

Lesson 3

Last week we began looking at the evil earthly villain in the book of Revelation — the first century Roman empire and the first century Roman emperors. We also looked at what the book itself tells us about when it was written, and we saw how Revelation 17:10 places the date of the book during the reign of Vespasian, and likely near the end of his reign in AD 79 based on the condition of the seven churches in Chapters 2 and 3. We also looked at emperor worship and the persecution that the church endured because of its refusal to participate in emperor worship.

The book of Revelation was written to encourage Christians generally in such times of persecution, and, specifically, to encourage the first century Christians being persecuted by Rome. The book of Revelation comes from one of the most heroic ages in church history. It is a call for all Christians to be faithful unto death to win the crown of life.

We also talked last week about how the church's attitude toward Rome changed over time. Early, the Roman peace paved the way for the spread of the gospel, and Paul used his Roman citizenship to his own advantage in spreading the gospel. But that changed as Caesar worship began to take hold, and especially in the provinces where the seven churches of Asia Minor were located.

We see the approaching spread of this persecution in the books of First and Second Peter, likely written in the early sixties, about fifteen years before Revelation was written. First Peter 4:12-17 speaks of a "fiery trial" that was coming and of a "judgment" that was coming to the house of God in which the righteous would "scarcely be saved." Second Peter talks about some who failed in that test — some who were "denying the Lord that bought them" (2 Peter 2:1) and some who having "escaped the pollutions of the world" were becoming "again entangled therein" (2 Peter 2:20). By the time of Revelation, the persecution by Nero had come and gone, but a renewed persecution was about to come under Domitian.

We also see evidence of these daily struggles in the letters to the seven churches. Some were struggling with sexual immorality and food offered to idols — both of which were central features of the trade guilds that were a vital part of economic life. The seven churches had problems with false

teachers that were promoting compromise and assimilation with Rome. They were having troubles with the Jews who were reporting them to the Roman authorities. The spiritual commitment of some in those churches was wavering; some had forsaken their first love; some were spiritually dead despite having a great reputation; others were lukewarm and arrogant. The daily struggle with Rome was taking a toll on the church. The people needed a message from God — and that is what this book provided them.

An exchange of letters has survived from the early second century that gives us a glimpse into the lives of the early Christians living in the Roman empire. The letters were exchanged between Pliny Secundus, the Roman governor of Bithynia, and the Roman Emperor Trajan (who was the second emperor after Domitian). Bithynia was located just north of the cities addressed in Chapters 2 and 3, and the letters were written in AD 111 or 112, about thirty years after Revelation was written. These letters show us that if a Christian was brought before a Roman court on charges of disloyalty, the Romans gave that Christian three options to walk free. He could sacrifice wine and incense to images of Caesar and other Roman gods, he could declare that “Caesar is Lord,” or he could repent of his faith and curse Christ. Refusal meant death.

What could the Christians do when faced with this choice?

- They could surrender their faith in Christ to save their life and their job, but that would mean giving up the crown of life promised in Revelation 2:10 — “be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”
- They could lie about their loyalty to Christ, but Revelation 21:8 tells us that “all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.”
- They could try to change the Roman laws, but Rome was not a democracy and no Roman emperor would ever have accepted a rival “Lord,” and especially when that rival had been executed by Rome as a criminal.
- They could fight the Roman government, but God had commanded them to do the opposite — honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:17). And God had told them that their weapons of warfare were not carnal weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4).
- They could compromise by confessing Caesar as “god” without really meaning it, but that would have been the worst sort of compromise.

“Whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 10:33).

- Or they could die, as Jesus had died. That was the only path for the Christian, and it is a path that we all must take one way or another.

Mark 8:34-38 — *And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

When Christ calls a man, he bids him to come and die. History describes someone who made the right choice a few years later in AD 156. Polycarp was an elder in the church at Smyrna, and his execution by fire was described in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, written shortly after the event. Here is Polycarp's exchange with a Roman magistrate:

But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, “Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ,” Polycarp said, “86 years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

That is the only path for the disciple of Christ — we must take up our own cross and follow him daily. And if we are ever tempted to think that struggle is too much for us to handle, this book of Revelation can help us view our own struggles in perspective with the struggles of those who came before us — those who were told to curse Christ or die! Unlike Polycarp, I certainly have “not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin” (Hebrews 12:4), and I suspect that is also true of others here today.

