

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 26: Revelation**

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Hope is an incredibly powerful thing.What we hope in demonstrates what we value;it drives our perseverance, it motivates our acts of love, and it gives meaning to our pursuit of purity and holiness.

Our attention this morning turns to the book of Revelation,a book that points ahead to the hope of God’s people: Christ’s final reign.

I wonder what images come to mind when you think of this last book of the Bible? Does the strange imagery tend to scare you off? Maybe you feel like it’s a book about gloom and doom and final judgment. Maybe you’ve spent time in the past picking through its details to discern exactly how the future will play out. Well, no matter your past impressions of this book, let me encourage you to revisit it today with a fresh look. Make no mistake, this book *does* tell us plenty about the future. But its primary application isn’t in the future—like a map I might give you for a place you’re not going to for another ten years. Instead, its main message is about how we can rightly order our hopes—and thus our lives—today. This marvelous book tells us that, ultimately, God wins. And those who have placed their trust in Him will live with Him forever.

And that’s important. Because if you see this book as being about determining who exactly the Antichrist is, or what exactly the mark of the beast will look like, I suspect Revelation will not change your life very much tomorrow. But as you begin to understand to true message of the book, you can’t help but be changed. How you can live a life today that only makes sense if this book is true?

## Background

We’ll start with some background. By the time John wrote the book of Revelation from exile on the isle of Patmos around the end of the first century, the gospel had been preached throughout the whole province of Asia as well as much of the rest of the Roman Empire—to the point that Paul could write in Colossians 1:6 that the gospel was bearing fruit “all over the world.” Many had believed and had become Christians. And those who believed knew that before he was taken up into heaven, Jesus promised that he would one day return and establish God’s final kingdom.

But nothing happened. Instead, wickedness in the empire continued to increase and the little band of Christians began to be persecuted. At the end of the first century, Domitian became the emperor of Rome. Unlike his predecessors who were mostly worshiped as divine after they died, Domitian honestly believed himself to be divine and strongly enforced emperor worship throughout the empire. Because Christians refused to worship anyone but the true God, they found themselves the objects of suspicion and persecution, sometimes even to death. So it led many to question what had happened to God’s good promises. Why did it appear that evil was triumphing over good? Would the church survive? Does God care about us? Can he do anything about our suffering? And if he can, when will he? I wonder, have you ever asked similar questions?

In that context, the book of Revelation was written to encourage Christians toward perseverance and hope.

## Genre

So then, how exactly did God’s Holy Spirit communicate that hope? That brings us to a discussion of genre. We’ve not spent much time considering genre in this class because the books we’ve studied recently have all been letters, which is a genre we understand quite well. Revelation is different, though. Yes, John writes to seven churches, so it is a letter. But it’s also apocalyptic in nature. And many cases of misunderstanding in this letter stem from a misunderstanding of this genre. What would happen if you played soccer according the rules of football? It wouldn’t work so well, would it? It’s the same when you read a piece of literature, biblical or otherwise. You need to understand the rules of the genre or you’ll end up grossly misinterpreting it. So, what does it mean for Revelation to be apocalyptic?

Apocalypse is a Greek word meaning to unveil. It was written not to confuse or to mystify, but rather to serve as a clear unveiling of God’s plan to bring judgment on the wicked and to preserve his people for eternal life in his kingdom. Apocalyptic literature is a kind of prophetic literature, talking about what will happen in the future.
What appears to modern readers as strange visions and coded language was to the first century Jew or Christian a familiar set of literary devices, many of which were drawn from the Old Testament. But while predictive prophecy in the OT generally uses realistic language, apocalyptic uses a symbolic, highly stylized vocabulary to talk about events, both past, present and future. What that means is Revelation is to be interpreted figuratively unless the context forces us to interpret it literally! Very different than other genres in Scripture.

The events in Revelation are real—but described in apocalyptic, or symbolic terms, rather than as a realistic, linear historical narrative. Throughout the book images are layered over each other, with common themes recapitulated over and over again to give us a set of strong impressions. In this case, the strong impression that God is in control, that he wins in the end, and that he cares deeply for his people.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Outline

Now. With genre in view, let’s move into the structure of the book. One of the most important things to recognize about the structure of Revelation is that it is divided into seven separate sections that do not follow after each other chronologically and linearly, but rather recapitulate one another and build in intensity in a sort of progressive parallelism. In terms of history, each section begins with the first coming of Christ and ends with his second coming, thus covering the entire church age. The last few sections build further, ending with the final judgment and the new heaven and earth.

The Church and the World

Chapters 1-3 The Church in the World (Seven Lampstands)

Each church is a type of response to the world. There are references to 2nd coming throughout, but no formal progression to final judgment

Chapters 4-7 The Church suffering trial and persecution (Seven Seals)

6th seal a picture of final judgment, while the 7th seal is silence, which in OT is symbolic of the shut mouths of the ungodly awaiting judgment.

