin Luther's day responded and called Martin Luther the Scarlet Woman. That mutual accusation has continued till this day.

Tragically, that accusation stands behind the troubles we have in our country in Northern Ireland. This wrong identification of the Scarlet Woman is still stirring up trouble, bombs and outrages and violence in our own country and it's still there. There are still Protestants in Northern Ireland who openly say Catholics, and particularly the Pope, are the Scarlet Woman.

Actually, when you read about the Scarlet Woman, she's not a religious character at all. The futurist approach would take the Scarlet Woman to represent a city, Babylon, which will be the final world trade centre, a centre of power and money and pleasure. Where money and pleasure go together, prostitution becomes the obvious picture or symbol of that, exchanging money for pleasure.

One partner in the arrangement wants the money and the other wants the pleasure. That is why Babylon is represented here as a Scarlet Woman who is a prostitute. You know, when the World Trade Centre towers fell on September the eleventh, and I spoke about that just five days later, and to our surprise there were ten thousand people demanded a copy of that tape and we were kept pretty busy sending them all out.

And they've had the most--had you heard it Mike? Yes, the most remarkable effect of that tape, we've had many, many conversions. One seventy-five-year-old man in Australia ordered six copies for his six grown-up children and sent it to them, and every one of them was converted and came to the Lord. He died two months later, a happy man.

He was the director, the headman of Herbert Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God, the plain truth man. I hope you know what's happened to that movement. They've turned right around to the gospel, back to the Bible.

In just two or three years they've completely disassociated themselves from the false teaching of Herbert Armstrong. This has never happened in church history, but he was the Australian head of the Worldwide Church of God and bless him, he died knowing that all his six children were the Lord's. But that was just one of the results.

We had people telephoning in tears, repenting of their sins, because among other things I said that all those who died in the towers deserved to die, and that sent a shockwave everywhere. But I said, that's what Jesus said. When the Tower of Siloam fell in Jesus' day and many were killed, people said, were they worse sinners than anybody else? He said, not at all, and unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

You see, I deserved to die in the World Trade Towers. I just didn't happen to be there at the time. I don't deserve to live.

If God had dealt with me in strict justice you would not have a preacher this afternoon. I've news for you, there'd be nobody else in this room either. It is of his mercy that we're not consumed.

When any disaster comes we need to say, I deserved to die in that disaster, and I thank God I didn't. His mercy is the reason. Well, I mustn't get into that tape.

How did I get into it? Well, many people rang me up. After September the eleventh, my phone never stopped ringing and people said, is this a fulfillment of Revelation 19? Eighteen and nineteen, where Babylon is fallen and the fires are seen by ships at sea of the city going up in smoke. Well, I'll be showing you a photograph of September the eleventh tonight or maybe tomorrow, and it really did remind me immediately of the fall of Babylon.

It's almost a description of it, but actually my answer to those who phoned me was, it's not a fulfillment, it's a foreshadowing and therefore we need to take serious notice of it. We mustn't get confused between fulfillments and foreshadowings. There are going to be terrible events in the future, but the Bible teaches that all of them are foreshadowed now.

Many people mistake the foreshadowing for the fulfillment. So whenever I teach on Revelation people bring me loads of cuttings from the newspapers and the magazines. Is this it? No, it's because all these events cast their shadow before them.

John himself said in one of his letters, we know that the Antichrist is coming but there are already many Antichrists in the world. People ask me, is Gaddafi the Antichrist? Or they used to ask that. Now it's, is Saddam Hussein the Antichrist? Listen, there are many Antichrists but they're all foreshadowing the big one and he's not here yet.

There will be one big false prophet at the end but there are already many false prophets in the world, foreshadowings. But the big thing will be the fulfillment. I believe September the 11th was a foreshadowing of the fall of Babylon, the ultimate centre of world trade, but not a fulfillment.

Though I heard preachers say it was a fulfillment and therefore we were right at the end of time. Let's then evaluate this. The Preterists said it's all behind us, but when you look into the predictions hardly any of them were fulfilled in the days of the Roman Empire.

It just didn't happen. You've got therefore to twist the predictions to make them fit. I want you to pray that the Holy Spirit will give you the discernment to know when preachers are twisting scripture to fit what they want to say.

It is very common indeed, and years ago I made a solemn promise to the Lord. I said, Lord, I don't want to be a popular preacher, I don't want a reputation. I want to speak the truth out of your Word whatever the cost or consequence, and even if it runs against opinion and tradition and there's opposition, I want to be someone you can trust to teach you truth.

That is not a claim to be infallible, I'm not. No Bible teacher is. I beg you now, and I should have said this earlier but I'll say it now, check out everything I say with your Bible, and if you cannot find for yourself in scripture what I'm teaching, forget it.

