

Chapter 1

Foundation

*The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to **show to His bond-servants**, the things which must soon take place... And he said to me, "These words are faithful and true"; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel **to show to His bond-servants** the things which must soon take place.* -Rev. 1:1; 22:6, NASB

The Book of Revelation begins and ends with the purpose of God in announcing these prophetic events: to show His bondservants what must soon take place. Our focus can become so engrossed in the events themselves that we fail to notice to whom this is addressed—the *bondservants of Jesus*. But who, exactly, are the bondservants? Isn't 'bondservant' just another name for a Christian? That would depend on our definition of 'Christian.' The Word of God has definite things to teach us about the life of an authentic follower of Christ, quite different from the popular definition today.

Correctly interpreting prophecy is bound together with the concept of bondservanthood. Living the life of a bondservant *in sincerity* forms the foundation of our relationship with God and the body of Christ. Without this foundation, our interpretation of prophecy is an academic exercise, resulting only in educated guesses of what makes sense to our finite minds. Understanding does not come from years in seminary school learning scriptural facts, history, and legitimate methods of interpretation, though this certainly helps. Any subject outside the Bible is mastered in this fashion, resulting in diverse interpretations of the facts presented. While approaching the Bible in this manner has some efficacy, we must acknowledge the Bible is no ordinary book. The Word of God is living and breathing, filled with the power and wisdom of God not only to change lives, but also to enable us to know and be known by the God of the universe.

Through our relationship with God—our foundation—we begin to understand His heart and plans for the hour in which we live, as well as foster love and unity in the community of believers. In this section, we will look at the biblical definition of the bondservant, laying a grid through which we can understand the commands of Christ, the instructions of the apostles, and the prophetic revelation given in the Word.

Bondservanthood: The Foundation for Understanding Prophecy

Understanding Scripture, particularly prophecy, evokes different responses in different people. The scope of responses ranges from passionate and fascinated to

bewildered or even indifferent. For some, the responses are a mixture of these with a bit of frustration thrown in if attempts have been made to accomplish this without help. Be encouraged. The very fact that you care and want to understand puts you in a great place to receive understanding—if you will persevere in your quest. This book was written for all but the indifferent.

The book of Revelation in particular has engendered more thought-provoking and controversial debate than any other book in the Bible. Mysterious and cryptic, the imagery has inspired widely varied interpretations, from the deeply philosophical and scholarly to the sophomoric and fantastically convoluted. Yet for all our interpreting and defining, it is still apparent we have not yet fully grasped the content of its message with any sort of consistency across the body of believers. After two thousand years, we must pause and ask ourselves, ‘Why?’ Through reflection on available Scripture, the answer seems to be two-fold. It involves both the *right timing* for the message to unfold, and the *readiness* of the believer (bondservant) to receive the message.

Timing

Timing is designated by God, an example of which can be seen in the life of Daniel. Though Jeremiah had written much earlier regarding the length of the Babylonian captivity, Daniel grasped the meaning of Jeremiah’s message when the time was nearly upon them for the return to the land. This realization drove Daniel to prayer and fasting so the Word of God would be fulfilled (see Dan. 9).

Jeremiah wrote something else of use to us for our current study. He stated the prophetic events of the Bible would be understood ‘perfectly’ in the latter days. Taking our cue from Daniel, those alive at the close of the age should also respond to Jeremiah’s words with prayer and fasting to see God’s Word fulfilled.

*The anger of the LORD will not turn back until He has executed... the thoughts of His heart. **In the latter days you will understand it perfectly.*** -Jer. 23:20, NKJV

In Habakkuk, we also discover that the revelation he received was for an ‘appointed time’ (Hab. 2:2-3). The Lord chooses the appointed time for every event (Ecc. 3:1; Ps. 75:2). Even Jesus had an appointed time to be revealed.

