



END TIMES
AND THE
SECRET
OF THE
MAHDI

*Unlocking the Mystery of
Revelation and the Antichrist*

MICHAEL YOUSSEF

Thought-provoking does not begin to describe this treatise. Dr. Youssef's analytical insight into the past, present, and future through the lens of the Bible and Quran brings the world around us into sharp focus.

Congressman Louie Gohmert

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Published by Worthy Books, an imprint of Worthy Publishing Group, a division of Worthy Media, Inc., One Franklin Park, 610 Tower Circle, Suite 210, Franklin, TN 37067.

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eBook available wherever digital books are sold.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Youssef, Michael.

Title: End times and the secret of the Mahdi : unlocking the mystery of Revelation and the Antichrist / by Michael Youssef

Description: Franklin, TN : Worthy Publishing, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015037825 | ISBN 9781617956621 (trade paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Revelation--Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Antichrist. | Antichrist--Islam. | Mahdi.

Classification: LCC BS2825.52 .Y68 2016 | DDC 236/.9--dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015037825>

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Published in association with The Gates Group, Louisville, KY.

ISBN: 978-1-61795-662-1

Cover Design: Smartt Guys Design

Interior Design and Typesetting: Bart Dawson

Printed in the United States of America

16 17 18 19 20 VPI 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Graeme Blaiklock

*in deep gratitude to the Lord for
you and your persistence in
being God's instrument in bringing
Leading The Way to Australia*

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INTRODUCTION

THE CAPSTONE OF THE BIBLE

ATHEIST PHILOSOPHERS and materialist scientists tell us that human life is utterly meaningless. Physicist Stephen Hawking put it this way: “The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderately sized planet, orbiting around a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a hundred billion galaxies.”¹

The book of Revelation assures us that the atheists are wrong. God cares very much about our individual lives—and about the future of planet Earth. Though the world seems to be spinning out of control, Revelation tells us that God is moving human events toward a dramatic and triumphant conclusion.

End Times and the Secret of the Mahdi presents an exciting new approach to the book of Revelation. Most books about Revelation focus almost entirely on the future. In this book, I show how the message of Revelation impacts our lives today—and what our response should be.

As you read these pages, you will find a clear and relevant presentation of the major themes of Revelation, packed with contemporary stories and filled with many surprising insights. This is not just a guidebook to the future but an action plan for living confidently for Christ in these turbulent and uncertain times.

Instead of beginning in Revelation 1 and proceeding chapter by chapter, I have organized this book by the major themes of Revelation: the revelation of Jesus, the reign and fall of the Antichrist, the events of the Great Tribulation, the Battle of Armageddon, what the Bible *really* says about heaven and what Jesus is saying to you and me through Revelation. This unique approach will help you understand and appreciate the book of Revelation in a fresh way.

After reading *End Times and the Secret of the Mahdi*, you will come away with a deeper sense of awe regarding God’s Word. You’ll understand how the prophecies of Revelation merge seamlessly with the other prophecies of the Old and New Testaments. You’ll recognize that many prophecies of Scripture have already been fulfilled with mathematical precision, and you’ll know that the prophecies yet to be fulfilled are every bit as reliable.

Our Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written by more than forty authors in three different languages on three separate continents over a span of sixteen hundred years. The Bible consists of history, drama, poetry, law, and prophecy. Yet the Bible is one Book. God’s Word is amazingly consistent, because our God is a consistent God.

The book of Revelation is the capstone of the entire Bible. It reveals the ultimate fulfillment of prophecies going back to the beginning of Genesis. Through the pages of Revelation, God has opened a big picture window on the future, and in this book you will discover how to apply these insights to your life today.

Now, you may be surprised at some of the amazing (and even disturbing) parallels between the ~~end-times prophecies of the Bible and the end-times prophecies of Islam.~~ You may be alarmed at the seeming connection between the Antichrist of Revelation and the shadowy figure of Islamic prophecy known as the Imam Mahdi.

But I don't want you to be alarmed. God gave us the book of Revelation not to frighten us but to motivate and encourage us. And that is my prayer for you as you read this book: May God fill you with hope, faith, and an eager expectation of the Lord's return. Again and again in Revelation, Jesus assures us, "I am coming soon."

Maranatha! Come, Lord!

—Michael Youssef, PhD

PART 1

THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

A Message from Jesus about Jesus

THE RELEVANT REVELATION

THE FRONT PAGE of the *New York Times* recently carried the headline: “ISIS Transforming into a Functioning State That Uses Terror as Tool.”¹ ISIS is the terror group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (in Arabic, *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-‘Irāq wa-sh-Shām*). When ISIS was formed in 2006, the world took no notice.

