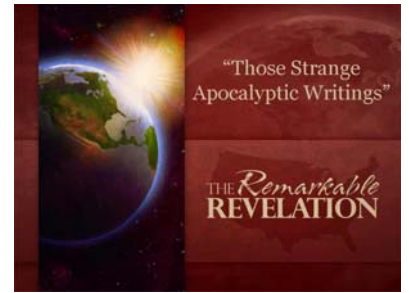


Sermon #1
THOSE STRANGE APOCALYPTIC WRITINGS
by Dr. David R. Mains



Text: Revelation 1:1-20

Subject: Those strange apocalyptic writings.

Desired Response: Need to explore them.

How To: 10 guidelines to help. 7 passages to read from Daniel and Revelation.

How Long: One week of assignments in the Journal.

Sermon in a Sentence: To understand the breadth of God's Word, we need to explore "those strange apocalyptic writings."

(Note: ► icon means "Next Slide," indicating when to advance to the next slide.)

In spite of predictions by some that books will become a thing of the past, they continue to sell very well. In fact, go to Borders, Barnes & Noble, B. Dalton, Kroch's and Brentano's (*use bookstores in your area*), and there are so many choices that you have to know at least a little about how books are categorized or you'll be overwhelmed.

To be quite basic, there's a difference between fiction and nonfiction. And you won't find children's books mixed in with those for adult readers. Histories and sports volumes aren't intermingled. There's a separate travel section and also one for religions, which has its own obvious divisions, much like there are many different kinds of books about cooking. In short, to find a volume that appeals to you, you want to at least head in a certain general direction.

► The best-selling book of all times is a little like this, in that it divides into various sections. These aren't labeled romance, humor and military. The Bible does contain certain passages about romance and war, and there are a few rather humorous verses, but basically the Bible is about spiritual matters.

Within this broad topic, however, it too has distinct divisions. For example, there's what's called the Old Testament and the New Testament, the former being about events prior to the appearance of the long-awaited Jewish messiah. That word "messiah" is Hebrew, and it means "the anointed of God." The same word in the Greek language is "Christ." The actual name of this Christ, or this messiah, the anointed of God, is then revealed in the New Testament to be Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.



The Old Testament divides into three major sections – history, poetry and prophecy.

▶ The first 17 books are all Jewish histories. That's Genesis all the way through the book of Esther.

▶ Next, there are five books of Jewish poetry – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. When we hear the word “poetry”, most of us think of rhyming words. Hebrew poetry, however, is more parallelism, or the repetition of similar ideas. An example would be the psalms, which we would probably call written prayers that, unlike the way we pray, repeat each idea twice. My point is, the psalms certainly don't read like the earlier books of history, and shouldn't be expected to be studied in the same way.

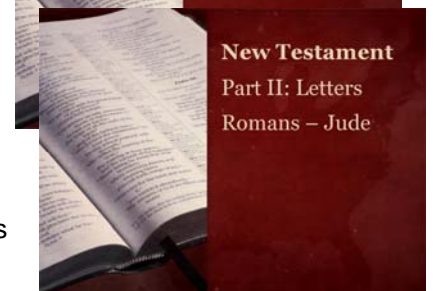
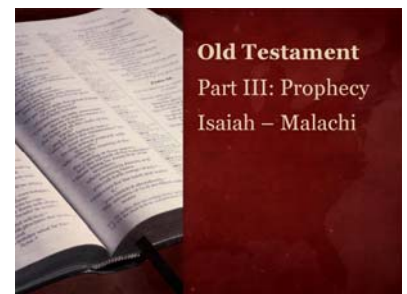
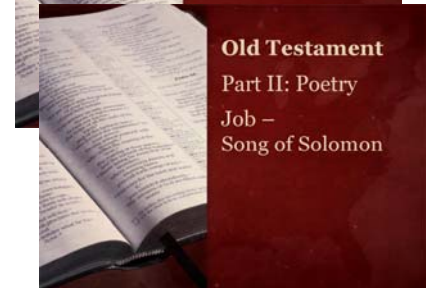
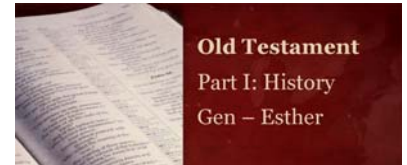
▶ The last of the three major Old Testament divisions is prophecy. Once again, these account for 17 books, starting with Isaiah and continuing through to Malachi. Given a chance, you would probably rename this grouping “sermons,” and that's helpful because we tend to think of prophets as individuals who predict the future. Some of these Old Testament preachers did, but as a group they were more forth-tellers, “Thus sayeth the Lord,” than they were foretellers.

