

why experience revelation?

Stepping into the unknown can be terrifying. Especially when the future seems uncertain with the likelihood of hardship and suffering. In these moments, we may long to have a friend speak words of comfort to steady us amid the chaos. The book of Revelation, in a most unexpected way, contains those words of comfort for the people of God.

It would be easy to think of Scripture and Revelation in particular as something God gave us only to inform us. But as scholar, theologian and pastor Eugene Peterson said in his book *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, “The intent of Revelation is not to inform us about God. But involve us in God.” Friends, there is truly brilliant information found in God’s Word, but there is so much more. There is also an invitation to be a part of God’s story, a story that unfolds by the Creator God’s powerful might and authority.

As we study Revelation, at times we will search for clarity of meaning among images that seem confusing and words that feel out of place and foreign to us. In these moments, be encouraged and reminded that this is more than information to absorb; this is an invitation to know God and His story.

Revelation acknowledges the crises that we experience or will one day experience and offers a picture of the final outcome that produces not a theoretical hope but a courageous hope rooted in truth and fact. Through Revelation, God’s people are encouraged to take courage and persevere in hope because our momentary sufferings will pale in comparison to the glorious, final victory of Jesus. It reminds us that without the presence of a crisis, there would never be a need for hope.

As we work our way through Revelation, fight the temptation to place this study in the category of future events that are far off. When we do this, we lose sight of how Revelation speaks specifically to us today. We have a “right now” and a “not yet” that leaves us with a deep longing, yet encourages us with profound hope.

One of the important themes of Revelation is a call for the people of God to hear. As we study Revelation, let’s intentionally focus to hear what the Lord is saying through these ancient words. The ultimate goal of Revelation is to bring and reinforce hope and courage to believers throughout time. It is an assurance that God is working out His purpose even in the midst of tragedy, suffering, persecution and the evil schemes of the enemy. In *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*, G.K. Beale said the book of Revelation is, “The Bible’s battle cry of victory, for in it, more than anywhere else in the NT, is revealed the final victory of God over all the forces of evil.”



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historical context/situation

There is general consensus among 20th-century scholars that Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian around 95 A.D. However, there are some that prefer a date prior to 70 A.D. and the destruction of Jerusalem.

When considering dates, we look at internal and historical factors. One of the challenges of the internal factors is that much of Revelation was written in symbols and metaphors. Therefore, historical factors will be very helpful. The testimony of the earliest church fathers supports a date during the time of Domitian. The most important witnesses are those closest to a historical writing. These include Irenaeus, Victorinus of Pettau, Eusebius, Origen and possibly Clement of Alexandria. However, the earliest and most decisive evidence we have comes from Irenaeus, who is quoted in The Church History of Eusebius by Eusebius of Caesaria as saying, "If it were necessary for his name to be proclaimed openly at the present time, it would have been declared by him who saw the revelation. For it was seen not long ago, but almost in our own generation, at the end of the reign of Domitian."

This reference to Domitian gives us a historical timestamp to consider the historical situation. We've learned from church historians that persecution of Christians dealt with the requirement for emperor worship. During Domitian's reign, he insisted on greater divine titles than earlier emperors in order to increase his hold, power and authority on the people through the government. Those that refused to acknowledge these new titles were persecuted. Domitian's anger toward Christians came under two categories and accusations:

1. Treason
2. Adopting the Jewish way of life

The penalties for either accusation ranged from economic fines (money), exile (which John was in the midst of), or even death.



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historical context/situation

Christians found themselves in another challenging situation. Judaism was considered a legal, authorized and “permitted religion.” Under this sanction they were afforded certain rights:

1. They had the ability to observe their legal tradition.
2. They could gather at synagogue for worship.
3. They were exempt from the state cult/religion.

However, as Christianity grew, they were viewed as separate and distinguished from Judaism. This meant they would no longer experience the benefit or rights of a “permitted religion” and were open to severe persecution. Ultimately, what we can know historically of this time period is that the Christian church grew, and as it grew, it became a point of interest and concern for Roman emperors who feared a revolt. This caused the Roman emperors to tighten their grip and establish their own sovereignty and authority over the people. The chosen method required the empire to worship the emperor as god. This was something Christians could not do and therefore found themselves in harm’s way and under persecution as they chose to stay true to their allegiance with Christ.



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connecting to the rest of scripture

If you enjoy drinking tea, you know it's important to let the tea bag steep in hot water for a few minutes. The steep makes it possible for the tea bag to flavor the water. Reading through the book of Revelation is like drinking a hot cup of tea steeped in the Old Testament. The connection of Old Testament themes, pictures, images, symbols, numbers and motifs awaits us at every turn of the page. Scholars estimate that as many as 278 out of the 404 verses in Revelation contain references to the Old Testament, and over 500 allusions to the Old Testament are made in total. In fact, Revelation has more allusions to the Old Testament than all of the other New Testament books put together!

