

Apocalyptic Hope: Introduction to the Apocalypse

Genesis 3:24; Exodus 34:29-35; 26:31-33; 2 Chronicles 3:14; Matthew 27:50-51; Revelation 1:1-3; 21:5; 22:2b

Intro:

I was a skittish kid growing up. I was scared of everything. Not because there was anything actually scary, but because I had such a big and vivid imagination. In any situation, I could imagine that there was the potential for something terrifying. But nothing scared me more than the book of Revelation.

I remember hiding behind the couch while my dad watched a VHS that someone had bought him called “7 Signs of Christ’s Return” that included the blood red moon, the war, tribulation, and... the most terrifying... the sudden disappearance of all true believers.

Then, when I was around 10ish a new book series came out: Left Behind. Shortly after, a series for teens followed. As an avid reader, I consumed all of the books thinking that if I understood the rapture and the end times better than maybe I wouldn’t be so scared of it. It didn’t work. It was so bad that if I walked in our bedroom and saw Kristy’s clothes tossed on the floor instead of in the laundry basket, my first thought was always that Jesus had come to get her but I wasn’t good enough to go too.

As I got older, I tried to just ignore that part of the Bible, but it always bugged me. A generation of Christians learned to associate the return of Jesus with anxiety. Shouldn’t we look forward to Jesus’ return with joy and hope?

My motivation for salvation was associated with escaping consequences rather than living with purpose and a hope for the future. Yes, there are consequences, but shouldn’t the longing for Jesus be stronger than the desire to avoid being left behind?

But what if Revelation wasn’t written to make Christians afraid of the future? What if it was written because Christians were already afraid and God wanted to give them something to hope for?

Apokalypsis:

Read Revelation 1:1-3. The letter begins by stating its purpose. It was written by the prophet Paul while in exile on the island of Patmos. It is the revelation *from* Jesus given to John by an angel. This book is about Jesus and the hope given to us through Him.

What is a revelation? It’s an ah ha! moment...when you gain new understanding. It is translated from the Greek word *Apokalypsis* meaning revelation, disclosure, unveiling.

Our culture has changed the meaning of apocalypse. When we hear it, we think about destruction, catastrophe, the end of the world...zombies and nuclear explosions! But that’s not what John’s word means. An apocalypse is an unveiling.

Unveiling:

To understand the significance of an unveiling, we need to consider the purpose or use of a veil. Read Exodus 34:29-35. The residual radiance of being in God’s presence was too much for others to look on so Moses covered his face with a veil. But - there’s more!

Read Exodus 26:31-33 and 2 Chronicles 3:14. Why a cherubim? First, take the Precious Moments idea of a cupid out of your mind. These creatures were intimidating to say the least!



Read Genesis 3:24. The curtain with the cherubim was symbolic of the separation between man and God's presence. Veils became a symbol of separation. As such, the removal of the veil became a symbol of connection.

Think of the wedding tradition of the bride wearing the veil. It doesn't mean much in our culture now, but in Hebrew culture where arranged marriages were the norm, the lifting of the veil revealed who the bride was to the groom. Think of the story in Genesis of Jacob being tricked into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. That was made possible by Leah being concealed by the veil.

Read Matthew 27:50-51. The symbol of separation between the presence of God and humanity that had roots all the way back to the Garden of Eden was torn from top to bottom by God Himself!!!!!! God removed the barrier by removing the veil. Now it is up to humanity to respond.

Jesus had a way of taking what was physical and making it spiritual. The physical veil was torn. Now he gives a vision to John to remove the spiritual veil that we are holding onto that prevents us from fully connecting with God. The book of Revelation is meant to be an unveiling of our hearts and minds.

Historical Context:

Revelation was written at the height of the Roman Empire. It was huge and dominant with massive political, military, and economic power. But they also gave spiritual meaning to their power.

Pax Romana - Roman Peace - was their own version of gospel or good news. Rome brings peace, order, prosperity and security to the world, but that came through imperial power. So with the promise came a warning. *Submit to Rome and you will prosper. Oppose Rome and you will be crushed.* With this imperial gospel came Emperor worship which creates a problem for Christians who say that Jesus is the true King.

John writes this letter of Revelation to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor. These are real cities - real churches - real people who are all trying to figure out what faithfulness to Jesus looks like while living inside an empire demanding their total allegiance.

Apocalyptic Literature:

Revelation was written *for everyone*, but it was not written *to us*. When we see symbolism of a beast, dragon, number, woman, city, horn, or other wild things, our first question

shouldn't be "Who is this in America in 2026?" It should be "What would this image have communicated to the first people who heard it?"

The literary format it was written in is called Apocalyptic literature which was common during this time. Heavenly revelation pulls back the curtain on the unseen world through visions, symbols, strange creatures, numbers, cosmic imagery, and scenes of the future. To us it feels bizarre, but let's face it. We are much more literal these days: with less imagination, less flexibility of thought, and demystified.