And [now] in His own appointed time He has made manifest (made known) His Word and revealed it. -Titus 1:3a, AMP

Before He arrived, the Scriptures were carefully studied so the Messiah would be recognized. But what does the Word record of the actual response of the majority? Most had not interpreted the prophecies accurately in the timing of God and wound up rejecting their Savior. As a result, they missed the day of their visitation because their expectation of the Messiah’s ministry and purpose had been clouded by their own rigid interpretation. Even the disciples, though they spent much time with Jesus personally,

did not fully understand His ministry and message until after Jesus ascended and the Holy Spirit was given.

Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." -John 13:7, ESV

From these passages, it becomes apparent that God chooses the specific timing to bring forth understanding as well as the specific individuals to whom understanding is given. Regarding the matters concerning the end of the age, He has promised in His Word we will understand perfectly 'in the latter days.'

Daniel assumed a posture of prayer, fasting, and mourning before God when he discovered the captivity of Judah was nearly completed. He understood the time was at hand. Daniel's heart was so closely knit with God's that the matters and purposes of God meant more to Daniel than anything else. Likewise, we must have God's will and purposes rooted in our hearts so we can show the wisdom Daniel demonstrated by interceding in a timely fashion. Intercession rooted in understanding of God's Word and timing will bear fruit for God's kingdom.

While John the Baptist's message of repentance and returning to God is appropriate for any time, the greatest impact and understanding of that message could only take place in the context of the Messiah's first advent and in anticipation of the new covenant's establishment.¹ Just as John burned with the message entrusted to him to prepare the way for Jesus, there is a time appointed for those entrusted with the message that will prepare the hearts of the people before Jesus' return. This message will necessarily include clarity on the prophesied events prior to His second coming, and the Word itself verifies they will understand this *perfectly*.

Peter also spoke of the timing of prophetic revelation, disclosing even the prophets themselves did not comprehend all they wrote because it was intended for *us*, in this age, to understand. Even though they earnestly sought revelation, God had determined their prophecies would not be made plain until the days of Jesus' ministry (1 Pet. 1:12). Obedience to God's will does not always come with complete understanding.

Further proof the prophets of old did not always understand the prophecies given to them can be found in Daniel. Though God highly esteemed and loved Daniel, the timing for granting understanding of the vision had been determined for the future. Even though Daniel asked for the explanation, God told him understanding would not be revealed until the 'time of the end.'

*I heard, but I did not understand... "O my lord, what shall be the outcome of these things?" He said, "Go your way, Daniel, for **the words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end**. Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined... And none of the wicked shall understand, **but those who are wise shall understand**."* -Dan. 12:8-10, ESV

Even the disciples did not have full revelation. In response to the disciples' questions about the restoration of the kingdom, Jesus replied it was not given *to them* to

understand God's appointed timing regarding those events. Their allotted portion—their *charge*—was to spread the message of the kingdom as far and wide and as quickly as possible by the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:6-8).

The appointed time for everything has been determined by God on His own authority. Jesus came at His appointed time, heralded by John the Baptist. The disciples were appointed to spread the gospel until it filled the earth ('like yeast working its way through a batch of dough,' Matt. 13:33). According to Jeremiah and Daniel, those at the end of the age are appointed to understand 'perfectly' the events and timing of God before the second coming of Jesus.

The Pioneers

Desiring to grasp the contents of the book of Revelation, those who have gone before us have put forth much effort in laying the groundwork for what we understand today. Born out of season, they are like the proverbial salmon swimming upstream to the spawning ground, planting seed for future generations. Their passion, zeal, and tenacity in searching out the contents of Revelation are evidence of the kingly spirit spoken of in Proverbs:

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter. -Pr. 25:2, NKJV

Despite the grand efforts of these dedicated believers, we still need clarity and the 'aha' feeling that comes when Holy Spirit inspired exposition takes place in conjunction with the timing of God. Despite being out of season for understanding perfectly, those who have 'seized the day' and brought their understanding forward have given us much to consider. On the other hand, some of their more speculative conclusions have contributed a degree of confusion! These individuals have been described in the book of Daniel:

[M]any shall run to and fro and search anxiously [through the Book], and knowledge [of God's purposes as revealed by His prophets] shall be increased and become great. -Dan. 12:4, AMP

The first key to acquire understanding of biblical prophecy is to hold opinions as loosely as possible until the appointed time. If we cling to any model, no matter how close it might be to the truth, we may get hung up on a detail that is out of place and then wind up missing the day of our visitation, just as the Pharisees did.