But by 2015, the Salafi jihadist group controlled large regions of Iraq and Syria, plus parts of Nigeria, Libya, and Southeast Asia, and ten million people lived under ISIS rule. The group proclaimed itself a global caliphate. Its motto, *Bāqiyah wa-Tatamaddad*, means “Remaining and Expanding,” and it is living up to those words. The *New York Times* explains:

The Islamic State uses terror to force obedience and frighten enemies. It has seized territory, destroyed antiquities, slaughtered minorities, forced women into sexual slavery and turned children into killers. . . . [It] initially functioned solely as a terrorist organization, if one more coldblooded even than Al Qaeda. Then it went on to seize land.

But increasingly, as it holds that territory and builds a capacity to govern, the group is transforming into a functioning state that uses extreme violence—terror—as a tool.²

ISIS has become a functioning totalitarian government. It issues identification cards, makes and enforces laws, and even provides services like garbage collection. The Islamic State regime is brutal but provides stability. Many who live under ISIS control welcome the stability of oppression. One Syrian living under ISIS said, “They are implementing [Allah’s] regulations. The killer is killed. The adulterer is stoned. The thief’s hands are cut [off].”³

Reporter Tim Arango notes that many people think ISIS will collapse under the weight of its own brutality, assuming “that its evil ensures its eventual destruction.” But all signs suggest that ISIS is remaining and expanding—and attracting new recruits. Arango quotes John E. McLaughlin, a former deputy director of the CIA: “These guys could win. . . . Evil isn’t always defeated.”⁴ A few short years ago, hardly anyone in the West had heard of ISIS. Today, the ISIS reign of terror crosses national borders, enforcing its rule with beheadings and mass slaughter, posted on the Internet for the world to see.

Now consider this: It’s easy to imagine the coming world leader known as the Antichrist enforcing his rule in much the same way.

I’m not saying that ISIS is the precursor to the Antichrist. But as we look at the scenes of horror

and atrocity coming out of the Middle East and the mass slaughter of the November 2015 ISIS attack in Paris, it is impossible not to compare those scenes with the Antichrist's reign of terror, as described in Daniel, Revelation, and other prophetic passages of Scripture.

Daniel tells us the Antichrist "will exalt and magnify himself above every god and will say unheard-of things against the God of gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is complete for what has been determined must take place. . . . There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then" (Daniel 11:36; 12:1).

The book of Revelation tells us the Antichrist will be "given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them" (Revelation 13:7). Is ISIS a foretaste of the Antichrist's future reign of terror? I can't answer that. I can only say that it's not hard to imagine the spreading horrors of our own time leading to the long-prophesied regime of the Antichrist.

Think, for a moment, of all the seemingly unsolvable problems of our time—war, terrorism, the spread of nuclear weapons, economic uncertainty, the gap between rich and poor, food shortages and famine, pollution, climate change, severe weather events, plagues, racial and ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts, and on and on. Years ago, the world looked to freedom and democracy for solutions. Today, the world consensus is moving away from freedom as the solution and toward authoritarian control, one-world government, and the concentration of power in a single authority—even a single human leader.

The Bible calls that leader the Antichrist.

UTOPIA—OR HELL ON EARTH?

The movement toward a one-world government began with a few individuals in the twentieth century. Sir John Boyd Orr, a Scottish doctor and politician, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949 for his research into improving global food production. He donated all the prize money to organizations working for a united world government. In his Nobel acceptance speech he said, "We are not physically, politically, and economically one world. . . . The absolute national sovereignty of nations is no longer possible. However difficult it may be to bring it about, some form of world government with agreed international law and means of enforcing the law, is inevitable."⁵

In 1950, James Paul Warburg, chairman of the Council of Foreign Relations, told a subcommittee of the United States Senate, "We shall have world government, whether or not we like it. The question is only whether world government will be achieved by consent or by conquest."⁶

More recently, Lord Christopher Monckton, who was science adviser to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, reported on the goals for the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen:

A world government is going to be created. The word "government" actually appears as the first of three purposes of the new entity. The second purpose is the transfer of wealth from the countries of the West to third world countries. . . . And the third purpose of this new entity, this government, is enforcement. . . . [Delegates discussed] setting up a global government so that they could shut down the West, shut down democracy, and bring freedom to an end worldwide.⁷

