

You Can  
**UNDERSTAND**  
*the Book of*  
**REVELATION**

A CLEAR GUIDE TO INTERPRETING PROPHECY

“Delightful and well-written. I wish everyone writing on Revelation was as thoughtful and clear. You even improved on my ideas at a number of points. Nice job!” –Jon Paulien, PhD, Dean, Loma Linda University School of Religion

JEFF SCOGGINS

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# Getting Started

I attended my first prophecy series in Tennessee when I was about seven years old. I have been a part of many since then, trying to expand my knowledge and understanding. In spite of my interest and study, however, prophecy interpretation simply wouldn't stick in my mind. I filled my Bible margins with dates, charts, and interpretations, only to find that the next time I visited a passage, everything was mixed up in my mind again. I couldn't recall what particular symbols represented and how they fit together. To make matters worse, presenters often disagreed with each other, confusing me all the more.

It wasn't until I took Professor Jon Paulien's seminary class in the exegesis<sup>1</sup> of Revelation that prophecy finally fell into place for me. Before that class, I thought I knew some basics of interpreting prophecy. Turns out I didn't. I was surprised at how much was new material for me—an entirely different way to approach prophecy than I had encountered before.

Dr. Paulien's class changed my life as a person and as a pastor. Suddenly Revelation had a storyline, a plot I could follow that held everything together. And the gospel of Jesus Christ finally shone through the clutter of symbols, interpretations, and sensationalism that had always shrouded the prophecies for me.

After the class was over, I took a portion of the material I had learned and, with Dr. Paulien's blessing, turned it into a seminar. Now it appears in this book. I cannot take credit for most of the content we will be studying because it closely follows Dr. Paulien's class. That said, however, this is my own approach to the material. Although much of the wording comes directly from the class, not all of it does. Dr. Paulien would surely add, delete, and state many concepts differently than I have. I thank him for his generosity and urge you to read his books for a deeper understanding of this complex subject. I particularly recommend *The Deep Things of God* and

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1. *Exegesis*, a simplified definition: The process of interpreting a biblical passage while taking into account the original context, language, and intent of the author. *Exegesis* draws meaning out of the text, in contrast to *eisegesis*, which reads meaning into it.

*Armageddon at the Door*, from Review and Herald Publishing Association.

**A word about the structure of the book**

This book is divided into two sections. The first seven chapters are largely about method, attempting to lay out in practical terms the way we should go about interpreting prophecy using only the Bible.

The second section uses these principles to examine the “plot” of Armageddon—both the plot against God’s faithful people by the forces of evil and also the plot (the storyline) that runs through the central portion of the book of Revelation.

Although Armageddon sounds terrible, the fact remains that Jesus is the central figure throughout. The climax of the great controversy between Christ and Satan will be an incredible time in the history of the universe. It’s time we stop viewing the final events of Bible prophecy in the shadow of fear and begin viewing them in the light of the hope we have in Jesus. He is the story of Revelation from beginning to end.

**Section 1**  
**How to Decipher the Symbols**



## Chapter 1

# The Process

Several years ago I built my own workshop. When I had finished, I stood back and studied what I had done and felt pleased with my work. That moment of satisfaction had been a long time in coming, because I had built the shop in one-hour increments over many days, slipping in that one hour a day between my pastoral work and time spent with my wife and one-year-old child. So, most of the time during its construction, my shop was just a skeleton. Still, I enjoyed watching the building go up. I could see progress, slow though it was.

Before I began building the skeleton of my project, I had to dig the foundation, which I did with a shovel. I have to admit that it was tedious. However, I understood that if I didn't construct the foundation well, I would regret it later.

We must go through the same building process in learning to interpret prophecy. Naturally we will look forward to the end, when we can step back and look at the incredible picture we've constructed from the book of Revelation. And we know that we must spend time building our case in order to arrive at a good end product. First we have to build a solid foundation of safe Bible study and interpretation.

I've discovered over the years that some people find building this foundation a little tedious if they simply want to know the meaning of the mark of the beast. But we will discover some disturbing things in prophecy, things that may cause us to rethink some of our preconceptions. Therefore, we need to know that we're standing on a solid foundation of biblical truth.

In the course of this study, we'll not attempt to identify every character and symbol we encounter in the book of Revelation, because our primary focus is the plot of the book and how Jesus Christ inhabits every corner of it. If for now we skip trying to identify and explain every last symbol, a storyline will emerge with greater clarity. After that, we will be able to plug in the identities of the different characters and everything will fall into place. We can't avoid identifying some of the characters as we go

along, but that's not our primary goal.

I've broken down the entire study into three stages. Here is a preview of where we're heading.

### **Stage One: Foundation**

First, we're going to lay a foundation by

- Looking at why we are interested in this topic at all
- Looking at Revelation in the light of the author's time in history
- Considering our limitations
- Discussing safe methods of approaching the Bible, and prophecy in particular
- Looking at how the gospel figures into Revelation
- Seeing how the prologue of Revelation gives us some checks and balances for our interpretations.

### **Stage Two: Building the skeleton**

Next we will dive into the text of Revelation itself and start making sense out of it using the tools we gained in Stage One. Our study will take a distinct shift when we start building a big picture of the events taking place at the end of this world's history.

In these chapters we will see

- Three stages of Christian history and the stage we are living in
- How the forces of evil battle the forces of good in a great end-time conflict
- Who are God's and Satan's forces
- What those forces will look like and what they will be doing and saying
- The nature of their battle.

Among the characters and symbols we will encounter in this second stage will be

- Dragons
- Women
- Beasts
- God's end-time people
- Armageddon
- The mark of the beast
- And much more.

