

Revelation 1:9-16 (NRSV)

⁹I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

¹²Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

Revelation 2:1-7 (The Message)

Write this to Ephesus, to the Angel of the church. The One with Seven Stars in his right-fist grip, striding through the golden seven-lights' circle, speaks:

"I see what you've done, your hard, hard work, your refusal to quit. I know you can't stomach evil, that you weed out apostolic pretenders. I know your persistence, your courage in my cause, that you never wear out. But you walked away from your first love—why? What's going on with you, anyway? Do you have any idea how far you've fallen? A Lucifer fall! "Turn back! Recover your dear early love. No time to waste, for I'm well on my way to removing your light from the golden circle." You do have this to your credit: You hate the Nicolaitan business. I hate it, too.

Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches. I'm about to call each conqueror to dinner. I'm spreading a banquet of Tree-of-Life fruit, a supper plucked from God's orchard."

What would it be like to see a vision of Jesus Christ? John sees a dramatically awe-inspiring Jesus who bears messages to seven Christian communities. It seems that the Ephesians are doing good work, but have lost their first love. Have we lost ours?

For most of my life, Revelation was this mysterious book at the back of my Bible. Once in awhile, my interest would be aroused by some of the endless fascination with the end times that floats around the fringes of the church. Back in the 70's, I read Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* in its first edition, which was fun but seemed farfetched. I even took a class on Revelation from the Moody Bible Institute. I can't say I remember anything from it. In all, Revelation was about as disconnected from my Christian faith as my copy of *Business Week*. I can't say Revelation was frightening; it was just weird and easily set aside.

Ignoring Revelation all those years was my loss. I wish I could get the years back. Over the past ten years, I've come to see the power and the beauty of Revelation, and even more importantly, the message of hope and encouragement in its pages. Scholars such as Bruce Metzger, Christopher Rowland, David Aune, Craig Hill, and Craig Koester¹ have opened up the book for me. That is what I hope to do for you in the coming weeks.

The helicopter view

Revelation is easier to understand if we grasp the big picture, what a professor of mine liked calling the "helicopter view." Broadly speaking, the book has three sections:

- Chapters 1-3 consist of John's opening vision of Christ, and Jesus' letters to seven churches in western Asia Minor.²

¹If someone asks me for a book on Revelation, I urge them to pick up a copy of Craig Koester's, *Revelation and the End of All Things*. More than any other, this book has helped me to grasp the narrative of Revelation and understand better the symbolism. It is very suitable for laypeople and received excellent reviews from biblical scholars.

²The April 22, 2007, Sermon Background Study focuses on Jesus' letter to the church at Laodicea, the last of the seven letters. There is also a textbox with background information on the seven churches. This study, like all studies, can be found at www.thebibleacademy.com.

- Chapters 4-11 focus on God, Christ, and a world that chooses to trust itself rather than its creator. In chapter 11, the unbelieving come to faith and the heavens ring out with the worship of God. In some ways, the book could end right there, but John's visions retell this story beginning in chapter 12.
- Chapters 12-22 are not a continuation of the story, but a second telling of the cosmic conflict between the creator and his idolatrous creation. This time the story focuses on Satan and a world in thrall to the powers that oppose God. This story culminates in God's victory through Jesus Christ, the judgment of all people, and the arrival of the long awaited new heavens and earth. This is the completed restoration of the cosmos and of humanity's relationship with God.

A vision of Christ

The book of Revelation begins by telling us that it is just that: a revelation of Jesus Christ, given him by God, that Jesus is to share with his servants. A revelation is simply an unveiling, a pulling back of the curtains so that we can see the truth about the world, about God, and about what is to come. We're told that these visions are prophetic and that we are to hear and keep them, implying that these are words we are to understand. How can we "keep what is written" if what is written makes no sense? Thus, the book itself often interprets for us the meaning of the most important symbolism.

John³ has been banished to the island of Patmos, where he has visions. These begin with his opening vision of Christ. What he sees transcends the power of words to express directly, thus, much like the prophet Ezekiel, his descriptions center on comparisons; i.e., Jesus' voice is "like the sound of many waters." The vision draws heavily on the Son of Man imagery of Daniel 7, in which God, the Ancient One, gives the Son of Man dominion over creation. Jesus stands amid seven golden lampstands which, we are told by the book itself, represent seven churches. He holds seven stars in his hand, which we are again told in the book, represent the angels of each of the seven churches.