Why were the Romans worried about the Christians? Why did Rome see the church as such a problem? The exchange of letters shown on the handout for Lesson 2 (available at www.ThyWordIsTruth.com) gives us two clues.

A first clue is provided by Pliny's statement that the false Roman temples had been almost entirely deserted for a long time due to what he called the infection of this wretched cult (referring to Christianity). That statement by Pliny suggests that the church had been very evangelistic even in the midst of the Roman persecution. Pliny's letter also suggests, sadly, that Rome's persecution had been partially effective in getting some people back into the false Roman temples. But that part of the letter tells us that Rome did not like the competition! And that was one reason why Rome persecuted the church.

A second clue for why Rome targeted the church is provided by Pliny's statement that his edict against them was prompted by Trajan's command forbidding assemblies. The Roman Empire (as with all totalitarian states) was suspicious of unlicensed assemblies, and particularly in the provinces, where the empire contained many nationally minded groups that could easily stage a revolt (such as the Jews had done earlier in AD 66).

Pliny's letter also gives us some insights into the church of the early second century. The believers met regularly, early in the morning, to worship Christ "as a divinity." They insisted on a strict code of ethics: to abstain from fraud, theft, and adultery, never to lie, nor to default on an obligation. At the end of the assembly they ate a common meal, and then they adjourned. Pliny called their teaching "an absurd and extravagant superstition." Paul had earlier described this same attitude.

1 Corinthians 1:18 — For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.

Rome's attitude toward the cross remains a common attitude today among those who are perishing. They are like a drowning man who ridicules the life raft with his dying breath.

Caesar or Christ? The book of Revelation is about the Roman state and about the choice between Caesar and Christ. That question — Caesar or Christ — may be the **central theme** of this book. We will see it all throughout the text from beginning to end, and it is a choice that we are still being called upon daily to make in our own generation. It is a theme that is just as relevant for Christians today as it was in the first century!

Keeping this theme in mind will help us understand the symbols in this book. For example, later we will see two cities — the *great city* and the *holy city*.

*Revelation 14:8 — And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, **that great city**, be-*

cause she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.

Revelation 21:2 — *And I John saw **the holy city**, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

Which city was the eternal city — the great city of Caesar or the holy city of Christ? Daniel answered that question six hundred years before Revelation was written.

Daniel 2:44 — *And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.*

Much of Revelation is devoted to describing and contrasting those two cities, while all the time asking God's people to make a choice. "Choose you this day whom ye will serve!" That age-old question rings out loudly all throughout this book of Revelation.

Yes, the message of Revelation was directed originally to those seven churches, but few books of the Bible are more relevant to our own day and age than is the book of Revelation. We can learn valuable lessons for our own lives by studying this message to the suffering first century church. It was a message of comfort and victory for them, and it is a message of comfort and victory for us as well. There has never been and will never be a time on this earth when the church does not need to hear a message of comfort and victory!

And our victory comes through our faithfulness to God despite whatever persecution we may face. That is why we rejoice when we are tested, and that is how the church triumphs over its enemies — by faithfulness to Christ, the head of the church.

And 2 Timothy 3:12 promises us that persecution will always come to the faithful Christian. Why? Paul tells us in that verse: "Yea, and all that will **live godly** in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Notice that the persecution does not come because of what we believe — persecution comes because of how we live.

The Roman persecution is a good example of that. As one commentator noted, "the ordinary pagan did not care two straws whether his neighbour worshipped twenty gods or twenty-one." The ordinary Roman would have been

fine with Christians had they just fit smoothly into Roman society — had they just gone along to get along — but they did not. Instead, they lived godly lives, and they suffered for it. But that suffering in this life is what ensured their crown of life in the next. “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). “And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away” (1 Peter 5:4).

Is Revelation relevant today? This book deals with the persecution of God’s people by the government. Is that subject relevant today? Are Christians facing persecution today? They certainly are outside of the United States. There are still countries today where being a Christian will bring you a death sentence. But what about in this nation — a nation whose motto is “in God we trust”?