Maturity and Heart Posture

The proper timing of a message is understandable, but what does being a bondservant have to do with understanding prophecy? The answer involves the readiness and maturity of believers to grasp or carry the message:

I have still many things to say to you, but you are not able to bear them or to take them upon you or to grasp them now. But when He, the Spirit of Truth (the

Truth-giving Spirit) comes, He will guide you into all the Truth (the whole, full Truth)... and He will announce and declare to you the things that are to come [that will happen in the future]. -John 16:12-13, AMP

Jesus explained this to His disciples, who later described themselves as Jesus' bondservants. In the prologue to Revelation, Jesus proclaimed that His message is intended for His bondservants. It is important to note at the time the book of Revelation was written (c. A.D. 95-96, though a minority of scholars disagree, contending for A.D. 68-69), most of the original disciples/apostles were no longer living. Therefore we cannot conclude this book was written for the original bondservants, the disciples.

[Note: Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers (c. 150-202), gives the earliest external testimony in existence, verifying that the book of Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian (81-96).^{2]}

The word *bondservant* provides the second key to understanding biblical prophecy concerning the end of the age. Contrary to popular belief, the book of Revelation was not written for anyone and everyone to understand, just as understanding of the parables hadn't been given to everyone who heard them (see also Luke 8:10).

And the disciples... said to Him, "Why do You speak to them in parables?" Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." -Matt. 13:10-11, NASB

The introductory passage to Revelation makes clear the *bondservants* of Jesus Christ are the targeted audience. Only after reading many different English versions of the book of Revelation dozens of times did this stand out. The word rendered in the opening passage as 'bond-servants' in the NASB is the more precise translation of the Greek word *doulos*. This leads to the obvious questions:

- ◆ What is a bondservant?
- ◆ Who are the bondservants?
- ◆ How are bondservants different?

This book will explore the answers to these questions and more, starting in Chapter 2 with a broad discussion of the biblical definition of a bondservant and its complementary application to the New Testament believer. In the context of biblical prophecy, particularly as it pertains to understanding the book of Revelation, it is important we first grasp the concept of the bondservant, to whom the book of Revelation is addressed.

Progressing from there, we will take a more detailed look at who the bondservants are and the general qualities of a bondservant's life. The process of voluntarily becoming a bondservant is initiated in love and results in bearing much fruit, including the strength needed to stand firm in the day of calamity. It is nothing less than the total transformation of the soul and spirit to be conformed to Christ. When Jesus returns, this will include the total transformation of our physical bodies as well—the adoption as

sons—enabling us to fulfill His call to rule and reign with Him. There isn't a better deal in the whole universe.

It is my hope you will find awakened in your spirit a renewed passion to know God. When we truly follow Christ, we experience the power of His resurrection as He takes us from a dead existence to one of a transformed mind and heart. This includes participating in the fellowship of His suffering by hearing and obeying as Jesus did—without reservation. This means dying to our own desires, will, and lives to embrace God's purposes instead. Then the apostle's words will be true in our lives as well: 'I am crucified with Christ.' By embracing the lifestyle of the bondservant, we will be in a position to hear from God with clarity and know perfectly what will soon take place.

The goal? To possess the mind of Christ, walk in the discernment of the Spirit, and know the timing and movement of the Father's heart. Add to this the hope that in the day we meet Jesus, we will hear Him say, 'Well done, thou good and faithful bondservant!'

First Things First

How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? -Luke 12:56b, NIV

Before we can understand the last days, or more precisely the close of this age, it cannot be emphasized enough that we must pay attention to and struggle with all our strength to enter into the salvation we are offered. This involves:

- ◆ knowing our God,
- ◆ understanding and carrying out what is expected of us,
- ◆ recognizing the tactics of our enemy,
- ◆ cooperating as the Holy Spirit transforms our character, and
- ◆ receiving with submission the discernment and illumination of the Holy Spirit.