Microsoft's billionaire founder Bill Gates said he was disappointed that the Copenhagen

conference failed in its goal to set up a world government. In an interview with *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Germany's Munich-based national daily newspaper, Gates said:

We have global problems and urgent needs. But the way we manage the world isn't super-efficient. Advantages and disadvantages are distributed unfairly. . . . We always have army divisions ready to fight a war. But what about fighting disease? How many doctors do we have? How many planes, tents, scientists? If there were such a thing as a world government, we would be better prepared [to fight disease outbreaks].⁸

Even the Catholic Church is involved in the effort to impose a global government on the world. In 2011, the Vatican cardinals issued a document calling for a "world Authority" (with a capital *A*) to impose controls on the global economy. The Vatican said:

It is the task of today's generation to recognize and consciously to accept these new world dynamics for the achievement of a universal common good. Of course, this transformation will be made at the cost of a gradual, balanced transfer of a part of each nation's powers to a world Authority. . . . This development . . . will not come about without anguish and suffering. . . . Only a spirit of concord that rises above divisions and conflicts will allow humanity to be authentically one family and to conceive of a new world with the creation of a world public Authority at the service of the common good.⁹

What none of these proponents of a one-world government seems to consider, much less have an answer for, is the question: How do we make sure this "world Authority" rules wisely and benevolently? These utopians make an unthinking assumption that their world government will be run by people of goodwill. But history shows that big governments tend to produce either clumsy and inefficient bureaucracies or ruthlessly oppressive dictatorships. A one-world government would be the biggest government the world has ever seen. What guarantees do these one-worlders offer that their utopian vision won't actually produce hell on earth?

In fact, if the utopians get their way, hell on earth is *exactly* what they will achieve. The result is foretold in Revelation 13: "The beast [*the Antichrist*] was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. . . . And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation" (Revelation 13:5, 7). The oppressive reign of the Antichrist is the goal toward which the one-worlders are working—whether they know it or not.

Though current events seem to be leading us straight toward the events described in Revelation, we should avoid treating Revelation as an oracle of future events. Revelation is not a puzzle to be solved but a message to be applied to our daily lives. Though most of Revelation deals with future events, this book is not primarily about the future. It's about the present—*your* present, your life right now.

So let me make a bold statement at the outset: If your life has not been changed in a major way by the time we have finished our study of Revelation, you probably need to examine your life. If you can study Revelation without being impacted in your relationship with God, then (as the apostle Paul said) it's time to examine yourself to see if you are truly in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).

PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Between the bookends of Genesis and Revelation, the Bible spans the history of the human race. Genesis tells the story of humanity's creation and fall. Revelation describes the redemption and eternal destiny of all believers.

In Revelation 1:19, the Lord Jesus describes to John the vast scope of the vision He is about to reveal: "Write, therefore, what you have seen [*the past*], what is now [*the present*] and what will take place later [*the future*]." These three aspects of time—past, present, and future—are important concepts in the Bible.

The Scriptures teach that our salvation is a past, present, and future salvation. We *have been* saved, we *are being* saved, and we *shall be* saved. We *were* changed into new creations when we were saved, we *are being* changed through a process of sanctification, and we *shall be* changed at the resurrection.

The kingdom of God is past, present, and future. Two thousand years in the past, Jesus announced, "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). Yet the kingdom is among us right now, as God reigns in our hearts today. And the kingdom of God is coming in all its majesty in the future, when King Jesus reigns.

We learn and grow from past mistakes. We walk with God in the present. And we look forward to the fulfillment of God's promises for the future. Past, present, and future—God weaves all three dimensions of our lives into a beautiful tapestry for His glory.

In the same way, the events in Revelation have happened in the past, they are happening now, and they will happen with increasing intensity in the future. Take, for example, the Great Tribulation—time of extreme persecution and global calamity in the future.

But the Tribulation is also a past and present event. Christians in the first century were thrown to hungry lions or crucified or dipped in tar and burned alive for the Roman emperor Nero's amusement. The believers in Thessalonica suffered such intense persecution that they feared they had missed the Lord's return—they believed they were in the Great Tribulation. Paul wrote the second chapter of Thessalonians to reassure them that they had not missed the Second Coming.

And what about today? Every year, more than one hundred thousand Christians around the world are martyred for their faith.¹⁰ More Christians have been martyred for Christ in the past hundred years than in the previous nineteen hundred years of Christian history combined.¹¹ And persecution is on the increase.

