

The structure of the book

• *For preachers – best explained as he goes along rather than at the beginning*

• *Introduction, 1:1 - 8*

• *Scene 1, 1:9 – 3:22*

• *Scene 2, 4:1 – 8:1*

• *Scene 3, 8:2 – 11:18*

• *Scene 4, 11:19 – 15:4*

• *Scene 5, 15:5 – 16:21*

• *Scene 6, 17:1 – 19:10*

• *Scene 7, 19:11 – 21:8*

• *Scene 8, 21:9 – 22:19*

We come to a new section in the book of Revelation. It is time for us to look again at the structure of the book. In a traditional Bible commentary, discussion of the 'structure' of a biblical book generally comes at the beginning in the Introduction. But this book is about preaching, and a preacher cannot exhaust his people with long sermons about matters of 'Introduction' at the beginning of his series of sermons. He will drive them all away and never get to chapter 1, verse 1! The best way for a preacher to talk about the 'Introduction' to a book is to do it as he goes along. In that way his listeners are learning **from** the book and finding out things **about** it at the same time. So – following this procedure – this is a good point for us once again to look at the structure of the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation is like a play in a theatre with several 'acts' and several sets of scenery. In **Revelation 1:1–8** we had an introduction to the revelation, but the book really started in Revelation 1:9. At that point John is on the island of Patmos. Everything in **Revelation 1:9–3:22** takes place in one piece of 'scenery'. John sees the glorified Lord Jesus Christ and from the lips of Jesus come messages for the churches.

Then in Revelation 4:1 John becomes 'in the Spirit' and he changes location. Suddenly he is not on the island of Patmos any more. He is (in his vision) in heaven, and he is seeing various things that are happening in heaven. This is the second scene, the second piece of scenery, in the book of Revelation. There is no change of scene throughout **Revelation 4:1–8:1**.

Then in Revelation 8:2 things change again. After a pause of half an hour, John suddenly sees something new. He is seeing a temple and things happen according to what takes place in the temple. It leads to a new series of items for him to hear and see. They continue throughout **Revelation 8:2–11:18**.

Then in 11:19 the same thing happens again. Once again there is a new scene and once again it begins with the sight of what is happening inside the heavenly temple. The section continues through **Revelation 11:19–15:4**.

Now we have reached Revelation 15:5, and there is once again an opening of the tabernacle in heaven. A new section is about to begin. It will last until the end of chapter 16. In **Revelation 15:5–16:21** we have another section of the book of Revelation.

Another section starts in Revelation 17:1, which begins when an angel says 'Come!' to John and shows him a new scene in his total experience of this lengthy revelation. This section will last from **Revelation 17:1–19:10**.

Then in Revelation 19:11 John says, 'I saw heaven standing open...', and he is led into a further piece of scenery which extends throughout **Revelation 19:11–21:8**.

In Revelation 21:9 once again an angel says 'Come!' and the revelation of Jesus moves into another section which occupies **Revelation 21:9–22:19**.

• *Conclusion, 22:20 - 21*

Eight sections, in each seven

Finally, just as Revelation 1:1–8 introduced the book, so **Revelation 22:20–21** adds a final comment at its end.

So there are eight sections in this book of Revelation. **If you look at these eight sections, in each of them there are seven of something.** In 1:9–3:22 we had seven churches. In 4:1–8:1 there were seven seals. In 8:2–11:18 we find seven trumpets. In 11:19–15:4 we shall find the words ‘I saw’ (or something similar) seven times – in 13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1, 2. There are seven small visions. This pattern of a section with seven-of-something continues in Revelation 15:5–16:21 where we now find we have seven bowls of God’s anger.

The same thing will continue. In 17:1–19:10 we shall find seven words of triumph. In 19:11–21:8 we shall find seven visions of victory. And in 21:9–22:19 we shall discover seven glimpses of glory.