And the sword in Jesus' mouth? It's an image that we find only in Revelation where the metaphor occurs four times, culminating in Jesus' victory on the battlefield (Revelation 19). The sword is probably a metaphor for the tongue, with its sharpness conveying the power of Christ's words. What Jesus speaks is the truth.⁴ And he is about to tell it to the churches.

The letter to Ephesus

Ephesus was a large and important city on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The Ephesian Christians work hard for the kingdom, seeking to stay true to the authentic gospel. And they endure the persecutions and suffering thrown at them. They even hate the works of the Nicolaitans.⁵ But, Jesus takes them to task nonetheless, for they have forgotten their "first love." In their diligent work for the church, these Christians were losing sight of what it was all about, their own love of Jesus Christ.

The truth of this letter speaks to us. How easy it is to let all our "doing" run away with us. It can certainly happen in our church work and it can happen in a marriage. A couple can get so busy with children, job, home and the rest, that they wake up one day and realize that they've lost their love for each other. Where are they then? It is the love of the spouses, one for another, that is to be the foundation of their marriage. So it is that our love of Jesus is to be the foundation of our life in the church. It is *necessary* to our discipleship. Doing the work without the love leaves us as only an empty shell and an ineffective witness to God's love. . . Hmmm, hardly what you might expect from that "weird" book called Revelation.

³Though the early church held that this John was also the writer of the gospel and the NT letter's bearing the name of John, this is almost certainly another John. Based on clues in the book, this John was probably Jewish and a native of Palestine who emigrated to Asia Minor. David Aune speculates that John's knowledge of the seven Christian communities shows he was an itinerant Christian prophet in western Asia Minor. Most scholars hold that the book was written late in the first century, toward the end of the Roman emperor Domitian's reign (81-96AD).

⁴Though commentators do not seem to make much of it, every time I come to this passage, I think of Hebrews 4:12-13:

¹²Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." To my mind, this is another of those echoes of Scripture that God hopes we'll hear.

⁵We have no idea who these people were or what they taught. Mention of them in the letters to Ephesus and Smyrna are the only references in ancient literature. Whoever they were, it is clear that they opposed the gospel of Christ.

Apocalyptic Literature

In Greek, the word “apocalypse” means “unveiling” and it is often used to describe an entire genre of writing that was very popular in the 200 years before and the 200 years after Jesus. Authors used apocalyptic writing to describe momentous and cosmic events, often having to do with the end of the world. Apocalyptic writing was stuffed full of symbols and filled with all sorts of wild imagery. These writings report mysterious revelations and usually entailed a cosmic transformation of the heavens and the earth, as well as a judgment of the dead. This literature seems very odd to us because we rarely read anything like it, but it was not odd in Jesus’ day. In the Bible, the second half of the book of Daniel is another example of apocalyptic writing.

Like all apocalyptic writings, the book of Revelation is filled with many sorts of symbols. There are colors, numbers, animals, lamp stands, buildings, plants, and so on. Some are very easy to understand, some are more obscure, and the meanings of some are probably lost to us forever. It is important to realize that the symbols in apocalyptic literature weren’t meant to conceal, but to reveal and to invest the writings with their cosmic significance. For example, in chapter 17, John is shown the Whore of Babylon who drinks the blood of the saints. We might wonder who the Whore is, but the answer is provided in verse 9, where we are told that the woman is seated on seven mountains. Anyone in the ancient world would hear this as a very thinly veiled reference to the Seven Hills of Rome, for it was Rome who persecuted the Christians. Another prominent symbol is the number seven, which signifies completeness or totality. The seven heads of the dragon indicate Satan’s total opposition to God (Rev 12:3); the seven spirits of the Lamb signify the fullness of the Holy Spirit going out with total power (seven horns) and full knowledge and insight (seven eyes). In the book of Revelation there are even seven beatitudes! All these symbols seem strange to us, but they were not strange to readers of ancient apocalyptic literature, in which seven always symbolized completeness.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus’ death and resurrection was the most important event in human history, inaugurating God’s new world – a world reborn. Easter was a thunderous moment – a moment when the ages met. Every Easter we celebrate God’s victory over evil, sin, and death. We celebrate new creation and life beyond the grave!

