

The Book of Revelation
Chapters 1-14
Pastor Dan Severson

The book of Revelation is one of only two books in the Bible that can be described as "Apocalyptic." The other is parts of the book of Daniel.

This particular genre became popular among Jewish authors in the second and first centuries B.C. The reason for this is that the Jewish people were undergoing serious persecution from their Greek overlords. Following the death of Alexander the Great in the year 325 B.C., the Greek empire was divided up between his three generals. Eventually, Palestine came under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanies, a tyrant who tried to force Jews to conform to Hellenistic ways of life. He outlawed the observance of Jewish customs such as Sabbath rest, and tried to erect a statue of the Greek god Zeus on the Temple Mount.

This caused a major rebellion in which many faithful Jews were slaughtered, and where Jews who cooperated with the authorities were put in positions of power. In other words, the faithful suffered while the unfaithful prospered. This gave rise to the question of why God would allow such a thing. The question became all the more acute due to the fact that many believed suffering was a punishment for sin. The facts contradicted the theological perspective, and so it became necessary to come up with an answer that could deal with this seeming contradiction. That answer came from the birth of apocalyptic literature.

The basic problem being addressed here was the justice of God. If God is just, why do the righteous suffer while the unrighteous prosper? According to the apocalyptic perspective, God's justice will prevail in a final judgment. At the end of the age, the dead will rise. Those who were faithful to God's covenant with his people—the righteous—will be rewarded with eternal life in God's kingdom. Those who were not will go into everlasting perdition.

It's important to understand that this question was not just a theoretical one to be debated by teachers of the law. The goal of apocalyptic was a serious attempt to give hope to the persecuted and to warn the unrighteous. The faithfulness of God's people was at stake. If people lost faith in God's justice, or if they came to the conclusion that evil was winning out over the forces of good, people would abandon their faith and the people of God would disappear from the face of the earth. The ultimate goal of this form of literature therefore was to preserve the people of God in the faith they had inherited.

The way in which apocalyptic authors communicated their message was through images rather than direct discourse. The battle between God and the forces of evil are pictured in often horrifying images of war, disease, and natural disasters. Even Jesus used such imagery in his teaching ministry when speaking of the return of the Son of Man—a concept first used in the book of Daniel, Chapter 7. (See Mark 13:24-37) The images are mostly drawn from Old Testament texts. For example, when picturing the throne of God, the presence of thunder and lightening harkens back to the story of Moses on Mt. Sinai.

In sum, the genre of apocalyptic includes the following characteristics:

- 1) A battle between the forces of God and the forces of evil or the devil.
- 2) Widespread destruction of the earth and the whole cosmos.
- 3) Images of bloody battles, disease, misshapen creatures of destruction, and natural disaster.
- 4) The final victory of God and his angels.
- 5) The coming of the kingdom and the final judgment when the righteous will be rewarded and the unrighteous are punished.
- 6) The author receives this information through visions inspired by the Spirit of God thus the name "Revelation."

The book of Revelation was written in the late first century during the persecution of the emperor Domitian. The author was an elder from the churches in Asia Minor, seven in all, named John. Because of this Christian faith, he was banished to the remote Greek island of Patmos. Here, he received the visions that became the book of Revelation. (so named because the future was "revealed" to him.) These visions were said to have come from "the Spirit, a reference to the Holy Spirit.

The book is written as a letter to the seven churches of Asia. Therefore, in chapters two and three, John writes specific messages to each of these seven churches. Because the emperor had declared that all people living in the empire had to acknowledge him to be a deity of sorts and offer sacrifices to him, the Christians faced a very difficult choice. The Roman governor was tasked with the job of interrogating Christians with the goal of getting them to obey the emperor's edict. The choice was to either curse Christ and make a sacrifice to the emperor or face death or banishment. Understandably, these early Christians had the same questions as their Jewish forbearers. Who is in charge here anyway? God or the devil? Does Christianity have a future? Or is it destined to be snuffed out?

As John saw it, his first task was to strengthen the churches so that they did not capitulate to the external pressure. He believed that he needed to address any weaknesses that existed in these communities so that they could withstand the opposition arrayed against them. And so, in each of these seven sub-letters, he identifies their weaknesses, not in order to tear them down, but in order to build them up.

For example, to the church at Ephesus he writes, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first." To the church at Pergamum he writes, "But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Belaam..." And so on with each one. His hope is that they will address these weaknesses and so become strong enough to endure the opposition.

In chapter four, John sees an open door to heaven and thereby receives a glimpse of God's heavenly throne. Around the throne are included 24 elders representing the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles—the whole people of God. They live in perpetual worship of God. "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." In chapter five, John sees that in

God's right hand he holds a scroll with seven seals. Unfortunately, no one is found who is worthy to open the scroll—whatever it is--and so its contents must remain a secret. But then, a Lamb appears who had been slaughtered. This is a clear reference to Christ whom John the Baptist had called "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The Lamb is the only one worthy to open the scroll. The question is, "Why?" Why is Christ declared worthy to reveal the contents of the scroll?

The answer eventually becomes clear. As the scroll is opened, the future is revealed. In other words, the scroll contains the secrets of the future. Jesus Christ is the only one worthy to open this up because his life, death, and resurrection are a proleptic event. That is, his death and resurrection determine our future salvation. On the cross, Jesus does battle with sin, the devil, and death, the enemies of the human race. In his resurrection, he defeats these enemies. This, in turn, discloses the future salvation of all who are "washed in the blood of the Lamb." So while there will be a great battle between the forces of God and the forces of evil embodied in Rome's idolatry which is inspired by the devil, nevertheless, God will win out in the end.