These are the foundational criteria for understanding the prophetic word. The beauty of the way God transforms us allows for increasing our understanding *along the way* while the foundation is being laid. In other words, He doesn't wait until we've arrived at our destination of maturity before He begins to share with us the secrets of His kingdom. What a privilege to be called into God's family and to have Him as our Father.

Laying a foundation can be swift if all we are building is a chicken coop. But if a large, multistory building is being constructed, the foundation and footings must go down deeply to support the structure. Foundational work is below ground and not impressive to the uninstructed eye. In fact, very few even notice the work taking place below the surface, let alone are impressed by it. But it is this very foundation that allows the building to stand and not collapse when storms, wind, and quakes come against it. Does this sound familiar? The Word admonishes us to be wise builders with solid foundations (Matt. 7:24-25). The edifice seen above ground will be built in its time.

Painting a room illustrates the same principle. If done properly, preparing the walls and taping the woodwork can easily consume seventy percent of the time for the project. The actual act of painting is the least frustrating yet most praised part of the job, despite taking the least amount of time and effort. Laying a proper and sound foundation is critical in the believer's walk so we do not falter when it counts the most.

Cultivating Good Fruit

A proper foundation provides fertile ground for bearing good fruit. The principle given in Levitical law regarding fruit trees furnishes an object lesson for believers to follow. After planting a fruit tree, the Israelites were to regard its fruit as forbidden the first three years. In the fourth year, the fruit was considered holy and given only to the Lord. The fruit could not be eaten until the fifth year. The reason for these instructions? 'So that your harvest would be increased' (Lev. 19:23-25).

Fruit production in the early stages of a tree's life can stunt its growth. This is due to an immature root system in combination with the inability of the soil to provide nutrients for both producing fruit and bringing the needed growth for the tree itself. Until the tree is of mature size to bear fruit, the flowers that appear on the tree should be pinched off as they emerge. This will encourage the development of a healthy root system and above ground growth that can support a much larger yield of fruit. The tree should not be allowed to produce fruit until then, typically requiring three or four years' growth to reach this desirable point of maturity, the same principle stated in the Levitical passage. The tree continues to grow after it begins to bear fruit, requiring pruning to maintain its health and optimum fruit-bearing capability.

The parallel, of course, is that many Christians are so anxious to produce fruit for the kingdom (or at least want to appear this way) that they have gotten very busy in their effort to accomplish this. The desire to do so is admirable in some cases, but this kind of 'zeal without knowledge' will lead to the ruination of their soul through pride, ambition to be approved by man, envy when they are not the one out in front, rejection when their efforts are not noticed, promulgation of error through misinterpretation or improper handling of the Word, or worse.

The sad part for many is that excessive 'busyness' for the kingdom has stunted personal spiritual growth. These have very little real depth in intimacy with and understanding of the Word by the standard of God. To their peril, they have only a shallow root system that is in very real danger of causing them to wither in a time of persecution. Consequently, they bear sparse fruit of very little value, far less than expected for the effort put forth. They feel as though they are 'spinning their wheels' and not getting enough attention or making enough progress in ministry.

While the waiting can be frustrating, allowing the Lord to bring forth beneficial and lasting fruit requires the input of time and effort into the believer's spiritual growth and maturity. The dangers of not following this principle are not fabricated but found in the

Word. Paul advised Timothy to select elders who were not new believers because young believers are more prone to pride. A posture of pride will cause us to fall (1 Tim. 3:6). Until a firm root system is established, no stability will be found:

*The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and **immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.** -Matt. 13:20-21, NASB*

For this reason, we must encourage and exhort each other to persevere in establishing our own foundation and history in God. This process takes time—years—depending on what has been ordained for us to accomplish and how much time and energy we devote to its pursuit. Paul may seem like an exception because the Word tells us he began preaching immediately. But by his own admission, Paul was a learned Pharisee when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He already had extensive knowledge of the Scriptures. However, only after this experience did he have the proper perspective to interpret accurately the Scriptures he previously learned so well. Even the disciples needed more than three years at Jesus' side, night and day, to prepare them for their callings.