• *Not seven sevens!*

• *Seven = completion*

• *Eight – a new beginning!*

It may come as a surprise to find there are eight sections in the book of Revelation, not seven! Surely – one might think – it would be nice if there had been seven sevens! Why are there eight groups-of-seven, not seven groups-of-seven? I think there is a reason. If seven stands for completion, what does eight stand for? It stands for starting again! You have seven days a week: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday – seven days. What does the eighth day say? It says you have started again! Eight speaks of a new beginning. In Revelation 21:5 the One who is seated on the throne says, ‘I am making all things new!’, and a few verses later an eighth section begins.

Scene 5 – speaks of the wrath of God

• *The trumpets were warnings*

• *The bowls are the actual occasions of Christ pouring out anger*

• *Plagues – as with Pharaoh who refused to let Israel go*

So what is this section about? The first revelation was about Jesus in the midst of his churches. The second section was about Jesus opening the scroll of God’s purpose. The third section was about Jesus sending angels to blow trumpets of warning. The fourth section consisted of seven visions explaining the deepest conflict going on behind the surface of human history. Now what will this section in 15:5–16:21 be saying to us? It speaks of the wrath of God. The trumpets of 8:2–11:18 gave a warning that wrath is coming. Now the bowls of wrath are a symbolic way of speaking of the actual occasions when God pours out his anger against sin. It is not a matter of warning so much as of actual experience of anger that cannot be held back. In 15:5–16:21 we shall see Christ pouring out bowls of anger upon the ungodly. Like two other sections of the book of Revelation, this part of the vision begins with a scene in the heavenly temple. We recall that tabernacle-language or temple-language has been used already. The scene in 8:2–11:18 began at the incense-altar, and at the beginning of 11:19–15:4 ‘God’s temple was opened’. Now John says, ⁵*After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness was opened,* ⁶*and out of the temple came the seven angels with seven plagues.* We remember that in the days of Pharaoh God sent ten plagues upon Egypt. They were punishments and warnings because Pharaoh insisted on refusing to release Israel to go to its own land in Canaan. Revelation 15–16 lets us know that God is still doing the same thing in the world that he was doing in the days of Pharaoh. He is still sending plagues upon the world.

The gospel is first and foremost a message about salvation from the anger of God against sin

Now this is very important to us. **It reminds us that the gospel is first and foremost a message about salvation from the anger of God against sin.** Remember Romans 1:14–18. Paul wanted to go to Rome. He wanted to share the gospel there. The gospel was needed because ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness . . .’

• *Satan always wants to change the gospel*

Satan always wants to change the gospel. He wants to change its nature, its location and its method. Satan would like us to think that salvation is about politics or about health or about money or about prosperity or about social welfare – or about a hundred other things! But salvation is about being reconciled to a God who hates sin.

• *Satan would like us to think that salvation is about earth*

Satan would like us to think that salvation is about earth. Well, it is certainly true that people are saved on earth, and that God cares for them on earth. But we are to lay up treasure in heaven – not on earth. We go to heaven when we die. Finally the new Jerusalem comes down from heaven. At the moment salvation is about relating rightly to heaven and laying up treasure in heaven. Heaven will come down on earth – eventually but not just yet.

• *Satan would like us to change the method of salvation*

Satan would like us to change the method of salvation. The method of salvation is the gospel message about Jesus Christ. We are not saved by study or learning. We are not saved by experiences. We are not saved by routines or disciplines or regulations. We are saved by a Person – the Lord Jesus Christ. We live on Jesus! The Bible is a massive exposition of the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

• *The problem – God’s wrath, right now*

Revelation 15–16 tells us of the human problem. **Men and women are experiencing the anger of God against sin.** Notice the present tense in Romans 1:18. The wrath of God is (right now!) being revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.

• *The punishment of sin is inevitable because of God’s holiness*

The punishment of sin is inevitable because of God’s holiness. The ‘temple of the tent of witness’ refers to the place in the holy of holies where the ark was kept with the law of God within it. That in itself represented heaven, which is a place where God’s holiness is revealed. The ‘tent of witness’ was a witness to the holy character of God. ‘Temple’ here means ‘sanctuary’ or ‘very sacred place’. It is not referring to the temple as a whole. So the point here is: punishment proceeds from God’s holiness. The angels who bring about punishment of sin come from the place where God’s holiness is revealed.



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