So, it's clear we need to have a grasp of the Old Testament in order to comprehend what God, through the Apostle and prophet John, wants to teach us in the book of Revelation. In the Old Testament, God continually calls His people to turn from their sin and idols and return to Him as their one true King and Lord. This was often done in the Old Testament through prophets who would proclaim God's words to His people. Prophecy in the Old Testament called the people to renew their commitment to God and His law. In the Old Testament, prophecy is often applied directly to the Israelites. However, there was always anticipation in the Old Testament for the inclusion of Gentiles and for all the nations to return to the Lord. (Genesis 17:5) So we find in Revelation a fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

In the Old Testament, God gave Israel the title "*kingdom of priests*," (Exodus 19:6) and John applies this term to the church. (Revelation 1:6; 5:10) In Zechariah 12:10, the prophet says the tribes of Israel would mourn over the Messiah; John expands this to include all the tribes of the earth. (Revelation 1:7) What God does is simply amazing. God gives John these visions in the best way he could understand them, by using the language and story of the Bible. This is the strongest possible affirmation of the authority of both the Old and New Testaments, Beale concluded.

In a sense, Revelation is picking up where the Old Testament left off and gives us a true picture of what awaits the people of God and the enemies of God. In the Old Testament, God is with His people, protecting them in exile until He delivers them to the promised land. In Revelation, we are reminded that the same God of the Old Testament is also actively protecting His people in the New Testament. He is protecting them in the present and will return to deliver all His people from all nations to the New Heavens and New Earth.



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uniquely revelation

The kind of narrative John wrote is one of the most unique and spectacular aspects of Revelation. John uses three writing styles in order to communicate the message that was given to him. John writes in apocalyptic, prophecy and epistle forms of narrative. For Revelation to be apocalyptic is to communicate an intensified form of prophecy. Therefore, there is a clear synergy and connection between prophetic and apocalyptic. The combined apocalyptic/prophetic nature of Revelation is simply God's communication of His will and work (often through visions, symbols and images) in regard to past, present and future events.

As we read Revelation, let's pay close attention to the unique experience John takes us through where he recalls past events, connects them to our present and gives a vision for the future. This brings us to the epistle form of writing that we experience. An epistle functions in the New Testament to address current issues that the church is facing. In Revelation, John uses the epistle form to address problems among the seven churches. We can read Revelation as a unique prophecy with apocalyptic overtones written in the form of a letter.

Another unique aspect of Revelation is the usage of symbols:

In the opening sentences of the letter, the Greek word translated as "revelation" is *apokalypsis*, which means "to reveal" or "unveil."

Just a few words later in Revelation 1:1, the phrase "*He made it known*" is used. This is the Greek word *sēmainō*, which can also mean to communicate by symbols.

Also, in Revelation 1:1 we find the word "show" or *deiknymi* which is used explicitly throughout Revelation to introduce symbolic communication by vision. (Revelation 4:1; 17:1; 21:9–10; 22:1, 6, 8)

What does all this mean? It seems clear that we are to pay special attention to the symbols that are depicted throughout Revelation because they are meant to show us something — to encourage us in our present experiences while hoping for the destiny that awaits us.



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uniquely revelation

In *All Things New*, Tabb reminds us that the symbols, numbers and images throughout Revelation are unique, but they also communicate something specific for us to understand and keep in mind. Symbols were used by Old Testament prophets — and Jesus through parables — to shock apathetic and sleepy saints back to life and into proper spiritual alignment with the Creator God. John follows the introduction of a symbol with Old Testament background, he presents an interpretation of the symbol, and then he reintroduces the symbol later in the book. For example:

- **The number 7** and its multipliers are symbols of fullness and perfection. In the Old Testament, God completes His creative work in seven days. John writes to seven churches, a symbol of the fullness of all churches.
- **The number 4** represents the complete cosmos as there are four corners of the earth (Revelation 7:1; 20:8) and four divisions of creation — heaven, earth, sea and freshwater. (Revelation 14:7)
- **The symbol of the four living creatures** (lion, ox, man and eagle) represent the strongest, swiftest and most dignified of created beings.
- **The number 12** is often associated with the people of God. In the Old Testament, we read about the 12 tribes of Israel. In Revelation, there are 12,000 sealed from each of the 12 tribes. (Revelation 7:4-8) The tree of life bears 12 types of fruits for the people of God to eat. (Revelation 2:7; 22:2)

Possibly one of the most unique aspects of Revelation is the final fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of a unified people of God who would be made up of every tribe and nation of humankind. When we see the phrase “*all the tribes of the earth*” in Revelation 1:7, we are reminded that this phrase never refers to the Israelite tribes in the Old Testament. Rather, it refers to all nations, as it does in every one of its occurrences (Genesis 12:3; 28:14; Psalm 72:17; Zechariah 14:17) in the Septuagint (The Old Testament written in Greek). It seems John is intentionally taking what is said of Israel in Zechariah 12 and Revelation 1:7 and transferring the truth of God’s protection, provision and presence to *all* peoples of the earth who turn to Christ as their Savior. This is the reality of the New Heavens and New Earth. It is a place where all people of all nations, a multiethnic family, will bow their knee in worship of King Jesus.



