

The Three Mysteries of Revelation • Revelation 1:20; 10:7; 17:5-7

We have been studying the “mysteries” of the Bible. Not all of them, only those that the Bible itself calls mysteries (which are actually few in number). The biblical definition of a mystery is “something once hidden that has now been revealed by God.” In our series we have studied three of these self-identified mysteries: the mystery of what happens when we die, the mystery of God’s great message to earth and the mystery of marriage. Now we come to a fourth Bible mystery. It is really three mysteries, all appearing in the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

In many ways the whole book of Revelation is a mystery. For twenty centuries Christians have studied and struggled and debated about its meaning. Questions continue and the fascination is still great. So much so that the book series *Left Behind* has been the number one best seller in the world. Some readers take these novels as a surefire prediction of the future while others think they are simply farfetched fiction. Either way, a lot of people have been interested enough to spend millions of dollars to see what tomorrow might be like.

When I was in seminary we had a series of lectures by a world famous Bible scholar. The first three days of his lectures traced how Christians in previous generations all thought they were in the end times and that the return of Jesus and fulfillment of prophecy would culminate in their lifetime. He carefully explained in academic terminology why every generation had been wrong and the mistakes they had made in reading and understanding the Bible. It was a fascinating lesson in history, prophetic expectations and wrong conclusions. On the fourth and final day of his lectures he announced that his study of Bible prophecy had led him to conclude that the return of Jesus and fulfillment of prophecy would happen in his lifetime. Wow! I was really impressed. But he died sometime in the last century. It turns out he, too, was wrong.

Just because something has not happened does not mean it will not happen. I firmly believe that every prophecy from God in the Bible has or someday will come true exactly as God predicted. We just need to be very careful that we do not try to set God’s calendar by our clocks.

Perhaps the greatest mistake Bible students make with the book of Revelation is to ignore the first four words of Revelation 1:1: “*The revelation of Jesus Christ.*” Revelation is showing or revealing something we would not and could not have figured out by ourselves. The last book of the Bible is not primarily about the future; it is primarily about Jesus Christ. Those who read this book looking for Jesus will have a far better understanding of what God is here teaching than those who read it primarily trying to figure predictions about what will happen some day.

The book of Revelation tells about the great future conflict between good and evil, the great battle between God and Satan. The thesis of the book is that God wins through Jesus Christ. If you get that, you’ve got Revelation. If you miss that, you miss the message of God.

We may be tempted to think this is irrelevant if it focuses on a future that has not yet arrived. Actually, Revelation is wonderfully relevant for us today because we need continual reminders that God wins. When we are scared, oppressed by evil, hear daily reports of sin and violence in the world, or are tempted to give up and think that Satan and evil will ultimately triumph we hear the thunder of “The revelation of Jesus Christ” that God wins! God always wins!

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Once we have the big picture of what Revelation is all about we can focus in on the three mysteries mentioned in Revelation. The first mystery is in Revelation 1:20; however, let’s look at the entire first chapter of Revelation to get a sense of how the book begins. In it we meet the author, John, who is a prisoner on the Mediterranean island of Patmos. One Sunday Jesus himself appeared to him:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because

the time is near.

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicia.

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead,

and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The first mystery of Revelation tells to whom this last book of the Bible is written. It is addressed to the seven stars and the seven lampstands. It is a mystery because none of us would figure this out by ourselves without God’s revelation. These stars and lampstands, whatever and whoever they are, are very important and Jesus himself is in the midst of them.

The explanation is in Revelation 1:20: “*The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*” So, the lampstands are specific churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea and the stars are the angels of these churches. We need to understand that the Greek word for angel, “angelos”, means “messenger”. It most likely refers to the leaders of the seven churches, much like our pastors and elders.

In some ways this may not seem like much of a mystery, but it is very important. The book of Revelation is written to Christians so they can better know Jesus and what he will do to win victory over evil. This first mystery teaches us that Jesus connects with us in terms of the church and the leaders of the church.

Think of it this way: We most often think of people in terms of the groupings to which they belong: male/female; young/old; occupations; marital status; nationality. We naturally group people as Americans, as females, as employees or employers, etc. We immediately categorize people. So does God. God groups us by church. He sees us as part of Ephesus Church or Smyrna Church or Sardis Church or Wooddale Church.

