



Lesson 4: Apocalypse Then

Dear friends,

For many people the word “apocalypse” brings to mind images of fiery devastation and universal catastrophe. There is some justification for that association: ancient apocalypses usually did contain images of destruction and judgment. But beneath and beyond these lies an intense longing for justice. Most apocalypses were written in times of distress and dislocation, when earthly power appeared as a demonic force bent on the annihilation of believers. On one level, therefore, the apocalypses served as a call to faith and endurance; on another, they functioned as social and political critique. As you consider this lesson, it is worth remembering the extent to which our hopes for the future are a photo-negative of our dissatisfactions with the present. The scale of apocalyptic judgment indicates the scale of the perceived injustice, and the glories of the future are proportionate to the deprivations of the past.

I have never had a "near death" experience, but I have read about several people who have. A consistent element in their stories is the report that their lives were forever changed. Having faced ultimate realities, their perspective and priorities were altered, sometimes profoundly. I often think of the apocalyptic writers as having a kind of "near death" experience. They thus possessed a clarity of conviction known to few of us who have not been pushed right to the edge. At the end of Chapter Five, I reflected a little on this point with respect to Daniel and Revelation:

The biblical apocalypses take us into a world in which one's decision for God is immediately pressing and ultimately costly, a world in which everything is at stake and nothing is secure. Daniel and Revelation confront our spiritual laziness and complacency; they challenge our measured alliance with God and our easy association with worldly power. They compel us to reconsider the depth of our commitment and the sincerity of our purpose. (Page 128)

It occurs to me that this is one case in which it might be helpful to preview the end of the story at the beginning. I concluded Chapter Five by talking about the meaning for today of the biblical apocalypses Daniel and Revelation. You might want to give that section ("Conclusion," pages 127-29) a look to see if it helps you to read Chapter Four with a bit more perspective.

The fourth chapter might be the densest of the book, but it might also be the most important. I have found a working knowledge of this material indispensable to my reading of the New Testament. I do not know why these texts have been so neglected in the church, but I hope that, like me, you will find them fascinating and, in every sense of the word, revealing.

Grace & peace,

Craig