

What Does That Mean?

By Jim Pinkelman

The End Times, the rapture, the anti-christ, the tribulation, the beasts, the plagues, the 7 seals, the bowl judgments. These words may bring to mind for you a variety of teaching you may have had over the years. You may even experience a little bit of anxiety or excitement when these topics come up in conversation. Many times in church history, pastors, prophets, apostles, and others have tried to determine what all these words or events mean, how they fit together, and when they will all take place. It is unfortunate that so many have been misled and deceived over the centuries by those who thought they had it all figured out. It seems the result is a Church that shies away from not only talking about the end times but, more generally, prophecy as well. The question is why. Maybe we have just gotten tired of it all, and we have chosen to focus on other parts of the Bible which seem easier to understand. This makes sense because discussions about the love of God and His great forgiveness are easier to grasp than trying to grasp how the entire world will be destroyed and a new Jerusalem will come down from heaven. This is unfortunate because, as 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "**All Scripture** is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;" (emphasis mine) and let us not exclude verse 17 "so that every man of God may be adequate, equipped **for every good work.**" (emphasis mine) So it seems, and rightly so, we need to study all of the Bible to be prepared for every good work.

This thought process comes up in a senior Bible class I teach at a local Christian school. Part of the class is a journey into the book of Revelation. In our discussions, I regularly state that I never want to definitely say that the events in Revelation are happening on such and such a date and such and such a place. However, we do talk about

how we know when the season is upon us because Jesus makes some things pretty clear in the Olivet Discourse. As I prepared for the study, it became clear to me rather quickly that there were other passages which we needed to understand before we got to Revelation. For example, there are passages in Daniel, Matthew, and Thessalonians that need to be understood and examined to give context to Revelation. This was beginning to look like a bigger endeavor than I had planned for the class. So we got started, and soon, I had one student ask, "If we can't know for sure what Revelation is all about, then why bother?" I was ready for that question and answered with 2 Timothy 3:16. That did not satisfy the student at all. I continued by explaining verse 17. I added, "There is a time coming when these events will take place, and the world will want to know what is happening. Who is the world going to turn to for answers? Christians! We need to know so we can be the light in their darkness. Essentially, being equipped for every good work and leading people out of darkness seems like good work." That seemed to satisfy the students' questions.

Why do I share this story from my senior Bible class? It's because I believe there are many of us who say, "Why bother?" as well. However, I also believe there is something in all of us that wants to know about the end times. Additionally, I believe that there is something in our spirit which yearns for Christ's return. We grow weary living out our lives here on earth. This is our journey. Even though we have this yearning inside of us, we ignore it for the most part because our lives are too busy to give the topic any attention. However, we must give it our attention; it is part of His Word to us, so there **is** something useful in its study.

I have come to the conclusion that we just have not been given the tools to help us

understand His Word. Don't get me wrong, the good Lord has provided wonderful teachers for us to learn from, but ultimately we need to take the responsibility ourselves to study the Word. An athlete cannot just watch or listen to good athletic training videos and seminars to become great. There comes a time when the athlete needs to get up and practice for himself or herself if he or she wants to be any good at his or her sport. To that end, I would like to give you some tools to help you not only study the passages connected to the end times but will also ultimately help you study the entire Bible.

Let's keep a few things in mind as we start.

1. We will never completely know the mind of God while here on earth. There are many gaps in our understanding which will be discussed later.
2. If the interpretation of the passage you are studying makes sense (based on study) then it is probably the right sense.
3. Since scriptures are God-breathed (by the Holy Spirit), then seek the Holy Spirit in your interpretation. However, be careful not to:
 - a. Over spiritualize
 - b. Over allegorize
 - c. Over symbolize
4. There are so many other resources to draw from to help in your study.
 - a. Bible Gateway or other Bible database
 - b. Blue Letter Bible
 - c. Interpreting the Scriptures (by Conner and Malmin)

So, what are these gaps in our understanding referred to in point number one above? We

have to understand that in our modern culture, many things have been lost, and here are some of those.

