

New Testament Lesson—Revelation 21:1-7

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

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Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." "See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

When I was growing up, I tended to avoid reading the last book of the Bible. I remember feeling pretty hesitant whenever it was brought up in church. I felt anxious because it seemed, well, scary to me. Perhaps some of you out there know what I'm talking about.

Now, to my younger self's credit, there is some objectively *weird* stuff in Revelation. And, yes, some of the imagery is rather startling, unnerving, even graphic. I used to think Revelation was only about things I'd rather not think about—like, the end of the world and the last days of the earth—time literally running out.

Simply put, it was about the "apocalypse." And why would anyone want to think deeply about that kind of stuff? Right? I mean, that's a dark space to dwell, isn't it? Or, at least, that's the way it seemed to me.

This morning, I'd like to try and reframe one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. We've reached the end of our sermon series on "Bible Basics" and it feels fitting to wrap up the journey with "oomph"—you might say: one more time, with feeling.

Because, friends, I'm confident that with a just little context and background, we can cast Revelation in the kind of hopeful, brilliant light it deserves—the kind of light the ancient Church intended it to be seen through.

After all, the Biblical framers, those who created the list of books we believe are inspired by the Holy Spirit—these framers placed Revelation at the end of the Bible for a reason. It served as a kind of exclamation point on the Scriptures!

It was put at the end because its message is one of emphatic, defiant hopefulness. Revelation doesn't simply *tell* a story of hope, though. It's way more dramatic than that. Revelation *screams* hope into existence! With literary flare, Revelation overpowers our senses—forcing our exhausted eyes open to see the hope and goodness in the world.

When we can't stop pointing out all the bad—when we can't stop spiraling into cynicism and learned helplessness, Revelation won't let us ignore the light. When all we seem to hear is noise and hateful voices, this book's message comes at us like a megaphone piercing through all that junk that sneers, “Why bother trying?” and “What's the point?”

Yeah, there ain't nothing subtle about this book.

To be fair, now, it could be argued that Revelation really isn't that extraordinary from other Biblical texts. At the end of the day, most of it's just an ultra-vivid description of a vision.

And, even if you've only cracked open the Bible a few times, you probably encountered either a vision or divine dream given to one of God's servants—super common way God speaks to humanity. We see them from Genesis all the way to...well, you know.

This particularly lengthy vision is given to John—a follower of Jesus who's been exiled by the Romans to a small, Greek island called Patmos—a hopeless place where the Empire could basically stash whoever they wanted to forget about and pretend didn't exist.

You see: this was a pitiable time to be a Christian in this part of the world. Small congregations had no choice but to meet in secret. At best, Christians were misunderstood and viewed with suspicion. But more often than not, they were scapegoated and seen as traitorous—disloyal to the Emperor and, thus, good for nothing but crucifixion or, perhaps, the hungry lions in the coliseum.

The persecutions of those following Jesus were cruel and widespread during this period—so cruel, in fact, that one Roman historian tells of the Emperor using Christians as human candles to watch his garden grow at night.

Friends, this is why the language and the imagery of Revelation can seem so off-putting, even shocking to us. The vision given to John, with all its haunting words and scenes, reflects the wider landscape of persecution Christians lived in. It mirrors the terror gripping these early worshipping communities.

Can you imagine the things John had probably witnessed—both on that island and before his exile? I'd say it was a miracle his life was spared, but...I can't be certain it felt like a miracle to him living in that place—left with only memories of freedom.

But then...that's when it happened...at the end of hope's endurance. In the fresh wounds of persecution, the inexplicable showed up. In the pit of loneliness amid other misfits and rejects, the unthinkable took place.

When things couldn't possibly get any worse for the exiled John, he witnesses the *apocalypse*! Ah, there's that word again—“apocalypse.”

Before we go any further, y'all, I think we should clear the air. In my experience, that word has a habit of becoming a stumbling block. It doesn't have to be something scary.

The word “apocalypse” is just a Greek word like many others in Scripture. In modern and pop culture, unfortunately, it’s become tainted by low-budget movies and rather poor interpretations of the Bible (in my humble opinion).

It’s important to understand that “apocalypse” is its own literary genre, one that was quite popular in the ancient Mediterranean world—right along with poetry, history, genealogy, letters, and law codes.

Nowadays, you always hear talk of “the” apocalypse (whatever that means). But, it’s more accurate to speak of *apocalypses* (plural) when referring to this period. In fact, there are several examples of “apocalypse” (as a genre) in the Bible!

Of course, Revelation is probably the most well-known to Church folks. But check out Daniel sometime—past the familiar stories of a lion’s den and the handwriting on the wall. You’ll find another in Ezekiel and even one in the gospel of Matthew!

So I’m going to strip away some of the mystique here. But, I think it’s for the best. Ok, here goes. Just as the Greek word “Christ” translates to “messiah” or “anointed one,” the word “apocalypse” literally means “something that is revealed”—something that is revealed—a revelation. That’s it—God unveiling what God has in store.

It doesn’t mean “death” or “end of the world” or “all hope is lost”—in our case, to be clear, apocalypse has more to do with “life” and the “birth of a new world” and “hope always persists.”

And for John, an unfortunate Roman exile on a Greek island, the apocalypse was anything but the “end.”

For John (and for us), what was revealed—the revelation given by God Almighty was the sure and certain hope that, no matter how much it felt like his world was falling apart, there was (yet) everlasting life and a lasting peace at the pinnacle of God’s design.

And the everlasting life John is shown is a life without tears, without pain, or mourning, or even death. How could any of those things be present with the Giver of Life and the Creator of Joy dwelling here among us?

And what’s more: John doesn’t just see *eternal life* in his vision, John bears witness to a *new creation* being born! He’s the best man at a wedding that makes turning water to wine at Cana look like a cheap party trick (no offense, Jesus).

Yes, John is privy to the revelation of revelations: *And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

Can any of us possibly imagine the ecstasy—the bliss of witnessing the marriage of heaven and earth?

I doubt I could ever fathom such wonder. Our natural senses just don’t seem strong enough, do they? How could any of us behold such boundless glory?

But that’s the gift John is given. And sure, we may have to use our imaginations a bit more, but the truth is John’s gift is our gift, too. John’s revelation is ours also, siblings in Christ.

We may not have *seen* it happen, but we have the promises of God nonetheless. And let’s be real: we *have* witnessed the promises of God—promises fulfilled in our past and our present—God showing up in ways we could never expect. As John reminds us: *These words are trustworthy and true.*

We know where all this is headed, my friends.

We know that persecution and injustice and tyranny can never have the last word. We know that, ultimately, sin and death have been swallowed up in victory. We know that God, the Alpha and Omega, holds our futures and eternal destinies with a tender love and grace.

So when you think about it that way, perhaps mine eyes really *have* seen the coming of the glory of the Lord, after all. Perhaps we all have.

What a revelation that is!

Amen.