Once again, you don't listen to a sermon with the same set of expectations as you would when attending a history lesson about a nation's kings. Hearing the works of a poet would also change the way you listened to them being read. So these three divisions – history, poetry and prophecy – set off the kinds of written material found in the Old Testament.

The New Testament also has three basic divisions. ▶ The first five New Testament books are history, with the first four being a special kind. They're short biographies about Jesus. Book number five is Acts, which is the history of the early church.

▶ Next in the New Testament is what normal people would call letters ... correspondence ... snail mail. Bible scholars refer to these as epistles. They're written by different authors, the main one being Paul, and his all come first. They start with his letters to churches – Rome, Corinth, Galatia, and so on. Then to individuals – Timothy, Titus and Philemon. After that come letters from other important New Testament leaders like Peter and John.

▶ Following these letters there is one more book. It's markedly different from the others. We call it Revelation ... the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Going back to the Greek, it's “apokalypsis.” We say “apocalypse,” which refers to writings that unveil truths lying beyond one's normal way of knowing. So this apocalypse, or Revelation, reveals the true meaning of world events and their outcome, even the heavenly perspective behind what is to take place.



Apocalyptic materials are a genre unto themselves. They can't be read like history or letters or sermons or poetry. They belong to a category all their own, and must be approached as such.

Allow me to illustrate. Today we have many literature categories that would not have been familiar to people in earlier times. A case in point would be what we commonly refer to today as detective stories. Film documentaries are another relatively new form of communication, as are Web sites, cartoon strips, horror flicks, sitcoms, Harlequin romances and such.

Now, what I'm saying is that in a reverse sense, the early Christians understood apocalyptic writings much better than we do. We're not used to them, but they were. These "revelations" came out of desperate times when there was a need for encouragement. However, the writers and readers had to almost communicate in code, because their very lives were in danger.

The truth is, living was extremely difficult for the Jews between when the Old Testament was completed and the coming of the Christ. That's the period when quite a few of these apocalyptic writers surfaced, which is understandable, because we're talking somewhere around 450 tough years between Malachi – the last of the biblical prophets – and the birth of Jesus.

To gain an audience, it was common for such writers to take on the name of a famous person from the past such as Enoch, or Elijah, or Ezra. None of these writings from what's called the Intertestamental Period, or the years between the Testaments, are included in the Protestant Bibles. In the apocryphal books of the Roman Catholic Bible, one is apocalyptic in nature. It's called 2nd Esdras.

Now it's fair to say that all apocalyptic writers model their work in one way or another on the prophet Daniel. He is the prototype. Others borrow his themes and symbols. Restated, you can't really grasp their messages without at least a working knowledge of Daniel's writings. That's true when looking at Revelation as well.

"Why all this background?", you may be wondering. "What you're saying sounds more like a lecture for a Bible college or seminary class than it does a Sunday-morning sermon."

Well, here's the point. To understand the breadth of God's Word, we need to explore "these strange apocalyptic writings." Not the ones outside of Scripture. What I said was that this was necessary to understand the breadth of God's Word. Shall I say that again? To understand the breadth of God's Word, we need to explore "these strange apocalyptic writings." The ones that are in our Bible.

▶ Today marks the start of what we're calling a 50-Day Spiritual Adventure titled *The Remarkable Revelation*. This is Sunday One of Eight that will bracket the seven weeks in between. Seven weeks of seven days equals 49 days. Add one extra Sunday and you have the 50 days of this Spiritual Adventure.

According to the dictionary, an adventure is a hazardous or exciting experience. So we're not going on a religious pleasure cruise. In my mind, this is a time set aside for accelerated, measurable and lasting spiritual growth. That's what will mark your life if you participate fully. Just listening to a sermon once a week isn't going to do it for you.



Each day of this time set aside for life-transforming changes, adventure participants have special work to do. This week I want you to start to familiarize yourself with some rather difficult chapters in Scripture. There are seven of them, to be exact ... three chapters in Revelation, and four chapters out of Daniel.

As an example, before Day 1, today, is over, you are to read Revelation chapter 1. Part of it was read earlier in our service, but I want you to prayerfully reread it, and then answer a few questions in your adventure journal.