Does this mean we do nothing but sit around and read the Word? Hardly. We put faith and compassion to work immediately, helping those in need as God places them in our path. We show hospitality. We learn to serve in our families and the church (in that order) in the most mundane or menial tasks. We train our children to live by God's standards. We resolve to hold our resources with an open hand for those truly in need. We determine to govern our time in prayer and Bible study. We discipline ourselves to control our appetites through grace for fasting and to shun those practices which will shipwreck our faith. Preparing ourselves God's way and in His timing will bring thirty-, sixty-, and hundred-fold increases.

We gain insight as we endure trials and testing. The Holy Spirit uses these tools to teach us if we will focus on the lesson rather than: 1.) our feelings toward the test, or 2.) our self-condemnation for having missed the mark. The patience and love of God are experienced because He never gives up on us, even when we give up on ourselves. If we will only turn to Him, He is faithful to pick us up and set us back on the right path.

Sharing Our Part in the Timing of God

Many have been given something to share with the body of Christ, but disdain their part as somehow insignificant because they haven't grasped the entirety of the message, or feel inadequate because they don't have credentials. If this is the case, consider that the disciples didn't have credentials either. Jesus, the Word, was their teacher. All who come to Christ, turning from sin and the ways of the world, receive the *same* Holy Spirit who instructed the disciples. We come to know God by the work of the Holy Spirit and

by washing our minds with the Word. Nowhere do we read that the knowledge of God has been reserved only for those who have been to seminary or Bible College.

Now is the time for God's people to establish themselves in the Word so they can stand in the days to come. The foundation must be laid *now* so we can have discernment when it matters most, speaking truth and wisdom when the Lord prompts. Focusing our lives *now* on what matters most will put us in good position when dire circumstances come our way.

Questions will remain throughout our lives that require further study and prayer. Keep in mind that each of us sees only in part (1 Cor. 13:12). Knowing this limitation, please prayerfully continue this book, always seeking the witness of the Holy Spirit and the proof of the Word. We grow in knowledge as each member does his part and shares with the others, continually gaining understanding as we spend our energies plumbing the depths and riches of the Word. By this continued effort, the body of Christ will mature in the unity of faith and knowledge in God as each faithfully executes his charge (Eph. 4:13).

Closing Thoughts

If we endeavor to understand prophecy, our life must reflect a bondservant's heart to serve in spirit and in truth. Whether we see perfectly, as Jeremiah prophesied, or not is dependent on our own readiness as well as the timing and purpose of God. Ambition, presumption, and arrogance would claim to have the whole matter sorted out ahead of time. This fosters a contentious or adversarial spirit among those who seek to put their views in the forefront as the only tenable position. We must move in grace, preferring others to ourselves, testing every spirit and searching the Scriptures daily if we are to understand what the Lord desires to impart in this hour. Having tested the words of others, we hold onto the good.

Paul taught the Ephesians that the church is built up as everyone does their part. The goal of what we have been given in the grace of God is to equip believers for ministry, promoting unity in faith and knowledge so we are no longer spiritual babes. Only by striving for the maturity available in Christ will the church stand firm against deception. The gifts of the Spirit are effective in edifying the body only if they are performed in love with the goal of unity (Eph. 4:7,12-16). To ignore doing our part because it seems worthless in our eyes equals negligence, and will receive rebuke from God.

We've all experienced tremendous growth and have been edified countless times by the works of others. We consider pastors, authors, and teachers our spiritual fathers and mentors, some having gone on to be with the Lord before we were born. It is my prayer this book will help equip the body of Christ to lay the foundation needed for walking in unity, as well as for understanding the last hour before Jesus returns. I also hope those who take the time to complete this book will be provoked to go deeper in their

relationship with God, searching the Word and drinking deeply on their own. Our hearts will one day kneel in agreement with the Holy Spirit and say, 'Amen. Come Lord Jesus.'

*Who then is that **faithful steward**, the wise man whom his master will set over those in his household service **to supply them their allowance of food at the appointed time**? Blessed (happy and to be envied) is that servant whom his master finds so doing when he arrives. -Luke 12:42-43, AMP*