Chapters 8-11 The Church protected and victorious (Seven Trumpets)

Visions of God’s judgment on the world, including unbelievers in the church. 7th trumpet a declaration of final victory! God wins!

Christ and the Dragon

Chapters 12-14 Christ opposed by the Dragon & his helpers (Seven Visions)

Begins with the birth of Christ and ends with scenes of final judgment. Rev. 14:14.

Chapters 15-16 Final judgment upon the wicked (Seven Bowls)

Again, section ends with final judgment: “It is done!” Rev. 16:17.

Chapters 17-19 The Fall of Babylon and the Beasts

This section progresses even further, past the final judgment of Babylon and the Beast, to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Rev. 19:7.

Chapters 20-22 The Dragon’s Doom and Christ’s Victory

And of course there is no debate that this last section ends with the new heavens and the new earth.[[2]](#footnote-2)

With each of the seven visions, John surveys the entire history of the church, but each time from a different perspective and with different emphases. There is a progressive nature, but it is not fundamentally chronological, but rather a progression in intensity and finality. Any questions?

OK. What we’ll do now is to walk through the book—beginning with the first few chapters, then moving through one of the cycles of seven as illustrative of the others, and finishing with the conclusion of the book.

## Revelation as a Letter

This book begins as a letter to seven churches scattered throughout modern-day Turkey. The general pattern John uses to address each of these churches is to include a commendation, a rebuke, a solution, the result of not repenting, and a promise. We’ll take the sections to the church at Ephesus and Laodicea as examples.

**Ephesus (2:1ff)**: John commends them for their good deeds, their hard work and perseverance. He rebukes them because they “have abandoned the love they first had”, they are doctrinally vigilant but relationally cold. He calls them to do the things they did at first, and if they do not repent they will have their lampstand removed.

Then skip ahead to 3:14.

**Laodicea**: this church for better or worse is best known of all the churches for the rebuke they receive. Unlike the other churches (save Sardis), they are *not* commended, but instead rebuked for being neither hot or cold but lukewarm. They do not realize their spiritual poverty; they assume themselves to be doing okay. They are encouraged to buy new gold which has been refined so they may be truly rich, white garments to cover their naked shame, and salve to open their blind eyes. If they do not repent, they will be spit out of Christ’s mouth like the lukewarm water they are; if they overcome they will sit with Christ on His throne.

Now. The genre of this section of the book is that of a letter, not of apocalypse. So our bias should be literal interpretation. It’s best, then, to understand these seven churches as churches that actually existed and to whom John is speaking specifically. But it’s also appropriate to see the issues being addressed as present in various churches throughout the history of the church. It should also be noted that each of these churches is first described in terms of who Christ is, and each of these churches is told what good will happen if they overcome their specific challenge. We should consider the admonitions that John gives these churches and seek to repent of ways our churches may be prone to the errors he is addressing, and rejoice that Christ is working through even flawed churches to establish His reign.

Well, in chapter 4 the scene suddenly changes, and John moves from addressing the seven churches and is taken into a grand vision of Christ and what He has for our future. 4:1, “After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’” We’ll spend the rest of our time this morning following John on his journey into the very throne room of God.

**The Throne**

Chapter 4, verse 2, John is “in the Spirit” and the first thing he sees is a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. The scene that now unfolds provides the framework for understanding what drives the rest of what we’ll read in this book. Verse three:

*“And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within”* (Rev 4:3-8).

Later we read that the twenty-four elders lay their crowns before the throne and say,

*“Worthy are you, 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.”* (Rev 4:11).

This is the center of everything. At the center of history is not an impersonal chemical reaction. At the center of the universe is not chance and randomness. There is a throne, and on that throne there is a sovereign God who rules the world. John goes on to tell us many other things about the future. But he wants us to get this clear at the beginning.

At the center of everything is a throne—the throne of God. And we are called to ultimately trust nothing other than God on his throne. The world and all of us in it are not held in the hand of Caesar. We are not in the hand of any government or boss or family member. If we are Christians who trust in the Lamb who was slain, we are in the hand of the one who bought us with the Lamb’s blood. Therefore, the future is not meaningless. It is not anonymous. It is not foreboding and empty like a soon-to-be occupied casket. No, the future is full and bright for Christians because of this throne. Trust God for his perfect rule.

**The Lion, the Lamb on the Throne**

But John didn’t just see God on his throne. John *hears* of the Lion.

Verse 5: *“And one of the elders said to me, ‘Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’”* (5:5).

Then John turns and *sees* not a Lion but the Lamb. He says,

*“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I say a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”* (5:6).

Imagine John’s astonishment when he looks and sees not a lion but a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain. A Lamb! A Lamb that had been slain! A slain Lamb standing on the very throne of God!Was the elder mistaken? Thinking the slain lamb was the lion? No. The lamb and the lion are the same thing. The suffering servant *is* the Lord of Glory. And this lamb is on God’s throne. He is in fact God himself and is being worshipped as God.