Could we face government sponsored persecution here? Not all government opposition to religion is as blatant as the former Soviet Union, which distributed booklets in the 1930’s entitled *Teach Yourself to be Godless*, but our society is becoming increasingly hostile to all things religious.

Those who don’t think that the tide has changed in this country just have not been watching the tides! Candidates for political office once *aligned* themselves with Christian principles to get elected. Now candidates **oppose** those same Christian principles to get elected.

We are in a race to the bottom, and it seems that there may not be a bottom! Who would have predicted even just a few years ago that so-called gay marriage would now be settled law in all fifty states? Remember that it was Bill Clinton himself who signed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, and remember that Obama was *against* gay marriage when he ran for president in 2008. By 2015, that same Obama was lighting the White House up in rainbow colors to *celebrate* that which he had *opposed* in 2008. That’s how quickly things can change.

In Europe, a preacher was recently jailed simply for reading out loud what the Bible has to say about homosexuality. Could that ever happen here?

Today, I am free to post audio and written copies of this lesson on the Internet for all to see. Do you think that will be possible forever? I don’t. I’m not even sure it will be possible ten years from now. How could that change? It could change due to government regulation, but more likely it could change due to *corporate* regulation.

I can guarantee you that Google disagrees with everything I am saying here today — what prevents Google from just deleting such content from their search engine so that no one can find it? They are already doing that with Nazi literature and other such content that we would all agree is evil and abhorrent — but Google thinks that our views on homosexuality are equally evil and abhorrent! Google is already censoring what people in China are able to see.

We tend to see the church and the government in the same way that many in the early church likely saw themselves and Rome. What can we do? The church is so small and the government is so powerful? What can we do?

If we leave this book with only one message, let it be this one: the church is infinitely more important and infinitely more powerful than any earthly government! We make a mistake when we look to the government for our salvation—it has no salvation to give. “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

Perhaps the primary goal of the book of Revelation is for the reader of the book to see the world and to see the church as God sees the world and as God sees the church. We often say that Revelation uses images and symbols to picture for us things that we cannot see — but I think that view of Revelation has it entirely backwards. I think we will see that Revelation uses images and symbols to picture for us things that we *can* see, but things that we are not seeing as we should. God wants us to see things as he sees them, and Revelation will help us do that.

If the book of Revelation and all of its talk about persecution and death sentences do not seem relevant to us, then we should be *thankful* for that. Perhaps our prayer should be that this book **not** become as relevant to us as it was to the Christians of the first century. But we should also recognize the turn of the tide, and we should be prepared for the coming day when that tide may very quickly and very sharply turn against us.

How should we approach Revelation? Many different approaches to this book have been proposed, and we won't have time to look at all of them, or even most of them, but let's look for a moment at the major approaches to the book.

The Dispensational Approach

The dispensational approach is by far the most common view of Revelation today in the denominational world. Where did it start? That's hard to say, but it was popularized by a man named John Nelson Darby, who died in 1882, and later by the Scofield Bible and its list of seven dispensations. Darby's view of

Revelation rested on two principles: First, he sharply separated Israel from the church, believing that God had a different plan for each. And second, he interpreted Revelation with a rigid literalism. From there, he developed the idea that Christians today are living in what he called the “Great Parenthesis,” the period between the crucifixion and the secret rapture to come.

At this secret rapture, millions of Christians will suddenly vanish. (“Warning: In case of Rapture, this car will be driverless!”) They will meet Jesus in the clouds so that they will not have to face the trials that will come upon the earth during a seven year tribulation. For the first three and a half years, political and military power will shift to a European confederacy led by the “Anti-christ,” who will have miraculously survived a serious head wound and then obtain unprecedented power. He will sign a seven year peace treaty in the Middle East, but half way through he will show his true colors and compel everyone to bear the mark 666 on their hands or forehead. He will also bear this mark on his own body.

At this point, the Antichrist will move from Rome to Jerusalem and will rebuild the temple. In that rebuilt temple, he will blaspheme God, break his own peace treaty, and persecute Israel. Chaos breaks out, and natural calamities follow.