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SYMBOLS

IN REVELATION

reference	symbol	revelation's own interpretation
1:20	Seven stars	The angels of the seven churches
1:20	Seven lampstands	The seven churches
4:5	Seven torches of fire	The seven spirits of God
5:6	Lamb's seven horns and eyes	The seven spirits of God
5:8	Golden bowls full of incense	The prayers of the saints
7:9-14	A great white-robed multitude	The ones coming out the great tribulation
11:4	The two olive trees and lampstands	The two witnesses who prophesy
14:3-4	The 144,000	Those who follow the Lamb
17:9-10	The beast's seven heads	Seven mountains and kings
19:8	Fine linen	The righteous deeds of the saints
20:5	Thousand-year reign with Christ	The first resurrection
20:14	The lake of fire	The second death



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revelation 1:1-3

TODAY'S DATE:

Write a verse that summarizes the chapter:

MAJOR MOMENT: Jesus shares His revelation with John.

Many people refer to the book of Revelation as “The Revelation of John;” however, Revelation 1:1 says this book is “the revelation of...” whom?

Notice Jesus is mentioned in verse 1 as both the original receiver and giver of the revelation. How should knowing it was Jesus who gave this revelation change how we read this book?

“The revelation of Jesus” could also be transliterated from Greek to “The apocalypse of Jesus.” Using the **Uniquely** section on page 13 of the introduction, define “apocalypse.” In light of this, has your understanding of this word changed? If so, how?

There is a high probability that the Apostle John penned the pages of Revelation. What three titles does John give himself in verses 1 and 9?

What does the above answer say about John’s character? Why might these titles be considered amazing, given the magnitude of his vision? How can we model this humility in our own lives?



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revelation 1:4-7

Write a verse that summarizes the chapter:

MAJOR MOMENT: John greets the churches in Asia.

While there exists a literary subgenre called “Apocalyptic,” what does *John* say this book is? (verse 3)

Prophecy, in simple terms, means truth spoken about God. So, with what we know about the words “revelation” and “prophecy,” describe in your own words what the book of Revelation is.

Among several names listed for Jesus in verse 5, one of them is “*the firstborn of the dead*.” Normally life emerges from existing life, but here we read Jesus was born, not out of life, or even nothingness, but out of death. How might this name show both Jesus’ deity and humanity?

Since Jesus was born after many people, what might it mean that he was “born” first?

What might be some other implications of being “firstborn”? (verse 5) For example: the firstborn child would historically receive an inheritance from their father. How is Jesus like an older brother? How might this affect our relationship with Him?



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revelation 1:8-20

Write a verse that summarizes the chapter:

MAJOR MOMENT: John sees a vision of Jesus.

What multiple-word title does the Lord God claim for Himself in verse 8?

The Alpha and the Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. In verse 10, John hears a loud voice, which we know from verses 1-2 is the “*revelation from Jesus Christ*” and “*the testimony from Jesus Christ*.” Now look at what Jesus says in verses 17-18. What title does Jesus claim for Himself? Why do you think this is significant?

In verse 18, Jesus says He has the keys of “*Hades*.” Hades represents the unseen world of departed spirits and may be translated “grave” only if the reader knows that this is not the same as a tomb or earthen grave but the state of being continually dead. “Hell” on the other hand is a related but separate concept for the final destruction of the enemies of God. (Matthew 10:28; Revelation 21) What does this say about the authority of Jesus over these things? Take some time to meditate on this and write down your thoughts.



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revelation 2:1-17

TODAY'S DATE:

Write a verse that summarizes the chapter:

MAJOR MOMENT: Jesus shares messages for the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.

Ephesus: Jesus praises the Ephesians for guarding against false doctrine. (verse 2) However, the major criticism for the church of Ephesus is that they have abandoned the love they had at first for Jesus, the Word and others. What does Jesus ask the church to do? (verse 5) How might this help us protect ourselves from false teaching without being hypocritical or unloving ourselves?

Smyrna: There is a Greek phrase in verse 10 translated from “*stephanos*” which was a sort of trophy awarded to a victor. It is a victory wreath, or crown, which would be especially appropriate in Smyrna, a city famous for its Games. God says to the church at Smyrna and to us today that the believer who remains faithful, even when it means death, will receive the _____ of _____.

Pergamum: This church is encouraged for holding fast to Jesus. (verse 13) However, Jesus warns that He will come to judge those who don't repent of being like the Nicolaitans who were behaving both unlovingly and immorally. (verse 15-16) Are there ways in which you might repent today of being unloving or immoral?



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revelation 2:18-29

Write a verse that summarizes the chapter:

MAJOR MOMENT: Jesus shares a message for the church of Thyatira.

The “Jezebel” from 1 Kings 16 was the wife of the evil king Ahab. She incited him to worship other gods. Here in verse 20, the name Jezebel is likely a nickname given by the Lord for Sambethé, a woman who claimed to be a _____ but was teaching falsely.

The reference to Jezebel, (verse 20) Balaam (verse 14) and the Nicolaitans (verse 15) can all be grouped together in a category of encouraging actions mentioned in verse 14: They would “... eat _____ and practice sexual _____.” These could be summarized as being unloving to both God and neighbor. (For further study see 1 Corinthians 6-8.)

In contrast to these two actions specifically, write your thoughts on how we can be *loving* to both God and the people in our lives.



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