### **Stage Three: The final product**

Finally, at the end we will step back from the details in which we've been immersed and we'll see the big picture. We will see the plot of Revelation, and we'll actually be able to chart the sequence of events surrounding the end of time leading up to Jesus' second coming. We will also be able to see quite specifically where we now stand in time.

By the time we get there, we will be able to take some pride in what we have accomplished because of the careful foundational work we will have done along the way. We will have arrived at some startling conclusions, but we'll have carefully marked and studied our way there, so we can have a healthy measure of confidence that we've arrived at the proper place.

Everything we do will be grounded in the Bible text. It's tempting to jump over to history and find scenarios that seem to confirm the prophecies, and there is a time and place for that kind of examination, but it's not here and now. We're going to limit ourselves to only the Bible for this study.

## Study Guide Outline

### Chapter 1

1. In Stage One we will lay a \_\_\_\_\_ for seeing the underlying story of Revelation.
2. In Stage Two we will use our particular \_\_\_\_\_ of Bible study to begin making sense of the text.
3. In Stage Three we will paint the big picture and see a flow chart of the \_\_\_\_\_ of events at the end of the world.

## Chapter 2

# It's About the Story

**T**he journey of interpreting prophecy takes us on a trap-laden trail. Being aware of the traps helps us to avoid them.

The first trap we will avoid is attempting to interpret prophecy in bits and pieces without consulting the rest of the Bible or without consulting the immediate context of the passage we're trying to interpret.

Let's say I took my squealing car to a mechanic and the way he addressed my problem was to announce, "A squeal means a faulty belt." That might sound good except that I know the sound is coming from the rear of the vehicle, not the engine. "Sorry," he says, "that's impossible. We have figured this out, and a squeal is undoubtedly caused by the serpentine belt." And he won't budge from his opinion.

I will go to another mechanic who doesn't claim to have my engine noise figured out without checking properly. A good mechanic listens to the squeal of my car and suspects something, but if his first guess is wrong, he knows something else to check. How does he have any clue what else to look for? Because he understands the "story" of an automobile. He understands the principles upon which a car works, and therefore he has the ability to track down a car's problems. A careful mechanic is ever growing in his knowledge and experience with vehicles, so that the longer he works with them, the better he works on them.

We often approach the Bible and prophecy in the same way as the first mechanic. We have decided that a symbol means just one thing and no discussion is possible. But we are much better served when we approach prophecy as the second mechanic does—when we discover the underlying story. When we do that, we are forced to admit that not every symbol is perfectly clear at the outset.

That's the first trap to avoid. Don't try to interpret prophecy without putting in the work of testing interpretations by the rest of the Bible. That means we need a sound method of studying the Bible that produces accurate conclusions.

### **The Bible interprets its own symbols**

Another trap to avoid is attempting to interpret prophecy by using sources from outside of the Bible.

Many people “study” prophecy by watching preachers on television. One of the first things some of my Bible students want to know when I teach a prophecy class is whether I am familiar with television preacher so-and-so, and they give me a name. Usually I’ve never heard of the person. They sometimes believe that a particular preacher has all the answers.

Others study prophecy using commentaries and books on the subject. If you happen upon a commentary or book by a scholar who is on the right track, you are fortunate, but how do you know who is on the right track? The only way is to crack open your own Bible and learn it for yourself.

The more time we spend searching the Scriptures, the more able we are to figure out the true meaning of the symbols. The Bible has the keys to itself. It will unlock its own mysterious symbols to anyone who will approach it in a systematic way, like a sleuth tracking down the clues that lead to the solution. Yes, it is work, but it is also the most rewarding work you can do. The brain exercise is priceless.

The Holy Spirit has an active role in our study because, as the Bible says, “Spiritual things are spiritually discerned.” If you don’t spend daily time with God to know Him better by reading His word and praying, then you won’t get far with trying to interpret prophecy. If you resolve to know Jesus as your Lord and friend, then in that relationship you will have a source of guidance for searching prophecy because you will be open to the Holy Spirit speaking to you in your study.

Avoid the tempting trap of “studying” prophecy without opening your Bible or only opening it at the places suggested by someone else. Know the Bible for yourself.

### **Prophecy is fuzzy**

Another trap to avoid is trying to become the next Nostradamus, attempting to predict the future using Bible prophecy.

Prophecy by its very nature is not an exact science. God never intended for prophecy to fill in every single detail about the future. At best, to use Paul’s phrase, we are “looking through a glass darkly.” From prophecy we get a general idea about the future, but it’s only a general idea—not the detailed description that we might sometimes wish for.

I fear that history is repeating itself. A couple of thousand years ago, some Israelites thought they had the prophecies concerning the Messiah all figured out. I've read about their interpretations of those prophecies, and I admit they were convincing. I would have believed them at that time. By their interpretations they were convinced they knew how the Messiah would conquer Rome and make Israel the leading power on earth. Those Israelites either ignored or failed to recognize the parts of the prophecies that went contrary to their preconceived ideas, and therefore their eyes were closed to key parts of the whole picture. So when the prophecies were actually fulfilled, it turned out that their interpretations were wrong.

I fear that today we have become so attached to the particular details of the way we understand prophecy that we may be blinded to other possibilities. We need to come to terms with the fact that looking into the future is never going to be as clear as we might imagine it. Prophecy only becomes crystal clear in hindsight.

*The primary purpose of prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to show us how to live today.* We must become students of prophecy in such a way that, whatever form the fulfillment of prophecy takes, we'll be positioned to recognize it for what it is.

So don't try to be Nostradamus and predict the future by using Bible prophecy. Accept the fact that looking into the future is not clear.

## Study Guide Outline

### Chapter 2

1. We need a sound \_\_\_\_\_ of interpreting prophecy.
2. The Bible \_\_\_\_\_ its own symbols.
3. Prophecy is clear in \_\_\_\_\_ but fuzzy when it points to the future.