

Perspectives on Eschatology and The Revelation to John

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Tonight, I want to give you some information which I call Perspectives in Eschatology. I want to thank Michael for this opportunity, and I want to make it clear that I am NOT here to show how Michael and I are in disagreement or to convince you that my viewpoint is somehow better than his. Believe it or not, we agree more than you might think, but we do admit that we have different perspectives on certain details regarding various aspects of Biblical interpretation, eschatology, and specifically some details regarding the Letter of Revelation. So all I am trying to do tonight is to perhaps broaden your perspective with regard to eschatology and Revelation.

I really appreciate the way that Michael has begun this topic, by pointing out what he calls the “knowns” and the “unknowns.” The knowns are very important; the unknowns perhaps less so. I also want to add to this particular perspective. The knowns are often regarded as “truth.” However, what we *know* may not be the whole truth, because our knowledge is often limited. So I urge a degree of caution when equating what we know with the ultimate truth. The Bible is only capable of revealing to us what God has made known, and our ability to perceive the truth of that revelation depends upon the degree to which we have studied that Word, listened to or read scholarly opinion about it, and the degree to which our hearts and minds are open to the inspiration of God's Spirit. As Christians, we are convinced that the Bible is God's Word, it is truth that is inerrant in its doctrines, that Jesus Christ is the key to understanding these Scriptures, and that the Holy Spirit's role is to open to us the truth contained in the written Word and the experienced presence of God. However, you know as well as I that two people can read the Bible and come away with widely differing opinions or understandings. The Middle East is at war today because two or three groups have differing opinions of what the Koran teaches. What we *know* may not always be the *truth* on every topic.

So my first caution is to not assume that everything we call “knowns” is the total truth about a matter. Second, I want to speak about “unknowns.” When referring to a particular topic, it is often the case that we know *something* about a topic, but we may also recognize that there is a lot we don't know, so our understanding about the topic is subject to some degree of uncertainty. So when we talk about a specific topic, I ask you to think for yourself what is really unknown to you and what is uncertain. What is unknown to *you* may not be unknown to someone else. It is entirely possible that someone knows a lot more than you about that topic and what you need to do is seek out that knowledge to reduce your level of uncertainty. What Michael is suggesting, I think, is that there are certain topics that God has not revealed to mankind in detail, so the truth about those topics really is unknown, and when confronted by such a topic we just have to admit that we don't have the complete answer.

Above all, we should not let our thoughts or perspectives keep us from being in full fellowship with one another, even when we strongly disagree on certain topics. For example, Michael and I come from widely differing life experiences and education, so it is quite likely that we would have differing opinions on many topics, but we have a call from God to be in harmony with each other, and so do you.

Now the problem is that when it comes to eschatology, God in His wisdom has not revealed to us in perfect clarity how things will happen when He brings to an end what I call “this earthly experience.” What He *has* revealed in perfect clarity, as Michael tells us repeatedly, is how we can come to know Him personally and be with Him forever. We must not let our lack of knowledge or our uncertainty about the end times keep us from a life-saving and joy-filled relationship with God, other people, and God's created universe.

Over time, God has provided some insight into these end-times matters through His prophets and finally through His Incarnation. There is some difficulty, however, when it comes to understanding what Jesus and the Prophets have caused to have been written. When God speaks, He speaks from eternity, that is, from a perspective where time is not relevant. Putting it in our time-limited perspective, He tends to “mix up” the past, the present, and the future. So when we read the Bible, we sometimes find it hard to determine whether what is being explained pertains to the past, the present, or the future, and to what degree. Moreover, the Bible was written primarily by people with what I call an “Eastern Mindset.” This mindset is more comfortable with symbolic terms or figurative language. So when God inspired them to write about topics whose timing or content was complex and need not be known clearly, these prophets utilized symbolic language. It is my opinion that most people are not aware of the degree to which symbolic language is used in our Scriptures, and even so, the degree to which it is used is subject to scholarly opinion.