Revelation chapter 1 gives you what I would call an initial feel for the apocalyptic style of writing. For example, here's verses 10 through 16:

▶ *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..."*

▶ *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.*

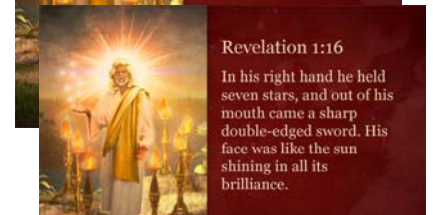
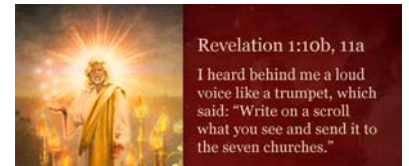
▶ *His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.*

▶ *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.*

▶ You know, from having heard this passage read earlier in our service, that the person being described here is none other than the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. You probably also recall, or already knew, that the lampstands are the seven churches of Asia Minor that our Lord will address one by one in Revelation chapters two and three.

You might not remember, however, what the seven stars represent that Jesus holds in His right hand. If you weren't told in the text, you could conceivably spend all kinds of time trying to figure out something that isn't really that important to



understanding the main thrust of the passage. The stars, according to verse 20, are the angels of the seven churches, but knowing that information isn't crucial in terms of moving this opening narrative along. All this is to say that one has to be careful with apocalyptic writings not to get bogged down with ancillary details, only to miss the big picture.

On Day 2 you're assigned Daniel chapter 10, which sounds very similar to Revelation chapter 1. Daniel writes:

▶ *I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist.*

▶ *His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.*

Is this the same person John meets in Revelation 1? Well, the text, Daniel 10, will tell you. You're to answer that question plus several others in your adventure journal.

If you don't have a journal, you can still get one by *(instructions)*.

▶ At the same time you should pick up a copy of Bob Fraley's book, *The Day That Changed America*. You will start to read that next week. If it leaves you wishing it were longer, you should get a copy of his earlier book *Salt and Light* to read on your own. It's almost 300 pages.

In the course of this week you are to read through seven different chapters of the Bible. Each day the reading will take about five minutes at the most. To answer the journal questions adds maybe another ten minutes. So I'm asking you to give an extra 15 minutes a day for these assignments. If you can't invest 15 minutes a day during these 50 days, the idea of going on an authentic spiritual adventure with me is more or less a pipe dream.

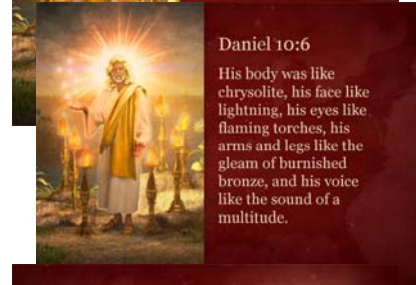
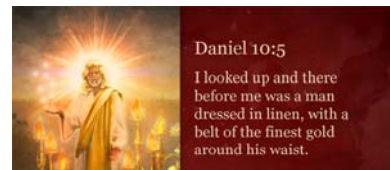
Toward the end of this week you will be reading Daniel chapter 7 and Revelation chapter 13. I'm sure you'll make some connections between those passages, and having looked at them will prepare you for my sermon next week, which I promise will get your attention.

Right now I want to give you some general guidelines for understanding apocalyptic materials. There are ten in all. This listing is on a separate page in your church bulletin and also in your Adventure Journal.

▶ 1. Revelation had historic relevance for first-century Christians.

It was written initially for them, just like Colossians was written for the church in Colossae. So, when exploring the meaning of Revelation for us, we can't just ignore its original purpose. What it said to the early church has to be considered.

▶ 2. The book's purpose was to encourage steadfast faith during persecution.



When I say persecution to an American audience, we hear the word in our heads, but we don't feel it in our guts. Domitian was the Roman ruler during the time this book was penned, and he was second only to Nero in terms of his cruelty to believers. Execution became almost a sport to him, as did various kinds of torture. Specifics could be given, but I choose not to. Again, I'm sure this written word from the risen Christ to His own through John, was a great encouragement in what for them was a desperate time.

▶ 3. Apocalyptic disclosures characteristically came through visions.

That's important. Look at it this way. If I say to you, "Let me tell you about a good book I just finished," you will listen in a much different way than if I say, "I had the strangest dream last night. Would you mind if I shared it?"

Dreams. Visions. These words instantly inform us that we're not talking about a detailed medical lecture on the way the human body functions. Instead, expect angels to be mentioned, and other strange beings to which you are not accustomed.

▶ 4. The overall picture is more important to grasp than the small details.

I touched on this already. But I mention it again because I'm aware of the strong tendency of many to want to tie up all the loose ends. For them, not to do so is like solving the hardest parts of a crossword puzzle or sudoku without completing it. Well, this is a different kind of puzzle – one that will only be completed by God Himself. The end result, however, will be that justice will prevail. Good will triumph over evil, and Jesus will reign as Lord over all.