As history draws to a close, a great battle takes place — the great battle of Armageddon, which lasts about a year and kills millions of people. Jesus finally appears, winning the battle and tossing the Antichrist into the lake of fire. Jesus then reigns on the earth for a thousand years, but that is not the end.

After the thousand year reign, Satan is released from the bottomless pit to challenge God one final time. He loses and is also cast into that lake of fire. The dead are then resurrected and judged, and God creates a new heaven and a new earth.

If you are thinking that all sounds less like the Bible and more like a Hollywood movie, you are right! It was called *End of Days*, and it starred Arnold Schwarzenegger!

There are many variations of that view, some of which are even more imaginative. Here was Hal Lindsey’s *original* scenario for the end of the world:

- For three and a half years Satan will rule the world through a Jewish Antichrist in Rome.
- The Jews will be allowed to rebuild the temple.

- Many Jews will be converted and a worldwide evangelism program will be undertaken by 144,000 Jewish preachers.
- After three and a half years the Antichrist will set up his own image in the newly rebuilt Jewish temple.
- World War III will break out.
- Egypt will invade Israel.
- Russia will invade the Middle East and trample both Egypt and Israel.
- The Roman dictator will invade Israel.
- Rome will launch a nuclear attack against Russian forces in Israel.
- Two hundred million Chinese troops will march on Palestine to battle the Roman army.
- The battle of Armageddon will begin and lead to worldwide destruction.
- Jesus will return to reign on earth for a thousand years.

If that all seems very dated, we are not the only ones to have noticed. Hal Lindsey recently had to release a new book with an updated schedule of events.

Who is the terrible Antichrist who will do all of this? If the end is as close as these people suggest, then the Antichrist (as they interpret Revelation, which, by the way, never uses the term “Antichrist”) should already be walking around among us somewhere. Who is he? Here are some of the suggestions that have been made by the dispensational crowd:

- Adolf Hitler
- Pope Pius XII
- John Kennedy
- Pope John XXIII
- Henry Kissinger
- Moshe Dayan
- Pope John Paul II
- Anwar Sadat
- Jimmy Carter
- Ronald Reagan

- Pat Robertson
- King Juan Carlos
- Sun Myung Moon
- Mikhail Gorbachev
- Saddam Hussein

And their reasons for these choices? It varies, but they are all very imaginative. Gorbachev, for example, had a clear mark of the beast on his forehead! Moshe Dayan suffered a head wound in the Six Day War. And President Reagan? His full name was Ronald Wilson Reagan — how many letters are in each of those names? Six, making his name 666!

Here is a Bible study tip — when you find yourself putting down your Bible so that you can count the letters in the middle name of a U.S. President, you have veered badly off course!

As we can see, there are many varieties of dispensationalism, but they all share three things in common: a separation between the church and Israel, premillennialism, and the secret rapture.

Time does not permit us to discuss everything that is wrong with the dispensational approach, but here a few major problems.

First, dispensationalism ignores the **time frame** of the book of Revelation. Twice in the first chapter and twice in the closing chapter the book tells us it describes things that were to happen soon. What happens to their “rigid literalism” when it comes to those verses?

Second, dispensationalism ignores the **context** of the book of Revelation. According to them, while Chapters 2-3 relate to the first century, Chapters 4-22 all relate to events that are still future in time. If so, why did the book include Chapters 2-3 — what purpose did they serve? And what about the persecution described in those chapters? How does that fit into the dispensational view? Dispensationalism causes the book to have little significance to its initial readers.

Third, dispensationalism causes great harm by suggesting that the word of God changes as quickly as the headlines. The political scene that caused Lindsey to reach his conclusions in 1974 is quite different in 2018. When asked about his changing views, one local dispensationalist preacher in Dallas said

he wasn't worried because everything he had said (and later retracted) was Biblical! The Bible gives a simple test for identifying a false prophet:

Deuteronomy 18:22 — *When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.*

Dispensational prophets fail that test every time it is applied!

A fourth reason we should reject dispensationalism is that it includes **premillennialism**, which is a false teaching that is directly counter to the gospel of Christ.