Over the centuries, Biblical scholars have found many ways to categorize and communicate the various facets of figurative language used in our Scriptures. They have found, for example, that certain numbers and colors often have special meaning. For example, the number 7 was highly symbolic of fullness, completeness, perfection; the number 4 related to the earth; the number 3 pertained to the Godhead; and the numbers 5 and 10 pertained to humanity. Note that the product of $3 \times 4 = 12$, is the number for God's people, and that $4 + 3 = 7$ is the perfect union of earth and heaven. Since 7 represents perfection, 6 means “short of perfection” or sinful. John states that 666 is the number of a man who is evil incarnated. Bullinger has an interesting statement on numerology: “[42] is the product of *six* times *seven*. Six therefore, being the number of man's opposition to God, *forty-two* becomes significant of the working out of man's opposition to God.” This helps us see how John uses the number 42 months or 1260 days in Revelation. It is the limited time frame in which God in His mercy has allowed mankind to live in rebellion against God's will for their lives.

Certain ideas or concepts also were imbued with special meaning. The blood of an innocent lamb prefigured the sacrifice of Christ, who was a propitiation or substitute for the punishment we deserved for our sins. So blood has a special meaning, and it's hard to think of the color red without thinking about blood. However, red is also used as the color of fire and evil, so its root meaning may have more to do with power and authority. Thus one has to discover the meaning of a color and other symbols in their context.

Let me give you another example of the kinds of issues we face in ascertaining the meaning of a symbol. In Rev. 4:3 John sees an image of one seated on a throne and something surrounded the throne like a rainbow that was like an emerald in appearance. But a rainbow is multi-colored, and an emerald is most likely green in color, so what is it that John is seeing? Part of the problem is that the Greek word translated as “rainbow” is *iris*. (I-R-I-S) **IRIS** was the goddess of the rainbow and the messenger of the Olympian gods, a link between heaven and the earth. Thus *iris* contains a double meaning, being connected with both the Greek word *iris* “rainbow” and *eir*, “messenger.” In Genesis, God made the rainbow as a symbol of His promise to never again flood the earth with water, or, as Ray Summers puts it, a symbol of hope in the midst of judgment. Now the color green typically is a symbol for hope. Thus, what John may be trying to tell us is that the emerald rainbow around the throne is a message of hope to all of God's people. Actually, that is the basic message of the book! To be clear on this point, there is no such thing as an emerald rainbow – what John sees and is trying to communicate is a message of hope, and that is the reality behind the symbol.

Another very prominent concept in Scripture is what was called “The Day of the Lord,” sometimes called the “Great Day of the Lord.” This was seen as a time when God would make all things right again in His Creation. Evil would be removed, the guilty would be punished, the earth would be peaceful, the righteous would be rewarded, and God would be ruler of all. This is a fundamental truth in Scripture. Unfortunately, those who see the 1000 years in Revelation as literal call this the Millennial Kingdom, which is a mistake. For example, when describing peace after the Day of the Lord, the prophet spoke of a wolf and a lamb lying down together.

If you think about this at some depth, you'll see that this can not happen on the earth in its present state – the prophet is speaking figuratively of a heavenly reality and a New Earth. However, in His wisdom, God has said, in essence, “You don't need to know the details or the timing; just trust Me; you'll be pleased with the result.”

The problem is that we humans, because we know each of us is not completely trustworthy, also often find it difficult to trust God, so we keep looking for some “signs” or “proof” about the end times. Michael has shared how his preference has been to focus on more important, critical spiritual issues than end times details. I have to confess that this was also my approach for many years as a young Christian. But one of my spiritual gifts is teaching, and as I taught, not only did my students often want to know some details about Revelation, I also felt it odd that the last book of the Bible was not of much interest to me. Perhaps, Michael and I knew we both wanted to know the details in some depth and knew that with Revelation, this would entail quite a bit of work and study and that as Jesus stated plainly, no one other than The Father Himself can know all the details. So why invest a lot of time and effort into a study, the results of which would be some degree of uncertainty?

Well, there are two or three reasons why I decided to study Revelation, First, as some of us studied books such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* in the 70's, I realized that this was a distorted, very narrow, and probably mistaken understanding of end time events. His interpretation of the symbolism was simply too “crude,” based on what I knew of Scripture. It also troubled me that many prominent theologians who held to this view saw the Pope as the Antichrist. Some time later, I met Ray Summers at a Ridgecrest retreat in North Carolina. He was a professor at a Baptist seminary, and he had authored a book in the 50s on Revelation – *Worthy is The Lamb*. He autographed my copy, and I began to study it. That was the first time that Revelation began to make sense to me. He explained how many of the symbolic events and situations in Revelation related to the situation of the Christians in the latter half of the first century and the importance of the Roman empire and its emperors in these matters. He explained much about the numeric symbolism, which he had borrowed from a previous author writing in 1935. The meaning of colors and various creatures and other images in Revelation began to make more sense. I caught a deep, personal sense of what it was that John was telling us who read his letter.