Mystery number one is that churches and church leaders are very important to God!

The second use of “mystery” in Revelation is in chapter 10. Time is too short to deal here with all the details of this amazing chapter. (At Wooddale Church we spent an entire year studying Revelation line-by-line.) Let me simply say that Revelation tells of a series of conflicts between God and evil. At first God uses judgments to bring people to himself with the hope that they will repent and turn to him. But they

keep sinning and resisting. Eventually God changes his strategy and sends awful punishment on evil in a series of judgments that sweep across the nations of the earth. Some of those are described by John in Revelation 10:1-7:

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from the heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."

Then the angel that I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay! But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."

The mystery is that God will come to a date when all delays are over and all his promised judgment of sin will be accomplished. Everything God said would happen will happen.

Some of us are a little critical of God's delays. Jesus said he was coming back and 2000 years later he is still in heaven. God promised to punish all the abuse, violence, injustice and sin in the world and it is still getting worse. We begin to think the prophecies are false or that God forgot. It may even be hard for some of us to take God seriously anymore because he has not come through on all he said he would do.

God sees it very differently. God keeps giving us one more chance. God keeps putting off the end of history. God keeps waiting for humans to repent and live right. God is reluctant to give us what we

deserve. What we see as delay God sees as extended mercy.

The mystery is that God is not going to wait forever. He will come to a point where he will do everything he said he would do. No more delays. After that point people can scream and plead for more time and they will not get it. They have had their chance and now God is going to pour out his judgment and wrath.

On a more personal note, the same goes for us as individuals. We may think that God has gone soft on our sin or will give us indefinite extensions to turn to him and do what is right. Yes, God is amazingly patient and merciful. But, do not be surprised when God says, "This is it. You have had your last chance."

Mystery number two is that a time will come when all God's predictions will be fulfilled.

Mystery number three may pique special interest because of America's wars against Iraq. What we today call Iraq was called the Babylonian Empire in biblical times and its great capital city was Babylon. So the third mystery of Revelation is about Babylon.

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Revelation 17 is not easy to understand. I am not quite sure if I should try to explain it first or read it first. But our purpose here is not to explain it in detail but to grasp the basic mystery, so let's read Revelation 17:1-14:

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY
BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF
THE EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and the ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

"This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

"The ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."

Obviously, this does not lend itself to an easy or quick explanation. So here is the deal. Number one, Babylon is the capital of evil power in the world and the center of Satan's war against God and good. Number two, this capital of evil is ruthless against God's saints; Christians are martyred because they are good and righteous and because they are faithful to God. Number three, God aims a supernatural attack against this capital city to defeat and destroy its power and to punish its evil. Number four, there are several uprisings along the way but the ultimate victory goes to Jesus who is the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Before we decide that this is all about Saddam Hussein and modern Iraq, we need to do a little more thinking. Babylon became a symbol for all evil empires. The actual city of Babylon was destroyed long ago and has never been rebuilt and inhabited since. When Revelation was written in the first century there was growing persecution against Christians. That persecution came from the Roman Empire. The actual description sounds more like Rome because it was built on seven hills. In the first century Christians were often considered unpatriotic because they insisted their allegiance was to Christ and not to Caesar and they would not salute the Roman flag. So Christians often used code words the government would not understand (like referring to Rome as "Babylon"). This leads us to conclude that once the capital of evil was Babylon, then the capital of evil was Rome and someday there will be the "mother of all capitals of evil" somewhere else.

The mystery is not the specific place; it is that God will bring cataclysmic supernatural punishment and destruction. What looks like ultimate undefeatable evil in this world will be conquered by Jesus Christ! Eventually every nation, every tribe, every capital and every person will have to acknowledge that Jesus is King and Jesus is Lord.

Remember this when you think evil is going to win. Evil will never win! Jesus will win!

Here is what to remember from these mysteries of Revelation. Jesus speaks to us through his church. God has delayed fulfillment of his prophecies to give us time, but he will do what he has promised. And, no matter how strong evil may appear, Jesus Christ will win!

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