Here is the message of hope and victor that John wants to convey to the early persecuted church. This is the answer to their question: "Who will prevail, God or the devil?" Because Jesus determines the future victory of God over evil, all who have faith in him will participate in his victory. This does not mean there will be no tribulation or suffering at the hands of the devil and his servant Rome, any more than it meant Jesus could avoid the cross. But it does mean that at the final resurrection, those who became righteous through faith in Christ; they will be welcomed into the kingdom of God.

In chapter six, the Lamb begins to open the seven seals. The first four seals release the four horsemen of the apocalypse—war, injustice, tyranny, and death are unleashed on the earth. The battle between good and evil begins, and the evil becomes an instrument of God's judgment against an unrepentant populace. The fifth seal reveals the righteous people who had been martyred for their faith. They cry out "...how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood...?" This was clearly a question on the lips of the early Christians. The sixth seal unleashes chaos in the whole cosmos so that the people of the earth seek to hide from the destruction00an expression of God's wrath against evil. One seal remains unbroken.

Chapter seven is a vision of the redeemed of the earth. First, he sees 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel—clearly a symbolic number meaning the whole of the descendents of Abraham. After this, he sees a great multitude from every tribe and nation, all of whom are praising God. These are all who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. The message here is clear. While God's judgment leads to the destruction of all who are idolaters, and who persecute the people of God, nevertheless, all those who put their faith in Christ will experience a final and glorious redemption. John's message is not one of fear for the church. It is a message of hope.

In chapter eight, the Lamb opens the seventh seal. At this, seven angels appear, each with a trumpet. As they blow their trumpets, terrible “woes” are unleashed that result once again in chaos throughout the whole cosmos.

What John is doing here is messaging in pictures and images what is essentially standard Christian doctrine. According to the biblical witness, the world—God’s good creation—is “fallen” from grace. God’s intent for his creation is that it exist in perfect unity with the divine Spirit, and the Word through which everything came to be. (John 1) Because creation has become separated from its creative origin, it now exists in bondage to decay, disintegration and death. The symptoms of this are natural disasters, disease, and death. Moreover, humanity, absent communion with God or union with Christ, the Word of God, has fallen into bondage in sin. Symptoms of this are idolatry, immorality, enmity, greed, and narcissism. If that were not enough, there exists a power of evil, sometimes referred to as the devil, that overpowers our ability to control destructive behavior and inhumanity. This is what John pictures in the terrible images of chaos and destruction.

Sin, evil, and death are incompatible with life in God’s kingdom. Therefore, God’s influence in the world is such that he acts in ways that war against these powers. He does so not to destroy his creation, but to save it. The forces of evil and death must be destroyed in order to make room for the rule of God. It’s important to understand that John’s images are meant to convey God’s judgment against these forces so that he can save the creation he called “very good.”

Central to God’s work of salvation is Jesus Christ, whom John refers to as the Lamb—an image taken from the story of the Exodus where a sacrificed lamb saved the chosen people from the Angel of Death. God saves the world by allowing the Son of God to fall victim to sin, evil and death. He literally takes these forces upon himself so that he can overcome them in the resurrection on Easter morning. God does not violently fight against these forces. He allows them to do their dirty work and then demonstrates his divine power to overcome them in Jesus’ resurrection. This is why the righteous are those who remained faithful to Christ even to the point of death. For in doing so, they too will overcome by the power of the Lamb in the final judgment when all people will rise again, the righteous to eternal blessedness and the evil to eternal rejection.

The point is that John’s apocalypse conveys the same message as the gospel in images that portray the battle between God and the forces arrayed against him. In fact, God uses the very powers of destruction to eliminate his enemies, just as the cross eliminated sin, and the resurrection eliminated death. In chapter eleven, John sees two witness who, like Christ, are martyred for their witness to the truth. But they ultimately become the victors because, by the power of God’s Spirit, they rise again to new and indestructible life. The story ends with an earthquake that destroys their enemies.

The seventh trumpet then sounds and a vision of heaven follows where the redeemed live in worship of God. This, John believes, is what awaits the churches that face the evil of Rome’s persecution.

Chapter twelve introduces a new phase in the apocalyptic struggle between God and the evil that has infected his creation. First, a woman pregnant appears—Mary who is pregnant with the Son of God. A dragon appears who seeks to destroy her. This is the devil himself. The origin of the devil is heaven where a war breaks out between him—a fallen angel, who wants to take the place of God—and the angel Michael. The devil is defeated and ejected from heaven. However, now that he is on earth, he seeks the woman to destroy her so that the redeemer of the world is also destroyed. This scene is meant to set the stage for the devil's war on God, now on earth rather than in heaven. The woman is saved, allowing for the birth of God's Son, but the devil inspires a partner in his war on God's people—the first beast. John is now speaking about current events, namely, the persecution of the churches in Asia. The devil gives his power to Rome—the first beast, who in turn uses “the second beast”—the Roman governor in Asia to try and eliminate the people of God.

Another possible interpretation is that the second beast is the emperor himself who is designated by the number 666. Some interpreters see this as symbolic of an imperfect or flawed number and therefore an enemy of God. Others have theorized that the numbers could symbolize the emperor Nero who tried to martyr all the Christians in Rome around the year 63-64. At this time, Peter was crucified upside down, Paul was beheaded, and many Christians were either burned alive or fed to wild beasts in the Roman Coliseum.

This leads to the turning point in the story. In Chapter fifteen, we have the beginning of the story of the seven last plagues.