Apocalyptic literature draws on imagery already embedded throughout Scripture (Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah). Here is a tip to use while reading Revelation: When Revelation gives us a strange image, look back into Scripture before looking forward to the news.

We are not going to get too deep into any of the imagery in this series. There is just too much! However, there is a consistent theme to look for across all the imagery. *Human power becomes beastly when it claims the place that belongs to God.* Think about a few weeks ago when we were talking about Nebuchadnezzar. There was political, military, economic domination, and religious idolatry. These things become intertwined in Revelation. Babylon (Nebby's Kingdom) is used as a symbol throughout. It was known as the previous world power since John couldn't exactly use Rome as the symbol.

John isn't simply interested in one bad individual or world power though. He is unveiling the way systems of human power can become: rebellious against God, oppressive towards people, and destructive towards creation.

Revelation is not some code book that we can use to try to identify the Antichrist. It shows us what beastly power looks like and how followers of the Lamb resist becoming like it.

One of the great contrasts throughout Revelation is: The Beast vs. The Lamb. Both represent power but that power that is exercised very differently. The Beast conquers through: domination, coercion, violence, fear. The Lamb conquers through: faithfulness, sacrifice, love, testimony. One motivates obedience through fear while the other motivates through grace.

Relevance of Revelation:

The book of Revelation is more than just one thing. It is an **apocalypse**. It **reveals** a spiritual reality that is not seen with physical eyes.

It is a **prophecy**. It is not merely predicting future events It **challenges** believers toward faithfulness.

It is also a **letter**. It **encourages** believers who are living in a broken world. Imagine the congregation gathering. Someone stands. The scroll is opened and Revelation is read out loud. Now Revelation 1:3 makes sense: "*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written...*"

Notice - John doesn't say: Blessed are those who decode it. Blessed are those who correctly chart it. Blessed are those who identify all the symbols. Instead, he says: Read it. Hear it. Take it to heart.

Revelation is not irrelevant to us. It is supposed to change how we live. What if the primary purpose of Revelation isn't information about the future but encouragement for faithfulness in the present?

Think about John's audience. They couldn't control Rome, Caesar, the economy, persecution, or anything that tomorrow would bring. But they could decide: Who will I worship?

Where will my allegiance lie? Will I compromise? Will I remain faithful? Will I follow Jesus even if it costs me something?

Roadmap:

I am a very visual person, so I created an image to serve as a kind of roadmap through this series.



I hope that you will all be challenged to follow along with us. Not just on Sunday mornings, but read ahead so you come in on Sunday morning with an understanding of what we will be talking about. There is way more in this book than we can begin to cover in a few hours over the next few weeks, but I challenge you to dig in on your own.

Don't avoid this book because it is intimidating. Embrace it because it is what we have to look forward to. Revelation isn't just the end of the written Bible. It is the end of the beginning.

The Story:

We are living in the space between the New Testament letters and the letter of Revelation. The Bible is the written story of God's relationship with humanity: From the dawn of creation to the return of Jesus and the New Heaven and the New Earth. We are part of that story.

It begins in the Garden with a river, the Tree of Life, and God's presence dwelling with humanity. Then sin enters: Creation fractures, humanity is exiled, violence grows, and death reigns.

Jesus enters the story. We gain a glimpse of Shalom/wholeness. The veil is torn so humanity can once again access the presence of God. Yet we still live in a broken world.

Then John gives us a vision of a garden that will be again. There's a river, the Tree of Life, humanity again, and God dwelling with His people again. The difference is "*the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations*" (Revelation 22:2b). What humanity broke; God restores.

The story doesn't end with God throwing creation away. It ends with God healing it! Revelation 21:5 says, "*He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'*"

When we encounter the Beast: remember where we are going. When we encounter Babylon: remember where we are going. When we encounter judgement: remember where we are going. When we encounter suffering: remember where we are going. When the imagery becomes confusing: remember where we are going. And when the world outside these walls looks like political, military, and economic power; you see violence, death, and suffering; you are filled with fear: remember *Who* is coming.

John's first audience needed to hear something that we still need to hear today: The empire you can see is not the kingdom that lasts. What you can see isn't all there is. God has so much more!

Maybe the question Revelation is asking isn't, "Can you figure out exactly what is going to happen?" Maybe it is, "Can you remain faithful to Jesus because you know how the story ends?"

Reflection Questions:

- What is your previous experience with the book of Revelation? What are you hoping to gain from this series?
- Where are you tempted to place your trust—God's kingdom or the powers and systems of this world?
- How might your perspective change if you focused less on trying to predict the future and more on faithfully following Jesus in the present?