I have received numerous reports from people who are ministering in Iraq. One Christian worker who cannot be named for the worker's own safety, told me about twelve-year-old Christian boys who were ordered by ISIS to recite the Shahada, the Islamic declaration of faith, or be crucified. The boys refused, saying, "No, we love Jesus!" So ISIS crucified the boys in front of their parents' eyes. For those Christian children and their parents, the Great Tribulation is going on right now.

In February 2015, ISIS kidnapped twenty-one Coptic Christian Egyptians and beheaded them by the seashore in Libya, then posted videos of the executions. The Christian martyrs shouted, "*Ya Rabbi Yasou!* (O my Lord Jesus!)" as the blades came down.¹² Two months later, ISIS beheaded thirty Ethiopian Christians in Libya.¹³ As Revelation 20:4 tells us, "I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God." For those believers, the Great Tribulation is now.

All around the world, Christians are being slaughtered on a daily basis—and most of the atrocities are not reported on American news channels. For these Christians, the Great Tribulation is not some future prophetic event. They wake up every morning and wonder if this is the day the

children will be murdered or they will be tortured for Christ.

Yet the horrors committed against Christians in the past and the present are just a foretaste of the Tribulation we read about in the book of Revelation. Jesus told John, “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later” (Revelation 1:19). The book of Revelation is relevant to the past, to the present, and to the future.

THE APOSTLE WHO RECEIVED THE VISION

The Greek word for *revelation* is *apokálypsis*, which is why the book of Revelation is also known as “The Apocalypse of St. John.” The words *revelation* and *apocalypse* have the same meaning—the unveiling of something that has been hidden.¹⁴ In a popular sense, the word *apocalypse* has come to be synonymous with the end of the world. But the word originally referred to the disclosure of a mystery. The book of Revelation is the unveiling of God’s plan for the future.

Some people refer to this book as “Revelations,” plural, but that is incorrect. The last book of the Bible is one Revelation, singular. It is God’s revelation of the final stages of His program for human history. This book is both timely and timeless—it relates to the times in which we live and deals with universal truths that never become obsolete.

Though the prophetic events in Revelation have not yet been fulfilled, we know that everything written in this book will come to pass. God will keep His Word. How can we be sure? Because God has always kept His Word in the past. Many of the prophecies of the Old Testament have already been fulfilled. For example, the Old Testament predicted that the Messiah would:

- be born of a virgin in Bethlehem (Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2)
- preach the good news to the poor (Isaiah 61:1)
- restore sight to the blind (Isaiah 35:5)
- be wounded for our transgressions (Isaiah 53:5)
- be crucified on a cross (Psalm 22:16)
- be forsaken by the Father (Psalm 22:1)
- be buried (Isaiah 53:8–9)
- rise again (Psalm 16:10)

Every one of these prophecies has come to pass. Yet many Old and New Testament prophecies have not been fulfilled, because they are prophecies of the Lord’s Second Coming. They will come to pass. There’s no maybe about it. The fulfillment of the prophecies of Jesus’ First Coming prove that the biblical prophecies about His Second Coming will also one day be fulfilled.

So who is this man John, to whom God revealed this mystery? Evangelical scholars generally agree that this is none other than John the Apostle, the author of the Gospel of John and the three magnificent epistles that bear his name. This is the disciple who leaned his head on Jesus’ shoulder in the Upper Room (John 13:23). In Revelation, the apostle John was privileged to be caught up into heaven, where he came face-to-face with the glorified and exalted Lord Jesus.

Most evangelical scholars agree that John wrote the book of Revelation in about AD 96. By that time, all the other apostles had suffered a martyr’s death for Christ. John was the only one of the original Twelve still alive. According to tradition, Peter and Andrew had both been crucified. Thomas

was killed by spear in India. James the son of Alpheus was stoned and clubbed to death in Syria. Philip was executed in Africa. Even Paul, who was converted late and who called himself an apostle “untimely born” (1 Corinthians 15:8 ESV), was beheaded in Rome by this time.¹⁵

Now in his early nineties, John was a pastor in the church at Ephesus. If you have been to Ephesus in modern-day Turkey, you may have visited the site of the house where John lived. According to tradition, Mary, the mother of Jesus, also lived in the home of John, in fulfillment of the promise John made to Jesus at the foot of the cross (John 19:26–27).