For God's sake, forget it. I want to drive you to your Bible. I don't want anybody going away from these seminars saying, David Pawson teaches this, did you know? Check me out in the Bible before you say that, and if you find it there for yourself you don't need to say, I said it.

You can say, the Bible says it, and that will give you the authority of God's Word behind you. I once said to a Roman Catholic, you know the one thing I admire about your church is that you have only one infallible teacher at a time. I said, we Protestants have hundreds and we trot around giving our interpretations if it's the last word.

Please, if you think that's what I'm here to do, you've misunderstood me altogether. I want to drive you to your Bible to check it out, to come to your own convictions, to think for yourself. Well now, just running through these.

The Preterist is right that it was written for the first century AD to churches in the first century AD and that therefore we must interpret it against that background. All that's good, but it limits these letters to history. Why would God include those letters in his Scripture for all time unless they were directly relevant to our needs? All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and for our instruction.

As I've said, many of the predictions of the future were not fulfilled in the Roman Empire, so the Preterist approach will not fit the whole book. The Historicist, quite frankly, is the one that leaves me utterly confused. I've read the Linear Historicist, one book I've got at home, takes the Cambridge twelve volumes of the history of the world and prints those on one side of the page and prints the book of Revelation on the other and tries to make it fit century after century.

And as I read, I just shook my head sadly. The parallels were forced again and again. You can easily twist Scripture to make it fit your theory, but that is not the way to handle Scripture.

It's reading things into Scripture rather than out. I find that approach quite unconvincing and the recapitulation or cyclic view that it goes through church history seven times over. I fear that the motivation for that theory was to get rid of the millennium, which it effectively does, but more of that when we discuss the millennium.

The Futurist approach I have great sympathy with and indeed I will largely take that position as regards the middle section because most of it has not happened on the scale that is predicted, on a world scale. There have been foreshadowings of it but not the fulfilment yet. That's my approach there.

Many things are happening today which foreshadow those final crises but we're not in the big trouble yet. Thank God we're not actually, but we're not there yet. So the Futurist, yes, I go a long way with it.

But those who take the Futurist position, if they're not careful, make it all so entirely future that it becomes irrelevant to the present and therefore simply an intellectual hobby to work out what's going to happen in the future. The foreshadowings of the future mean that all these predictions are very relevant to today because the way we react to the foreshadowings is the way we will react to the fulfilment. The way you react to false prophets now will tell you how you will react to the false prophet.

The way you think about Antichrist now will decide how you think about the Antichrist when he comes. So these chapters are still very relevant to the present even though they are not yet fulfilled, but we are to react to the foreshadowings. The Idealist makes the message relevant for all centuries, but frankly it means that you must not take any of it literally.

You must take it all pretty well symbolically and it rather tends to destroy the hope of an end to the struggle between good and evil. It tends to talk as if it will just go on and on and on. Essentially, it is a Greek way.

Do you remember when I told you about degreasing the church? I think I'll tell you a little more about it this afternoon because I want you to know what I mean. The Greek thinking had a terrible way of separating physical and spiritual things, sacred and secular things, time and eternity. The Bible does not separate these things, but it means a division of life in very practical areas.

Let me mention one or two of them. The Jewish prayer book has a lovely prayer to pray when you go to the toilet, or you call it restroom don't you? All right, we call it the loo or whatever. But here is a prayer in the Jewish family book of prayer for you to pray when you go to the toilet.

To the average Western Christian who is so Greek thinking, this is ridiculous if not even blasphemous. But listen, the God of Israel is as interested in what you do in the toilet as what you do in church, or you haven't understood him. Because he made your body, he made your physical body.

He's concerned about it. He loves your body as well as your spirit and soul. That's terribly important.

Now as I travel around, I stay in many Christian homes and therefore I use many Christian toilets. Shall I tell you what they're like? There's a pile of devotional books by the side of the throne, and there are texts on the wall in nice frames with flowers. Neither the texts on the wall nor the books by my side have anything to do with why I'm in there.

They are all designed to keep me on a spiritual high. You're laughing at this, but I'm very serious. The prayer the Jews use is, Lord I thank you that my body is working properly, and I thank you that I feel better, I feel relieved, and you come out praising the Lord.

Isn't that lovely? Do you know when I speak to Jewish congregations and mention that, they don't even smile. Their reaction is, but of course, but of course. I was in a home for Sunday lunch.

Father sat here, Mother sat there, two kids over the other side. Lovely lunch, roast lamb and mint sauce. When I smell that, I'm a Pavlovian dog, I start to drool.

I sat down and the father turned to me and said, would you give thanks for us? So I bowed my head and I said, Lord I'm ready for this and it's ready for me, so thank you. I opened my eyes and the parents looked

horrified. We thought we had a man of God come to lunch.