1. **The Linguistic Gap.** Language changes so much. Even in our modern culture, a word may mean something different today than it did a year ago. Imagine that happening over a thousand years or even across cultures. I am continually hearing new words the students use, and I have to ask them what it means, not because I am old, it is just a new word.
2. **The Cultural Gap.** No one today has lived in Bible times, and we don't have a time machine to take us back to understand the way culture operated. Think about how women's roles in society have changed since the 1950s. We have archaeology to help us uncover many artifacts about Biblical culture and help confirm things in the Bible, yet these are still artifacts. There is no owner's manual to help us know how things were used.
3. **The Geographical Gap.** The landscape doesn't change that quickly, but our understanding of the land and climates is very much lacking. For example, let's look at Mt. Siani. Do you know how tall it is? How long did it take Moses to climb it? How about the Red Sea? Do you have an understanding of how big that is? The list is endless of these types of things we don't understand.
4. **The Historical Gap.** Kings, queens, governments, politics, who conquered whom, who lived, when

and how did they come into power is the beginning of a long list of history we don't understand. Again, archaeology helps us date these things but by no means gives us a complete picture of what went on. An example I use in class is, why did Jesus have to see so many people before Pilate released him to be crucified? He first went before the Jewish leaders, then Pilate, then Herod, and then back to Pilate. An understanding of who was in charge and the limits of their authority makes this clearer.

I don't present these gaps to discourage you from actually taking up the study of scriptures. It is my hope that understanding where we fall short will take some of the pressure off us to get it right. We won't always get it right, but it is a noble pursuit because, as stated before, all Scripture is God-breathed and useful. So I say, why not make the noble effort and learn something along the way? Here are a few principles of interpretation that may help you on the way. These are all from a book I use in my class. (*Interpreting the Scriptures*) There are many more principles in the book other than what I will discuss here, and I encourage you to get the book and learn the others for yourself.

1. **The Context principle.** This is the idea that we should not take scripture out of its context. An extreme example would be "Jesus wept," and then conclude that Jesus cried all the time. Obviously, this is not true. The idea is that a passage needs to agree with the theme of the section it is in, as well as the book it is in. Further, the interpretation should agree with the themes of the testament and with the themes of the Bible. If there is a

contradiction with any of these themes, then the interpretation is wrong. This is pretty simple but can be misused.

2. **The Comparative Mention principle.** Considering themes of the Bible, we can also find places where there are similar words or, phrases, or concepts used in various parts of the Bible. How Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy is a good study to undertake. There are over 350 passages, including many direct quotes, in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in the New Testament. In my Master's thesis, I compared and contrasted Exodus with Revelation. This seems incredible, but there are many connections to the two books. Other topics which can be compared are principles, events, symbols, persons, places, and parables.
3. **The Symbolic principle.** Many times in the Bible, things are just what they are; however, there are symbolic themes that run through the Bible. Water and wind are a couple of these things, which many times are symbolic of something else. Creatures are symbolic: Jesus is a lion, for example. Plants, actions, names, direction, colors, and numbers (which a whole study can be done here) are many of the things which have symbolic meaning.
4. **The Typical principle.** This can be a bit of a challenge to understand and does require the use of other principles. The best example is the idea that Moses is a type of Jesus. In other words, as you look over the entirety of Moses' life in many ways, there are parallels to Jesus' life. This

makes sense because the entirety of the Old Testament really points to the Messiah of the New Testament.

5. **The Allegorical principle.** An allegory is a bit different than a metaphor or a simile. For that matter, an allegory is really an extended metaphor. We can say that Jesus is the rock as a metaphor, but we can see so many times when the rock is used in the entirety of the scriptures. He is the rock of my salvation, He is the cornerstone, He is a firm foundation, are just a few examples. The stories of Narnia are allegories where Aslan represents Jesus.

6. **The Numerical and Color principle.** While these seem self-explanatory on the surface, and they are, add to them the number of times certain numbers and colors show up across the whole Bible. You begin to see a thread that weaves scripture together and makes it a whole picture. Take the number 40: 40 days of the flood, 40 years in the desert, 40 days Moses, Elijah, and Jesus fasted, Ezekiel laying on his right side for 40 days.