You may recall that Jesus nicknamed the apostle John and his brother James “Boanerges,” or “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). I do not doubt that when John preached to the believers in Ephesus, he thundered! In his later years, one of the spiritual dangers John thundered against was the great persecution that began when the Roman emperor Domitian ascended to the throne.

Domitian was the brother of Titus, the Roman general who destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 (just as Jesus had prophesied in Matthew 24:2). Titus and Domitian were both sons of Emperor Vespasian. After Vespasian died, Titus became emperor, reigned for two years, then died from a mysterious illness (some historians think Domitian poisoned Titus). After Titus died, his brother Domitian became emperor.

At the beginning of his reign, Emperor Domitian demanded that everyone throughout the Roman Empire worship him as a god. The people were commanded to burn incense before statues of the emperor, and they were to chant to the statues, “Our lord and god.” Domitian was a vain and ruthless tyrant who ordered mass executions as casually as most people would swat a fly. He imposed severe punishments on any who disobeyed him.¹⁶

But John warned his congregation in Ephesus *not* to bow to idols, *not* to burn incense to the emperor’s image, and *not* to yield to government threats. He preached that Jesus alone is worthy of worship and that Jesus alone is the truth in the midst of a culture of lies.

To Emperor Domitian, the apostle was a dangerous subversive who had to be silenced. So he exiled John to Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea. We tend to picture John as being cast ashore on a rocky, barren desert island. In fact, the island of Patmos was a thriving Roman colony with homes, shops, temples, and an army outpost. John was free to move about the island, but he couldn’t leave. As long as Domitian was emperor, John was stuck on Patmos.¹⁷

So John wrote the book of Revelation against the backdrop of intense persecution. The Lord gave John a message to deliver to the seven churches. That message can be summed up in two words: *don’t compromise*.

When Emperor Domitian commanded that incense be burned before his image as an act of worship, many Christians said, “What harm would it do to burn a little incense? I still go to church and pray. If I defy the emperor, I might lose friends, lose business, and lose my job. If burning a little incense keeps the government off my back, what’s the harm?”

But the Lord’s message, delivered through John, is clear: Don’t compromise. Take a stand for the truth. Stop worrying about what other people think. Stop worrying about what the government may do to you. Instead, consider what you will lose eternally if you compromise the truth.

That’s still His message to us today: Don’t compromise. Stand firm for the truth.

THE PURPOSE OF REVELATION

Why did Jesus reveal this vision to John? The answer is twofold—and this is not my opinion; it comes straight from God’s Word. (If anything I state in this book is purely my own opinion, I will clearly state

so.)

The first reason is that Jesus wanted to send specific messages to His churches in Asia Minor. Revelation 2 and 3 contain seven letters to seven churches. Some are letters of condemnation; others are letters of commendation. Jesus calls five of the seven churches to repentance, just as many churches today need to repent. Two of the seven churches needed encouragement in the midst of persecution, just as some churches today need encouragement to persevere against obstacles and opposition. We will examine these seven letters in [chapter 9](#).

The second reason Jesus revealed this vision to John was that He wanted to give an outline of future events—not a precise timetable, but a general synopsis of God’s plan for human history couched in symbolism and imagery. The Bible makes it clear that no one except God the Father knows the day of the Lord’s return, and it is not for us to peer into the times and seasons the Father has set by His own authority (Matthew 24:36; Acts 1:7).

Jesus could return for His church at any moment, even before you finish reading this sentence—He could return in ten thousand years. It really makes no difference whether the Lord comes for you first, or if we die and go to be with Him. A believer must always be spiritually prepared to face the Lord.

There are five crowns promised to believers in the Bible. They are found in 1 Corinthians 9:25; Timothy 4:8; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 1 Peter 5:4; and Revelation 2:10. The Greek word translated “crown” is *stephanos*, and it may refer to the crown of gold worn by kings, the crown of thorns that Jesus wore on the cross, or the laurel wreath worn by the victor in Greek athletic contests.¹⁸ The crown symbolizes victory—indeed, it is a symbol of *spiritual* victory.

Four of the five crowns speak of the everlasting life we will experience in heaven with Jesus. But one of the five crowns is a different kind of crown. In 2 Timothy 4:8, Paul says, “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” This is a crown of righteousness, and it is a reward for those who watch for the Lord’s return.

John believed the Lord was returning soon, possibly within his lifetime. In Revelation 22:10 and 12, John recorded these words of Jesus: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this scroll because the time is near. . . . Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.”