▶ 5. The different visions don't always unfold in chronological order.

Respected Bible scholar John Stott writes:

"The visions are chronological, but the events represented in the visions need not be so. John saw one vision follow another. But it is not necessary to suppose that the visions reveal a historical sequence. They are successive visions of Christ. They are not visions of successive events. Many of the visions portray the same period, the Christian dispensation which stretches from the first to the second coming of Christ, but each has its different emphasis or insight. The book is not a film showing the continuous unfolding of one story but a series of ... slides depicting the same landscape from different angles." (unquote)

▶ 6. The mysterious imagery roots back into the writings of Daniel.

You will quickly see this as you read the chapters assigned for this week. I have already spoken to this point, so I won't address it further.



▶ 7. Along with the numerous symbols, certain numbers have special meaning.

The writer tells you what some of his symbols represent. For example, the dragon is Satan. Conversely, the lamb is always Jesus.

Here's Revelation 5:6-8:

▶ *Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.*

▶ *He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.*

▶ *He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.*

▶ *And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.*

There's another symbol – golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. Without help would we have gotten that one right? Probably not.

Also, the seven eyes are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. I don't think John means for us to try to picture the seven eyes and where they fit on the lamb's face. Rather, that seven, the number of perfection, represents the perfect vision the lamb has that sees everything that is taking place everywhere and at all times.

▶ 8. The vantage point of the narrative can shift from earthly to heavenly.

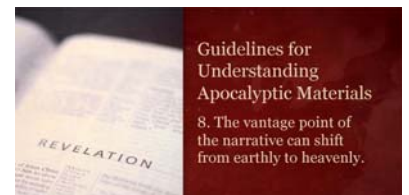
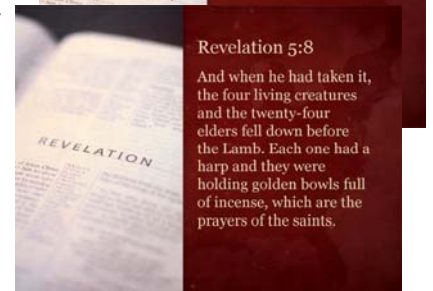
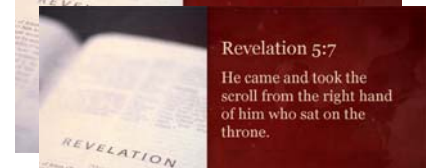
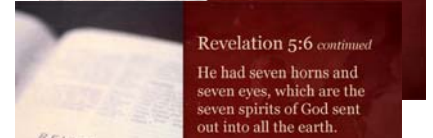
Let me cover this quickly. Sometimes it can be helpful to ask, "Does this passage view what is going on from man's perspective or from God's?"

▶ 9. Cosmic catastrophes characterize a number of Bible passages.

As you read apocalyptic materials you encounter earthquakes, floods, the sun being darkened, the moon turning to blood and the sky rolled up. What's literal and what's figurative? Again, this is visionary language. What's being described is the earth as we know it going through convulsions. Then again, that concept isn't unique to apocalyptic writings.

In this regard, here are the words of Jesus in Luke 21:25-28 ...

▶ *"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea.*



▶ *Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*

▶ *At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.*

▶ *When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

▶ 10. It takes time to get your mind acclimated to this unusual approach.

That's why I said earlier: To understand the breadth of God's Word, we need to explore “these strange apocalyptic writings.” That's what we will be doing as we begin this 50-Day Spiritual Adventure. We will be exploring these passages, getting more familiar with them.

You know what? I think it's remarkable that God used this approach as a part of His written Word. I mean, here's Revelation chapter 1, verse 1:

▶ *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...*

Well, this approach has not only been a comfort to persecuted believers down through the ages, a literature for the oppressed, it has kept Christians absolutely intrigued as to the future. And how does God pull this off, except by giving us a book that in many ways is mysterious, while at the same time making enough sense to engage the best of Bible scholars in studying it with great seriousness. Bottom line, this is a message from the Lord.

▶ You will come next Sunday having read about the beast who comes out of the sea in Revelation 13. That's the key chapter in this Adventure. He has “ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.” He resembles a leopard, but has feet like a bear, and the mouth of a lion.

The dragon, or Satan, gives this beast his power, his throne and his great authority.

The text says that men worship the beast and ask, “Who is like him? Who can make war against him?”

Next week I will talk about who or what this beast might be. Just be aware that with apocalyptic writings you never know what you might discover.

