

Apocalypse Now: The Book of Revelation

Session 1: Why study one of the Bible's strangest books?

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. – Rev 1:1-3

“Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.” - G.K. Chesterton

Why People Don't Read the Book of Revelation

- It seems confusing (“How am I supposed to make sense of all this?”)
- It seems unimportant (“Who cares? We all will wind up with Jesus in heaven”)
- It seems divisive (“I know churches that have split over their view of end times”)
- It seems easily misinterpreted (“I’ve heard one too many predictions of the antichrist”)
- It seems offensive (“Non-Christians are not painted in the best of lights here”)

Why You Need to Read the Book of Revelation

1. We are promised a blessing
 - a. For “reading,” “hearing” and “keeping” what is written in it
 - b. “for the time is near”
2. The purpose of the book
 - a. (1) to encourage and comfort believers amid persecution, (2) to challenge believers to adopt a new perspective on reality, and (3) to exhort believers to remain faithful to God and Christ, to not capitulate to the temptations and pressures of the world. (See Schreiner, pg. 26).
3. It tells us what is to come
 - a. It is a “prophecy” (1:3; see 22:6, 7, 9, 10, 18, 19)
 - i. Of what “must soon take place” 22:6
 1. “for the time is near” 1:3
 2. “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” 22:10
 3. “Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.” 1:19
 - ii. What is “to come”?
 1. The defeat of evil, the vindication of God’s people, the triumph of Christ, and the eternal rest of the saints.

- b. “The prophecy, however, isn’t written merely to convey information; the purpose is ethical formation and transformation, since genuine hearing leads to obedience, to keeping the words of the prophecy (1:3; 22:7). The prophetic vision has a pragmatic purpose that is intended to shape the thinking and to transform the behavior of the readers.” – Tom Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, p. 24
- 4. It tells us what the real world is like
 - a. The book is an “apocalypse” The *apokalupsis* (Ἀποκάλυψις) of Jesus Christ...” (1:1). What is an apocalypse?
 - i. “*Apocalypse* is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world. Apocalypse was intended to interpret present earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.” – Adela Yarbro Collins, “Introduction,” *Semeia* 36.
 - 1. For example, portions of the book of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah would be considered apocalyptic
 - a. also, books outside the bible: 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, Apocalypse of Abraham, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch
 - b. A “prophetic apocalyptic” work
 - i. “It is prophetic in the way it addresses a concrete historical situation—that of Christians in the Roman province of Asia towards the end of the 1st century AD—and brings to its readers a prophetic word of God enabling them to discern the divine purpose in their situation and respond to their situation in a way appropriate to this purpose. This contextual communication of the divine purpose is typical of the biblical prophetic tradition. But John's work is also *apocalyptic* because of the way that it enables its readers to see their situations with prophetic insight into God's purpose is by disclosing the content of a vision in which John is taken, as it were, out of this world in order to see it differently. Here John's work belongs to the apocalyptic tradition of visionary disclosure, in which a seer is taken in vision to God's throne room in heaven to learn the secrets of the divine purpose. **John (and thereby his readers with him) is taken up into heaven in order to see the world from the heavenly perspective. He is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history so that he can see what is really going on in the events of his time and place. He is also transported in vision into the final future of the world, so that he can see the present from the perspective of what its final outcome must be, in God’s ultimate purpose for human**

history.” – Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, pg. 7

5. It pushes us into the rest of the Bible
 - a. There is no other book in the New Testament that has more citations or allusions to the Old Testament.



b.

6. It captures our imaginations
 - a. “To appreciate the importance of [the imagery of Revelation] we should remember that Revelation's readers in the great cities of the province of Asia were constantly confronted with powerful images of the Roman vision of the world. Civic and religious architecture, iconography, status, rituals and festivals, even the visual wonder of cleverly engineered 'miracles' in the temples--all provided powerful visual impressions of Roman imperial power and of the splendour of pagan religion. In this context, Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images which impress on its readers a different vision of the world: how it looks from the heaven to which John is caught up to in chapter 4. **The visual power of the book effects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative visions of how the world is and will be.**” – Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, p. 17
 - b. The rich symbols in the book are intended to grip our minds and hearts with what is *actually* happening.
 - i. For instance:
 1. The powerful Roman government—is really a bloodthirsty prostitute who will soon be devoured by the power struggles that typify beastly godless governments (Rev 17).