What is premillennialism? The word “millennium” refers to the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20:4, which, by the way, uses that time period to describe not a reign **of** Christ but rather a reign **with** Christ.

“Premillennialism” views that thousand year period as a *literal* thousand years and teaches that the return of Christ will occur **prior** to that thousand year period, which explains the “pre” in its name.

“Postmillennialism” also takes the thousand year period literally but teaches (or, more accurately, *taught*) that the return of Christ will occur **after** the millennium (hence the “post” in its name). Under that view, the final coming of Christ would be preceded by a thousand year period of peace. Understandably, postmillennialism did not survive very far into the twentieth century, which by one count saw 123 million deaths in its various wars and genocides, but postmillennialism was popular in the 19th century, even in the church. Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*, for example, was *post-millennial*. The years after 1914 gave premillennialism a tremendous boost, and postmillennialism quickly faded from the scene.

“Amillennialism” takes the thousand year period figuratively, which, as we will discuss when we get to Chapter 20, is (I believe) the correct way to view the thousand year reign with Christ.

What does premillennialism teach? There is a temptation to think that premillennialism is just about the end times, and so perhaps we can all just agree to disagree about it — but that is not the case. The false teaching of premillennialism is directly counter to the gospel of Christ.

For example, premillennialists teach that the Levitical priesthood is going to be restored during the millennium. We know that can't possibly happen. Why? Because Jesus' perfect sacrifice put those people out of business permanently (Hebrews 10:12, 18). The coming of reality in Jesus Christ meant that the shadow of the Levitical system was removed forever. (Premillennialists teach that all of the old shadows will return.)

Also, Jesus could not be a priest if the Levitical system were still functioning. Under the Law of Moses (Numbers 18), only Aaron's sons could be priests. The Law of Moses and the Levitical system cannot be separated—one cannot exist without the other (Hebrews 7:12). In addition, the old and new covenants cannot coexist (Romans 7:1-6). The first covenant was taken away so that the second could be established (Hebrews 10:9-10). Jesus cannot be priest on earth under the Levitical system (Hebrews 8:4).

Premillennialists also teach that bloody sacrifices for sin will be restored during the millennium. But what does the Bible say?

Animal sacrifices were never able to cleanse the soul. They simply shadowed the coming sacrifice that would provide true cleansing. Jesus' sacrifice was all sufficient. His perfect once-for-all sacrifice meant that future sacrifices were unnecessary (Hebrews 10:17-18). Those who have remission of sin have no further need of sacrifice. The premillennial view undermines the sufficiency of Christ's sacrificial atonement. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:21 that "if justification were through the Law, then Christ died to no purpose."

Premillennialists also teach that the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31 is not yet in force and that it will not come into force until the millennium. Walvoord says that the new covenant applies only to Israel and has no relation with this present age. But what does the Bible say?

In Luke 22:20 Jesus says "this cup is the new covenant in my blood." In Hebrews 9:15 we read that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant. In 2 Corinthians 3:5-6 Paul writes that "our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant."

Premillennialists teach that Jesus is not presently ruling over Israel. Walvoord and Lindsey both claim that although Jesus has the right to rule the earth, he is not exercising that authority at this time. For proof they point to the mess that the world is in. But what does the Bible say?

Psalms 29:10 reminds us that God reigned (and *rained!*) at the time of the flood even though the world was in a mess at the time. Paul told the Ephesians in

Ephesians 1:21 that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” in this age. In Revelation 2:26–27, Jesus claims to have already been given the authority over nations that was prophesied in Psalm 2:8–9. In Revelation 1:5, we see that Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Psalm 110 depicts Jesus as sitting at God’s right hand and ruling in the midst of his enemies. This passage is quoted many times in the New Testament as having been already fulfilled. What does Walvoord say? He claims that although Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 110:4 have been fulfilled, the remaining verses in Psalm 110 have not been fulfilled.

We could go on and on, but that should be enough to show two things — first, that premillennialism is false, and two, that premillennialism is dangerous. It belittles the plan of God and the work of Christ, and it creates a difference between Jew and Greek that leads people astray.

That approach, with all of its many variations, is called the dispensational approach, and it is *not* the right approach to the book of Revelation.

