

Introducing the Bible
Worksheet for Week 8
God Calls His People to Hope and Renewal

This week, we will take a look at the maturing Christian church of the first century, including the later writings in the New Testament. In particular, we'll look at the book of Revelation, which has fascinated Christians for nineteen centuries. Many Christians today are no less fascinated, given the astonishing popularity of the Left Behind book series. This worksheet will introduce you to the book of Revelation and provide you with a structured set of daily Bible readings.

Apocalyptic Literature

In Greek, the word apocalypse means “unveiling” and it is used to describe an entire genre of writing that was very popular in the 200 years before and the 200 years after Jesus. Writers used apocalyptic literature to describe momentous 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 books report mysterious revelations and focus on the end times, which usually entailed a cosmic transformation and 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 and the book of Revelation are apocalyptic writings.

Like all apocalyptic writings, the book of Revelation is filled with all 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 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. To anyone in the ancient world, this is 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 symbolizes completeness.

Revelation

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 the life beyond the grave!

Could any words 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).

John's Revelation is not some sort of ancient movie script wrapped in impenetrable mystery, waiting for 2002 when all its symbols will suddenly be meaningful. It was written first for real people at a real time and we need to understand what it meant for them if we are to understand what it means for us. Their message of hope is our message of hope. Their confidence in God's victory must be our confidence in God's victory, even if we don't know how that victory will play out. Who knows when or how Jesus will return? The timing or circumstances is not the point of Revelation. The fact that God's purposes will not be thwarted is the point, for one day we surely will see the face of God (Rev 22:4).

Bible Readings for Week 8

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. What do you find most surprising in these readings?

<p>Day 1 Revelation 1 John is commissioned and his vision commences</p>	<p>Day 2 Revelation 2 Messages for the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira. These were all real churches.</p>
<p>Day 3 Revelation 17 The woman, the Whore of Babylon</p>	<p>Day 4 Revelation 19:11-21 Jesus' victory</p>
<p>Day 5 Revelation 21:1-8, 22:1-7 The new heavens and earth!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>