The kids loved me. But to me, with a hot meal already, it's sacrilege to pray a long prayer because God gave us all things freely to enjoy. Are you beginning to get a flavour of this? Our attitude to daily work has been profoundly affected by Greek thinking that said, work is a necessary evil and the least you can do the better.

The more leisure you have the better. They used to buy slaves and get the slave to do the work so that they could enjoy their leisure. The attitude to work in Greece was totally different to your Bible.

There's no teaching about leisure in your Bible. There is teaching about coming and partying and resting a while, but there isn't any teaching about the vast leisure industry today. Work was intended by God and it really doesn't matter to God what work you do provided it's not immoral or illegal.

It's your sacred calling. It's your holy vocation. God would rather have a good taxi driver than a bad missionary.

We need to get back to what Martin Luther once said. He said, all work ranks the same to God. Now it is this separation of the physical and the spiritual, it's profoundly affected Christians' attitude to sex which God made long before sin got into the world.

I was once asked to speak at an open-air meeting in Canada in a place where they'd never had permission to have a Christian meeting before, in front of the Niagara Falls. Boy, what a back cloth to speak against. It was broadcast to the whole of Canada and parts of America and three of us had to speak and they put me on first.

I got up and I said, I'd love to talk to you about the man who made the Niagara Falls because I met him when I was seventeen. He looked at me sideways. I said, his name happens to be Jesus and without him nothing was made that has been made.

So he made that behind me. But I said, I don't want to talk about the falls, I want to talk about honeymoons. I said, God enjoys sex.

Wow! There were hundreds of church people there and they looked as if they didn't recall how they got into this world, but there they were. I said, I don't mean that he has a body and has physical sex, I mean that he thought it up. When a couple make promises to stay faithful to each other for the rest of their life and go away on their honeymoon and cement that dedication with the exquisite pleasure that God intended them to have, God is saying, I did that, that's my handiwork.

Well, the second speaker was a Catholic priest. He got up and he said, I don't happen to be married and I don't think I ever will be. But he said, I want to talk to you about honeymoons.

The third speaker was a well-known Pentecostal pastor, the head of 100 Huntley Street, the Christian television centre in Toronto. He got up and he said, when I asked the Lord this morning what I should talk about, he said, tell them about your honeymoon. So all three of us had been led to a message on honeymoon.

I only found out later that Niagara is the honeymoon capital of Canada almost, that all the hotels have bridal suites for honeymoon couples. There must have been hundreds of honeymoon couples listening to

us that day, thousands even, it was a huge crowd. So glad we all spoke about that, because sex is not spelt S-I-N.

It was only spoiled when man rebelled against God, but the Greeks could never think like that. Sex is physical, can't be spiritual. How crazy.

Now that is what lies behind this idealist approach and lies behind the spiritualising of Scripture. So often we take Scripture in a spiritual, allegorical way. I'll give you an example.

I'm really getting warmed up on this, but I'll have to stop shortly and get back to Revelation. But the book, the Song of Solomon, I never preached on it for years. I didn't dare, because apparently from the commentaries I read it was all in a secret code and nothing meant what it said.

When I read all the commentaries they all had a different decoding system for the details of that. I remember one commentary left me in a guilt complex. The verse in chapter one that said, a girl is saying, my lover is nestling between my breasts.

The commentator said, the two breasts represent the Old and the New Testament. I said, help Lord, help! I'm a carnal man. When I read that verse I don't think of the Old and the New Testaments.

Then you know, I was liberated when I realised God means what he says, and breast means breast, and pomegranates mean pomegranates. I took the book at its face value. It's a wonderful story of human love that reflects as an analogy, not an allegory, an analogy of divine love for me.

I could say to my Lord, my beloved's mine and I'm his. You see? Now this allegorising of scripture, this reading into it different meanings and then applying it to spiritual issues, that started in Alexandria, a Greek university city. I won't name the Church Fathers who started it, but they seemed to see all kinds of deep spiritual meanings and they found it difficult to take the Bible literally.

My principle of approaching scripture is take it in the plainest, simplest sense unless it is clearly indicated otherwise. Take it as it stands. Let God speak to you in plain language.

Use your common sense, don't look for highly profound spiritual meanings. I fear the idealist does that. Now what do we learn from this evaluation? First thing we learn is that no one of these four schools has got the key that unlocks the whole thing.

It is trying to force the whole book into a straitjacket to say that one key will unlock the whole book. Secondly, why can't we use more than one approach of interpretation? The texts have different meanings and different applications and this requires greater flexibility. Thirdly, the emphasis may switch from one of these interpretations to another as we go through the book.