So I studied Revelation and books by various authors as time permitted for several years. Most of those I read seemed to follow the pre-millennial ideas expressed by Hal Lindsey, so these were usually not satisfying to me. Many years later, I began to find books by scholars who presented amillennial perspectives or emphasized a broader interpretation of how “Empire” was the modern connection with the symbolism of the Roman empire in Revelation. I saw the fundamental error in interpreting literally a writing that was intentionally symbolic. My study of The Revelation to John continues to this day.

Michael and I agree on at least one thing – neither of us has all the answers. Because I am much older than Michael, I have a bit of head start on him when it comes to Revelation, so maybe there are some things he can learn from me, and I think he recognizes this. He knows Scripture passages better than I, so I can also learn from him. However, as I said earlier, we come from different perspectives. He studied in a more formal manner and was guided to some degree by seminary professors, who may have impressed upon him some of their personal perspectives. One of his textbooks was *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem. I have a lot of respect for Grudem, who provides an excellent overview of the various ways of interpreting Revelation, giving the pros and cons of each. I found that very helpful. Grudem comes down on the side of pre-millennialism, and makes very cogent arguments for this view. Without a somewhat extensive knowledge of various interpretations of Revelation, anyone would be hard pressed to disagree with Grudem in his conclusions, so Michael will probably have difficulty taking a position different from Grudem. It's easy to take the position of a recognized authority as your position, for all the arguments have been spelled out for you. It's more difficult to do the study and reasoning needed to come to your own conclusions.

I, on the other hand, do not have an experience guided by a seminary or a particular scholar. All I know is what I have studied for the past 50 years, primarily from the Bible, but also from a large number of authors, and with a great deal of personal thought and prayer. I am comfortable with symbolism and abstract thinking, with the tendency to seek various viewpoints on a topic of interest. I always do this – I tend to postpone a decision or conclusion until I have as much data as I can find. I also don't feel discomfort when someone disagrees with me, for each of us comes from different perspectives. When it comes to Revelation, I don't feel that I have to explain every little detail to grasp the message. Moreover, I see where scholars who feel they know all the details have come to ridiculous, un-Biblical conclusions, so a detailed explanation is not the answer. If it were, God would have given us that. Jesus would have told us. He didn't. Look at what He said, then let the Holy Spirit lead you into your personal study of The Revelation.

I said earlier that I take a different position from Grudem when it comes to interpreting the details of eschatology. However, I am in full agreement with at least part of his final conclusion. After discussing the signs or events that Jesus stated in Matthew 24 that will occur before His return, Grudem points out that the only sign that one can say with certainty has NOT occurred is the darkening of the sun and moon and the falling of the stars, but this could occur within a very short time. He concludes, "It is unlikely but certainly possible that Christ could return at any time." He goes on to say this:

"With each successive "wave" of events, we do not know which one will be the last. And this is good, because God does not intend us to know. He simply wants us to continue to long for Christ's return and to expect that it could occur at any time. It is spiritually unhealthy for us to say that we know that these signs have not occurred, and it seems to stretch the bounds of credible interpretation to say that we know that these signs have occurred. But it seems to fit exactly in the middle of the New Testament approach toward Christ's return to say that we do not know with certainty if these events have occurred. Responsible exegesis, an expectation of Christ's sudden return, and a measure of humility in our understanding, are all three preserved in this position."

Count yourselves blessed that you have a pastor who is willing to stand before you and say that he doesn't have all the answers. He is willing to listen to your ideas and mine and present his own ideas, some of which may still be developing in their fullness. Count yourself blessed that we have a membership with a broad range of personal learning and experience. We can all learn from one another. Don't just take my opinion, Michael's, or anyone else's. Study the Bible, and come to your own conclusion. If you know Jesus personally, it won't matter if the Second Coming happens before you finish your study, and we all need to be intentional about sharing what we do know about Jesus with others.