In the book *Interpreting the Scriptures*, there are 24 different principles of interpretation. That is a lot, and I will certainly not cover all of them here. We must be careful not to take each one separately without using the others. While not all the principles will apply to each passage, several of them will. I believe as you begin your study of a passage, a beautiful picture of God's purpose for man will begin to be painted for you. Will it ever be finished? I don't believe so. Just like putting a puzzle together, the whole picture becomes clearer and clearer as time goes by.

In the beginning, I mentioned Revelation, and I would like to take just one passage and show you how each of these principles works through that passage. Let's look at Revelation chapter 4 and see how we can use these principles to help us understand the chapter.

¹ After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." ² At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. ³ And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. ⁴ Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. ⁶ Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. ⁷ The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. ⁸ Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying: " 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

⁹ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him

who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ¹¹ "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

The Context Principle.

Let's first consider the major themes of Revelation itself. First, we know it is a book of prophecy. Prophecy can and does make predictions concerning the future and also makes proclamations about God and His character. This will be important to know when we discuss the allegorical principle. Additionally, Revelation can be seen to be about God's sovereignty, Christ's return, judgment, and hope in eternity. The question we ask ourselves then is, "Does this passage fit into the themes of Revelation?" The answer is, "Yes!" This will become more evident as we use the other principles to reveal these themes. For example, one of the creatures looks like an eagle. Symbolically, an eagle represents God's sovereignty. It is also understood that the major theme of the entire Bible is God's plan to redeem His people to himself. Chapter 4 sets the stage for this plan to unfold for His creation. None of these themes contradict our understanding of chapter 4 so we must be on the right track.

The Comparative principle.

There are many things we can compare in this passage. Here are two that we will explore: In verse 1, we find the word trumpet, and typically, we conclude that this is the voice of God. However, let's just confirm this with a few other passages in scripture. Isaiah 27:13 is a word of prophecy and seems to indicate that the Lord will call all those to Him to worship on the holy mountain. Matthew 24:31 says His angels

will be sent out with a trumpet call in the last days. 1 Thessalonians 4:16 describes the trumpet call of God as well. Additionally, Revelation 1:10 and 11:12 also describe the voice of God as a trumpet. Simply it seems we can conclude a trumpet is something making a call to believers, and more specifically, it is God's voice calling to His people. In verse 5, we find lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. If taken literally, we might conclude that it is about to rain in heaven and pretty seriously, too. However, if we look for other passages in the Bible, we may be able to understand better what these mean. One of the first times we see these words in scripture is in Exodus 19:16, when God's glory descends on Mount Sinai. This is repeated again in Exodus 20:18. Psalms describes this as well in 77:18 and 97:4, both describing His presence. Daniel describes a man with a face like lightning in 10:6, and in Matthew, Jesus describes His own return as lightning. Additionally, Revelation also has other references to lightning and all in reference to God's presence; Revelation 8:5, 11:19, and 16:18. It seems, at the very least, lighting, rumblings, and peals of thunder refer to God's presence in chapter 4. It can also be understood that neither of these understandings contradicts any of the major themes of Revelation or the Bible as a whole. So, we may be correct in our understanding of these things. So far, so good.

The Symbolic Principle.

Let's examine the creatures described in the second half of verse 6 and verse 7. The first thing we need to understand is that John saw these creatures, and they are real, but they also have symbolic meaning in the heavenlies. There are other beliefs that suggest that John had a dream, and what he saw was just that, and nothing about it was real. While that seems reasonable, we will

accept here that John saw real creatures that have symbolic meaning. He saw a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle. Each had eyes all over them and had six wings. Let's just focus on the types of creatures here. Just as a comparison (Comparative Principle), these same creatures are described in Ezekiel 1:5-10. These creatures symbolically represent God's character. The lion represents God's power; a lion is very powerful, the king of the animals. An ox shows God's faithfulness. In the Old Testament, an ox was there to work the fields and be faithful to its owner for its entire life. The man symbolizes God's intelligence. Man is the only intelligent, creative being in all of creation. The eagle reveals God's sovereignty. Even in our own culture, we see the eagle as majestic as it soars in the sky. Interestingly, the gospels also reveal these same creatures as themes in their writing. Matthew shows Christ as a Lion of Judah, Mark shows Christ as a servant, Luke, Christ as the perfect human, and John as the Son of God, exalted and divine. Notice here we showed how these creatures are symbolic of God's character. We also compared them with other scriptures and themes to get a better, clearer understanding of their meaning. Hopefully, you see that while each of these principles can stand alone, they will be used together.