And therefore, lastly, paths of awe can be helpful. Let me now illustrate what I'm trying to say by putting something else up on the screen. Why not be more flexible and use all four approaches as appropriate where they are appropriate? Here are the four schools, here are the different parts of Revelation, the three major parts, chapters one to three, chapters four to nineteen, and chapters twenty to twenty-two, which are clearly different sections, different phases of this Revelation to us.

Taking the Preterist, remember that says it's all been fulfilled already long ago. It was written to the first century churches in the Roman Empire and that's when it all happened. Well, chapters one to three, that's

a good approach because that's when the letters were written, that's when the churches existed.

But to try and force chapters four to nineteen into that and say that's all past doesn't work. And chapters twenty to twenty-two, nobody ever tries to apply that to there because it is so clearly future, the new heaven and the new earth. So that helps us with the first bit but not the second and third.

The Historicist, I have to say, and I hope you've realized why, I don't find it helpful there, there, and certainly not there. It doesn't apply there because that's after history has ended. The Futurist, I don't find it helpful to say that these churches represent future phases of church history so I don't use it there.

But it clearly is relevant to the middle section and when we go back to that in our studies, I will be taking the Futurist view of the events described from the broken seals to the blown trumpets and the poured-out bowls. That clearly applies, and obviously that clearly applies there. The Idealist, the idea that this can be applied at any time, has some truth in it.

And when we went through the letters to the seven churches, I was using this approach partly. I was saying it applies to the first century but also those letters are relevant and appropriate to any century. And in chapters four to nineteen, though I believe most of the events if not all of them are future, the foreshadowing of those events does mean that the predictions are still relevant to our living today and have been for two thousand years.

Of course, it doesn't apply to the new heaven and the new earth. That is pure future and it's not here yet. The only reason we're told about it is to get excited about it and look forward to it happening.

So that's the approach I use. I've got commentaries on Revelation from all these four schools but none of them has the whole truth and none of them unlocks the whole book to me in a common sense, sensible way. Well now that's a pretty technical approach and I apologize if it's caused you to have to think very hard.

But I think my advice now would be to forget them and you go back to the book of Revelation with your common sense and with the Holy Spirit and read it through, perhaps as if you'd read it for the first time with the awe and the wonder of this unveiling, this apocalypse, this revelation of what we can look forward to, the bad things and beyond them the good things. You know, Jesus took the long-term view and that's why he was able to go through the crucifixion. His long-term view is summed up in Hebrews 12 where it says that, for the joy set before him, not immediate joy, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross despising the shame.

It was a terrible experience to go through. He went through hell for three hours from midday on the cross till three o'clock. He went through hell.

Up to then, his concern was entirely for other people. The first three hours on the cross he was praying for those who'd crucified him. He was making arrangements for his mother.

He was concerned for the dying thief alongside. For three hours, when the suffering would not be as great as later, he was concerned about other people. But for the last three hours on the cross, his concern was his own experience.

The first thing he said was, I'm thirsty. Hell is a very thirsty place. His second concern was, I'm alone.

My God, my God, why have you left me? Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani. Even God had left him, and hell, God will have left you. You can see he went through hell, and hell is a very dark place.

There's no natural light there because God is light, and it was in those three hours that he was in total darkness, crying to God. But he went through hell on your behalf so that you never experience it. That's why at the last moment when God said, that's enough.

Do you know crucifixion never killed anybody in six hours? It takes two days minimum and seven days about maximum. In the Philippines to this day, they celebrate Easter by nailing church members to crosses, then pulling the nails out later in the day and they become honoured members of the church. Crucifixion doesn't kill in six hours, no, no.

Jesus said, no man takes my life from me, I lay it down to myself. And after six hours, three hours in hellish experience, God told him, that's enough. And he cried out in relief, it's finished, it's over.

Then he prayed a prayer that he'd been taught as a little boy at Mary's knee. It's I think Psalm 30 verse 6, somewhere in there. Every Jewish boy is taught to pray when he goes to sleep at night, into your hands I commit my spirit.

As he died, that prayer learned at his mother's knee came back, and as he fell asleep he said that prayer and added one word, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. How was he able to go through all that? He shrank from it. He was under such strain and stress that blood oozed from the pores of his forehead as they can under extreme stress.

How did he go through all that? He went through it all because of the joy set before him. He could see beyond the present suffering and he could see what God had in store for him. It kept him going all the way through.

As we move later into studying the big trouble, the big troubles, it's a horrid list. It's bad, bad news. The only way that Christians will get through it is the same way that Jesus got through it by looking beyond and looking to see what God has prepared for us after it's all over.

Hold in there. I'm going to stop there. We've had a pretty tough thinking session and it'll give you a bit more break before the next session.

I could do with more than fifteen minutes anyway. For more information on Friends of the Bragg Room visit our website at www.fotv.com.

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