These verses are often quoted by skeptics and critics of the Bible who try to debunk biblical prophecy. They say, “Poor, deluded John! He thought Jesus was coming back soon, yet two thousand years later there’s still no sign of His return!”

People fall into error when they fail to interpret scripture by scripture. All too often, we interpret Scripture by our own biases or by what our favorite Bible teacher said—instead of comparing scripture with scripture. Skeptics who think John was misguided have ignored the words of Peter:

Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.” . . .

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

The objections of scoffers and skeptics have already been answered in God’s Word. Again and again, the Lord Jesus told His followers that His return would be sudden and unexpected, and on those who were waiting for Him would be ready. We must always be ready for the Lord’s return.

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Though Jesus could come at any time, we must acknowledge that the signs of the times seem to be aligning for His return. It’s easy to imagine current trends tipping the world into the events of the Great Tribulation.

For example, those who pay attention to the global debt crisis can easily envision the global economic collapse described in Revelation 18. In the year 2000, such a global economic calamity would not have seemed likely. At that time, the United States federal debt stood at \$5.629 trillion or about 32.5 percent of gross domestic product, and the US Treasury was running surpluses, not deficits.¹⁹

But as I write these words in 2015, the federal debt stands at \$18.2 trillion dollars or 103 percent of gross domestic product.²⁰ Uncontrolled entitlement spending will explode the debt sky-high within the next few years. Unless the government quickly and drastically cuts spending, the US economy will collapse and take the rest of the world down with it. That global economic meltdown may well be prophesied in Revelation 18.

And there are other trend lines leading to the events in Revelation. Every day, there is more bad news from the Middle East—the region where human history began and where it will all end. Just a few years ago, it seemed that the nation of Israel had many friends in the world, and none more reliable than the United States. Today, Israel seems all but isolated—and the United States and other nations of the world are making deals with the devil, like Judas bargaining away the life of Jesus.

From Syria to Iraq to North Africa, barbarians with a seventh-century ideology use twenty-first-century weapons to force the greatest nations on earth to submit. A spirit of delusion is spreading around the world. It’s not hard to imagine how one persuasive world leader might declare himself a savior, deceiving multitudes.

Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 (KJV) that in the church there would be a “falling away (*apostasia*) from the faith before the Day of the Lord. (This is where we get the word *apostasy* meaning defection from the true faith.) We already see a great falling away in the evangelical church today. Many churches that once preached the pure gospel of Jesus Christ have defected. Increasingly, churches treat sin as a virtue and virtue as sin. Apostasy has infected the church.

One of Satan’s most ingenious deceptions is a movement to merge Christianity and Islam into a single religious travesty called Chrislam. For several years, churches in the United States and Canada have been placing the Quran next to the Bible in the pews. Ministers have been preaching the words of Muhammad side by side with the words of Jesus. Just a few years ago, such brazen heresy would have been unthinkable. Today it’s called “tolerance.”

In America today, we see government officials trampling the First Amendment rights of citizens in ways that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. In November 2014, the city of Atlanta punished Kelvin Cochran, one of America’s most decorated firefighters, for writing a book about the Bible’s perspective on sexuality, including homosexuality. For exercising his First Amendment right (freedom of religion, speech, and the press), Cochran was suspended for thirty days without pay.

Though the city found no evidence that he discriminated against homosexual firefighters, the mayor of Atlanta fired him.²¹

Was this a violation of Cochran's constitutional rights? Absolutely. Chief Cochran was forbidden to express his religious views, even though they did not hinder him in performing his professional duties. In the future, we can expect to see the government at all levels punishing Christians for their beliefs.

Denying Christians the right to follow their conscience would have been unthinkable a few years ago. Today, religious liberty is endangered in America as the First Amendment takes a backseat to political correctness.

Current headlines are filled with evidence that society is on a collision course with the book of Revelation. I have not lost hope that these trends can be reversed. I pray night and day, for the sake of my children and grandchildren, that God will bring revival to America and reverse our downward course. But as yet, I see no sign that America is slowing its headlong rush to moral depravity and the persecution of Christians.

If these trends are not reversed, the events in the book of Revelation may come to pass sooner than we expect.

COMPLETING THE REVELATION OF CHRIST

From the looming debt crisis to the rise of militant political Islam, from apostasy within the church to oppression against the church, the world is moving toward the fulfillment of the book of Revelation. Why is all this spiritual and moral upheaval taking place at the same time? The Bible doesn't tell us, but here's my opinion:

I believe Satan is intensifying his actions against Christians because he senses that time is growing short. Satan can read the Bible as well as we can, and he knows that Revelation 20:10 predicts his doom in the lake of fire (NKJV). He is desperate to do as much damage as he can, to cause as much suffering as he can, and to take as many souls with him as he can. That, I believe, is why we are seeing increasing satanic activity in the world today.