The Typical Principle.

This principle may not just deal with one word or verse, though it could. More likely, it deals with concepts such as persons, offices, institutions, or events. In Revelation chapter 4, we get a good look at the throne room in heaven. Later, we find this room is also in Revelation in the New Jerusalem. So, a type (in this example, the throne room) is a prophetic representation of one thing prefiguring another. Where do we find a detailed description of the temple and all its details? It can be found in Exodus 25-40.

God gives a very detailed description of the tent of meeting all the utensils and clothing and rituals for Israel to follow. This is a prophetic representation of the throne room in heaven, which we find in Revelation chapter 4. For a more in-depth study, we could explore how Christ is also a type of temple and how we, as believers filled with the Holy Spirit, are also types of the temple, all reflecting His glory here on earth. This is a fascinating study, which would be a paper in and of itself. It seems appropriate then to understand why, after addressing the churches, John begins with a description of the throne room in heaven. The temple has been reflected throughout all human history in one way or another and is the focus of all worship, which we see the 24 elders engaging in, and they are our example.

The Allegorical Principle.

Before we begin this principle, we have to decide if the passage under study is truly allegorical in nature. If it is not, then we cannot use this principle for the passage we are studying. Since we have already concluded that Revelation chapter 4 is prophetic and is something that John actually saw, then more than likely, it is not an allegorical passage. The passage has been interpreted as such by some, but the conclusions drawn don't fit with the entirety of Scripture. There are many examples of an allegory, and one such example is John 15:1-10. This passage talks about the vine and the branches. It is an allegory because there are several things that refer to other things, for example, the vine and the branches and marriage. By studying vineyards and marriage, we get a better understanding of our relationship with Christ. It is not possible to find these types of comparisons in Chapter 4 of Revelation based on some of our previous conclusions. This example shows that even though several principles may be used together to

understand a passage, by no means will all of them be used.

The Color/Number Principle.

Following are a list of colors and numbers found in Chapter 4 and their meaning:

Rainbow

Reminder of God's promise to Noah and, more generally, His promises to us

24 Thrones

12 tribes of Israel, 12 Apostles - divine government apostolic fullness

12 x 12 =144

Ultimate creation (this may be a stretch)

White

Purity, clean - symbolizing righteousness

Gold

God's love and protection, blessing, favored

4

Number of earth, creation, world.
(Directions, seasons, elements: wind, water, earth, fire) (Medieval times: yellow bile, black bile, blood, phlegm) Also winds of judgment Jeremiah 49:35-39

Hopefully, these few examples help you to understand the depth at which you can understand scriptures. It is not an easy task, but it can be incredibly rewarding. Consider a couple of verses, one from Jesus and one from Paul. In Matthew 24: 23-25, Jesus warns us there will be false christs and prophets, and they will perform signs and miracles. In Acts 20:29-31, Paul also warns there will be savage wolves that will come from among them, and we should be on

guard against them. Today it seems there is a rise of false teachings rising up even in the Church. What better way to prepare ourselves than to be able to study the Scriptures for ourselves and not rely on others' interpretations of the Word. Please understand not everyone is a false christ, prophet, or teacher. However, we need to be aware, just as Jesus and Paul warn us. I am grateful I sit under a man who takes the Word of God seriously and presents the Truth to the congregation. There are times I do go home and "fact check" what was said with the tools I presented here in this paper, and I encourage you to do the same. Let me leave you with this scripture: Proverbs 27:17 tells us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Wise words when it comes to the study of Scripture.

Credits

Interpreting the Scriptures, Kevin J. Conner and Ken Malmin, ISBN 0-914936-20-4
All scriptures are taken out of the *New International Version*.

Jim Pinkelman, a lifelong northwest Ohio native, currently lives in Haskins with his wife, Suzie. After many years in the woodworking industry, God called him to use his gifts to build up people instead of building things. He now coaches and directs theatre for high school students.