Could any words really begin to describe such events? Because our everyday language would be woefully inadequate to the task, John uses enormously provocative and fantastical word-pictures to convey the enormity of these cosmic events. He writes to encourage persecuted Christians, to show them, as powerfully as he can, that the Christian story will end well, that their own story will end well, even though the abominations of Rome make this claim seem absurd. He reminds them of the cosmic powers they battle, a battle climaxing in Jesus’ victory (Chapter 19 & 20) and inaugurating the final re-creation of “a new heaven and a new earth” (21:1) where “anyone who wishes [can] take the water of life as a gift” (22:17).

READING WITH HEART & MIND, SEPTEMBER 9 - 15

Sunday, Revelation 1:1-8 For what purpose is John given this book? Why is John the one given the revelation? The blessing in v. 3 is the first of seven. Why is seven such an important number? What might it symbolize? What is said about Jesus in this introduction to the letter?

Monday, Revelation 1:9-20 Also read Daniel 7:1-14. It too is apocalyptic literature. What is conveyed by calling Jesus the “Son of Man?” Be sure to read the NRSV translation footnote of Daniel 7:13.

Tuesday, Revelation 2:1-11 This study looked at the letter to Ephesus. What do you take away from the letter to Smyrna? What is God’s word for you in this letter? In what are the Christians of Smyrna rich?

Wednesday, Revelation 2:12-29 Note the two-edged sword again in 2:12. What do you think the Christians in Pergamum would have taken from this letter? What is its message for you? Same for the letter to Thyatira.

Thursday, Revelation 3:1-13 In all these questions, we ought to strive hear God’s word for us. What do you think Christians have learned from these letters over the centuries?

Friday, Revelation 3:14-22 What do you think it means to be lukewarm for God? Why would Jesus prefer us to be either hot or cold? Have you opened the door for Jesus?

Saturday, Revelation 4 This is the first great worship scene. John is taken to the throne room of God. Don’t get lost in the details and the possible meaning of every symbol. Enjoy this powerful imagery of the worship of God. Is this how we worship?

Sermon Notes

www.thebibleacademy.com

Registration for the Fall 2007 Bible Academy session is now open. We are offering daytime and evening classes as well as two one-day Saturday workshops. There is something for everyone this fall and we hope that you'll make plans now to be a part of it. Most classes will begin the week of September 24. Brochures for the fall session are available around the church.

Scott Engle's Sunday morning class, *Something More*, is now meeting in Festival Hall at 11am. We hope that you'll join us!

Because Scott is now preaching in the 9:30 service each week, his Sunday class is moving to 11am in Festival Hall. If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages and focuses on a deeper understanding of Scripture. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@thebibleacademy.com.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about your own experiences with Revelation. Has your experience been like mine? A mysterious book that made little sense and stayed closed. Or have you been fascinated by Revelation and talk of the endtimes? If you read a lot of the *Left Behind* books, chances are that you are in the latter category! Have you ever tried to find a message in this book for your life now? If so, what did you learn?
2. The vision of Christ in the first chapter is striking. It is meant to inspire awe and perhaps even a little terror. How does it fit with the portraits of Jesus that emerge from the gospels or from Paul? Can you think of any other NT passages that evoke a cosmic Christ? (Hint – read Colossians 1:15-22. Others?)
3. The seven letters to the churches are worth a lot of our time. Do you know what Jesus means by losing your first love in his letter to the Ephesians? How might good work for the church actually get in the way of loving Christ? Have you ever witnessed any examples? Are there any parallels here to your personal life?
4. Take a few minutes to read the letter to the Laodiceans (3:14-22). This one always brings me up a bit short. Hot? Cold? Lukewarm? . . . If this letter doesn't get you thinking, then not much will. Why would Jesus prefer cold to lukewarm? In which of these three categories would you place yourself? In which category would your friends place you? Your family? Co-workers? If your faith were hot, how would anyone know?