Earlier in our introduction we asked the question — does it matter what we believe about Revelation? We know that it does, but that is particularly true when it comes to this dispensational approach. Wild theories about Revelation have consequences, not just in the world to come, but also in this world.

For one recent false prophet, Revelation 9 was the key to everything. He saw in those verses four angels with the faces of men and hair like that of a woman with fire from their mouths and breastplates of fire. Those four angels, he decided, must be the Beatles — with their long hair, their fiery lyrics, and their electric guitars. He saw himself as the angel with the key to the bottomless pit who had been tasked to start the racial war he thought was prophesied in that chapter. Who was that false prophet? Charles Manson.

For another recent false prophet, Revelation 13 and 17 were the key to it all. The beast in those chapters, he said, was the United States, and he would lead his followers in war against that horrible beast. Who was that false prophet? David Koresh.

Peter talks about such people in 2 Peter 2:14 — “having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls.” It is not a coincidence that the book of Revelation is the first place a false teacher turns when he or she wants to beguile unstable souls. It does matter what we believe about this book, and we need to be able to explain it to those who have been deliberately confused about it.

So if dispensationalism is not the way to go, what other choices do we have?

The Historical Approach

The Historical Approach was once so popular that in the denominational world it is sometimes called the standard Protestant interpretation. It remains popular in the church, and is, for example, the approach taken in the *Gospel Advocate* commentary by Hinds.

The historical approach views the book as a forecast in symbols of the history of the church following its establishment in the first century. The Roman Catholic church almost always plays the role of the villain in the historical approach.

There is an immediate surface appeal to that view. Why? Because the Roman Catholic Church and the Roman Empire have much in common. Listen as secular historian Will Durant describes the relation between the two, and especially as he describes the transformation of the Roman empire into the Roman Catholic church:

Christianity . . . became a triumphant Church by inheriting the organizing patterns and genius of Rome. . . . As Judea had given Christianity ethics, and Greece had given it theology, so now Rome gave it organization. . . . It was not merely that the Church took over some religious customs and forms common in pre-Christian Rome — the stole and other vestments of pagan priests, the use of incense and holy water in purifications, the burning of candles and an everlasting light before the altar, the worship of the saints, the architecture of the basilica, the law of Rome as a basis for canon law, the title of Pontifex Maximus for the Supreme Pontiff, and, in the fourth century, the Latin language as the noble and enduring vehicle of Catholic ritual. The Roman gift was above all a vast framework of government, which, as secular authority failed, became the structure of ecclesiastical rule. Soon the bishops, rather than the Roman prefects, would be the source of order and the seat of power in the cities; the metropolitans, or archbishops, would support, if not supplant, the provincial governors; and the synod of bishops would succeed the provincial assembly. The Roman Church followed in the footsteps of the Roman state; it conquered the provinces, beautified the capital, and established discipline and

unity from frontier to frontier. Rome died in giving birth to the Church; the Church matured by inheriting and accepting the responsibilities of Rome.

Of course, when that historian uses the word “church,” he is not referring to the Lord’s church that we read about in the Bible. Instead, he is referring to the monstrosity that grew out of the ashes of Rome and remains with us to this very day.

It’s very interesting to think about the impact that the old Roman empire continues to have to this very day through the Catholic church. Rome was not able to conquer the church through persecution — that is a message of the book of Revelation. But Rome did great damage. How? Not by persecuting the church, but rather by *embracing* the church. It was at that point that the great heresies really took off.

But here is our question — is the historical approach the right approach to understanding the book of Revelation? In my view, no.

First, we should be very careful before we take a first century description that could apply to Rome and lift it out of that context to apply it instead to the Catholic church. Yes, there may be some striking similarities, but the best explanation for those similarities is the one that we just read — the Roman Catholic church modeled itself after the Roman empire, and so we would expect them to have some striking similarities.

Second, a major problem with the historical view is that it operates with the unstated assumption that we are presently living close to the end of the world. Why? Because the historical approach almost always ends its history with our own history. I have never anyone taking the historical view who was operating under the assumption that the history of the church would last 100,000 years — but that is a possibility, and if so, wouldn’t that suggest that our own history should appear around Chapter 5 rather than around Chapter 22?