Many churches are uncomfortable with the teachings of Revelation. These churches do not mind worshipping a helpless baby in a manger or a helpless body on a cross. Neither the baby Jesus nor the crucified Jesus makes any demands. But the risen and glorified King of kings and Lord of lords, the Righteous Judge of Revelation, demands our all.

Some in the more "progressive" quarters of the church are disturbed by the thought that this same Jesus who hung on the cross will one day sit in judgment over the human race. The books will be opened, and He will judge every human being who ever lived. There will be no excuses to hide behind. Jesus will judge righteously, and all who have not received Him as Savior and Lord will give an accounting to Him as Judge.

In 2 Corinthians 5:16, Paul writes, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." Paul is telling us that we must no longer regard Christ as merely the baby in the manger or the man on the cross. We regard Him as the risen and glorified Lord, the returning King.

Revelation is an indispensable book. If we did not have Revelation, we would have an incomplete picture of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. The Old Testament presents a picture of Jesus, the promised Messiah. The Gospels present a picture of Jesus, the Teacher, the Leader, the Servant, the Crucified and Risen One. In the book of Acts, we see Jesus as the Ascended One. In the epistles of

Paul, John, Peter, and James, we see Jesus as Savior and Lord. But only in the book of Revelation do we see Jesus fully glorified and magnified, King of kings, Lord of lords, and Judge of all.

Near the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 3:15, God promises that a future offspring of Eve will crush the head of the serpent, who is Satan. The fulfillment of that promise does not take place until almost the end of the book of Revelation, when Jesus orders that Satan be cast into the lake of fire. If we did not have the book of Revelation, we would have the promise of Satan's destruction but not the fulfillment.

Can a person have a saving faith without ever reading the book of Revelation? Of course. You can be a genuine Christian and know that Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead, and is coming again—and you can repent of your sins and commit yourself to His lordship. You would be saved without reading Revelation, but your knowledge would be incomplete.

The book of Revelation completes the gospel of salvation. It reveals the past, the present, and the future. In Revelation, we see Jesus no longer hanging on a cross but glorified, robed in white and gold, with hair as white as wool, with eyes that blaze with fire, with a voice like the sound of rushing waters. We see Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 21:6). We see Jesus as the One who holds the keys of death and Hades (Revelation 1:18).

People in Old Testament times knew nothing about Jesus except what they read in the prophecies. Those prophecies mystified the rabbis in Old Testament times. Why? Because those prophecies seemed to present two incompatible portraits of the coming Messiah. Some prophecies predicted a triumphant King; others depicted a suffering and rejected Servant. How could there be *two* Messiahs?

We find the perfect example of these seemingly contradictory prophecies in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. In one passage, the prophet foretells the birth of the triumphant King:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever. (Isaiah 9:6–7)

That's great news! But later in the same book, the same prophet describes the same Messiah in very different terms:

Surely he took up our pain

and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,

stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,

and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,

each of us has turned to our own way;

and the LORD has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,

yet he did not open his mouth;

he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,

and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,

so he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:4–7)

In one passage, the Messiah will suffer and die. In the other, the Messiah will rule in power and bring peace. How could these two passages in Isaiah be describing the same Messiah?

With twenty centuries of hindsight, we can understand why this is so. The “Suffering Servant” passages refer to Jesus at His first appearing, two thousand years ago. The “Prince of Peace” passages refer to the risen and glorified Lord Jesus. This is clear today, but scholars in Old Testament times didn’t know this, and they debated these matters through the centuries.

The book of Revelation ends the debate. The mystery is revealed. The questions are answered. In Revelation, we see Jesus the Ruling King superimposed over Jesus the Suffering Servant—and it is clear that they are one and the same. He wears a crown of heaven and a crown of thorns. I am grateful for the book of Revelation because it unlocks a mystery that baffled generations of rabbis. This book completes the revelation of Jesus the Messiah.

So turn the page with me. The apostle John is about to introduce us to Jesus the Lord—and you will see Him in a fresh, new, compelling way. In the Gospels, we meet Jesus as a preacher and teacher, a miracle worker, the Great Physician, the friend of sinners, the Good Shepherd, and the crucified and risen Christ.

Now, meet the Jesus of Revelation, the Lord of the Beginning and the End.

LORD OF THE BEGINNING AND THE END

KING CANUTE was a Danish-born ruler during the eleventh century. His empire stretched from England to Norway. Though born a pagan, he later became a devout Christian. He built many churches in England and Denmark, and he sent missionaries to evangelize the Scandinavian lands.

Because of the king's success in battle, his people practically worshipped him. Their praise made him uncomfortable. One day, King Canute decided he'd had enough flattery, so he ordered his servants to take his throne to the seashore. His servants followed his orders and set his throne on the beach. Then Canute sat on the throne and waited for the tide to come in.

All around King Canute, his attendants and courtiers watched and waited and wondered. Had the king lost his mind? The tide rose. The waves lapped at the king's feet. Canute raised his hands and commanded the waters to depart. Still the tide rose, and the waters came up to the king's waist, then his chest, and finally his neck.

Finally, the king's attendants, fearing he would drown, waded in and pulled the king and his throne back to the shore.

Then King Canute scanned the faces of those who had rescued him. "Let all men know," he said, "how empty and worthless is the power of kings. For there is none worthy of the name, but He who of heaven, earth, and sea obey."¹

Returning to his castle, Canute went to the crucifix on the wall and hung his own crown on the brow of the crucified Christ. The crown remained there until the king's death—a reminder of the glory that belongs to Christ alone.

The message of Revelation is that Jesus is the King of Glory, worthy of honor and praise—the Alpha and Omega, the Lord of the Beginning and the End. The Son of God was present at the moment of creation in Genesis 1:1, and He will reign over the new heaven and the new earth at the end of Revelation.

Jesus gave John this vision to remind us that glory, honor, majesty, and praise belong to Jesus Christ alone.

THE BOOK WITH A BLESSING

While exiled on Patmos, John had a vision of the Lord Jesus. When I say "vision," I don't mean that Revelation is all a dream. John had a real and personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, and the things he saw and heard were not symbolic impressions from his unconscious mind. He saw reality. He witnessed real events. He truly heard the voice of the Lord.

Then John took pen and parchment and wrote down everything he had seen and heard, so that it would be preserved through the ages. John opens this book with a prologue, Revelation 1:1–3, and he opens his prologue with an intriguing statement: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave

Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place” (NKJV).

What does John mean by the phrase, “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”? Is John saying that the book of Revelation came *from* Jesus—or is he saying that the book of Revelation reveals *who* Jesus is? Ultimately, it means both. John received this revelation directly from Jesus, and Jesus is the focal point of the book.

Of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, Revelation is the only book that promises blessing to those who read and study it. In fact, this blessing appears twice in Revelation, once near the beginning, and once near the end, like bookends:

Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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. (1:3)

“Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.” (22:7)

In Revelation 1:4, the Lord Jesus sends a blessing of “grace and peace” to the churches. There are at least fourteen places where New Testament writers use the phrase “grace and peace” as a greeting. We find it in the epistles of Paul and Peter, and in Revelation—but we never see the order reversed. It’s always “grace and peace,” never “peace and grace.” Why do grace and peace always appear in that order?

The order of these two words is important. No one can ever have the peace of God before receiving the grace of God. It is always grace first, then peace. Only the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ can give you peace through times of trouble and discouragement.

John goes on to describe Jesus as “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5). He is the faithful witness because He came from heaven to reveal God the Father, so His testimony is true. As Jesus told Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

And Jesus is the firstborn from the dead because He is the first to experience resurrection in His glorified body. On three occasions, Jesus miraculously raised people from the dead—the widow’s son in the town of Nain (Luke 7), the daughter of Jairus (Luke 8), and the Lord’s friend Lazarus (John 11). Yet not one of these people was raised in an incorruptible body like the resurrected Lord. Each of them had to pass through death again.

Jesus is the first to rise from the dead, never to die again. He is the firstborn—but not the last. All who put their trust in Him, even if they die and their bodies crumble to dust, will one day live again in a glorified body like His. We will not be disembodied spirits floating among the clouds. In fact, our resurrection bodies will be so real and perfect that the bodies we inhabit now will seem insubstantial by contrast.

The Lord Jesus is also the Ruler of the kings of the earth. Think of all the powerful rulers and tyrants who have bossed empires. Every one of them, without exception, will bow their knee to Jesus. Willingly or not, they will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

John goes on to say, “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” (Revelation 1:5–6). Most of us have sung hymns about the blood of Jesus. A

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