Incidentally, this pattern will repeat throughout the book. John *hears* one thing, John *sees* another, and they are the same thing—something fraught with theological significance. Lots of examples of this in the book of Revelation. Just to pick up one more, look ahead to chapter 7. John *hears* in verse 4 of *“And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.”* and then in verse 9 we read, “*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb*,” The 12 tribes of Israel and the multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, are the same thing. Seeing adds another dimension on top of hearing, and the fact that these two are the same is of enormous theological significance. The multi-ethnic church *is* the new people of Israel, the fulfillment to which that ethnic nation always pointed.

But back to chapter 4.

It is the lamb, and the lamb alone, who is able to open the sealed scroll of God. Only he had authority to fulfill judgment and redemption. Only he had purchased this redeemed company.

In a moment we are going to walk through the pattern of judgment that is repeated in greater intensity from the seven seals, to the seven trumpets, to the seven bowls. But let’s pause here to consider what we see here in chapter 5.

Only the Lamb controls when these judgments are unleashed and only the Lamb can save and protect the Redeemed from these judgments. Do you know how many of the 144,000 saints I mentioned before remain standing around the Lamb? Not 143,999, but 144,000. Twelve tribes times twelve, times one-thousand. The number signifies completeness. None of God’s people have been left out. Not one of them is missing. All of God’s chosen ones are sealed and protected from God’s wrath. The Lamb keeps those whom he has purchased with his blood.

In this book we see that terrible things will happen, but even in the midst of judgment God is in control and will work for the good of those who are his. **Hope in the book of Revelation is not found in the absence of suffering, but in God’s goodness and sovereignty that are displayed despite suffering, and even within suffering.** That’s the message of the book that we see even right here at the beginning. God is in control. We can put our trust in him.

But we do move along to judgment. Chapter 6, verse 1.

**God’s Judgment**

John tells us that, *“Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voce like thunder, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.”* (6:1-2).

As I mentioned before, chapters 6-16 are not a linear, end-to-end recounting of events in history. We’d have some pretty serious problems if that were the case; after all, how could the events of chapters 7 and on even take place after the sixth seal is opened in 6:14, as we read: *“The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.”* (6:14). If we are to take these judgments as a linear recounting of events, then several of the remaining judgments could not literally take place.

Instead, what we see, as I mentioned earlier, is several cycles of seven that each cover the full spectrum of history from Jesus’ first coming to his second—with each cycle more intense than the last. But each cycle is describing the same time period- simply from a different angle. What we’ll do is consider just one of these cycles in order to get a flavor for them all. The seven trumpets, chapter 8.

Judgment begins with the land being burned with fire and hail. The judgments get progressively worse with part of the sea becoming blood, rivers and springs becoming embittered by a falling star, one-third of the sun, moon, and stars being darkened, locust demons coming out of the abyss, one-third of mankind being killed, and finally the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of God in chapter 11, verse 15.

Through all these events we learn important things about God’s judgment. Let’s consider some of these lessons. We see first:

The Completeness of God’s Judgment (See 11:15-18; 22:12). In each series – the seals, the trumpets, the bowls the judgments – like a descending spiral -- repeatedly get worse. So complete is God’s power that even his extraterrestrial creation acts in concert with his judgment on earth: the sun is blackened, the moon turns red, and the stars fall. Not even death itself can hide us from the searching judgment of God (11:18).

The Finality of God’s Judgment “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” (11:15b). This present world will end. There will come a day when it is all over. There is no appeal from God’s judgment. When God judges, the only response is the silence of assent and songs of worship.

The Horror of God’s Judgment. The severity of his judgments is clear throughout the book. It will be a horrible thing to undergo the judgment of the Lord Almighty. Every kind of human will be horrified on that day…if the images are true, we do not help anyone by trying to make them seem less horrible.

The Righteousness of God’s Judgment. At the end of the seven trumpets, 11:17-18, the two elders praise God for his righteous judgment.

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

God’s judgments are complete, accurate, and appropriate. God’s judgment will not be an embarrassment: it is his vindication, and therefore cause for praise. And though this may not make sense to us today, let alone feel comfortable, Revelation tells us that one day this will all make sense. And God’s goodness will be vindicated.

## God will triumph

But the book does not end with judgment. After the seals, and trumpets, and bowls we see the defeat of the Beast, the fall of Babylon, and triumphant reign of Christ. Turn ahead to chapter 20, verse 11.

*“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.”*

Before this throne, Satan and the dead are judged. God is sovereign over history.

Remember, when John is writing this the emperors of Rome, the most powerful kingdom the world had ever seen, were demanding obedience meant only for God. To resist could lead to death. John, an old man at the end of his days on a tiny island in the middle of nowhere, is proclaiming judgment on the kingdom of Rome and likewise on future kingdoms that are to come! Why? Because Jesus is coming back! He will judge. The final word is not with Caesar in his Roman halls, but with Almighty God!

**From a Garden to a City**

And that brings us to our final section in the book. With judgment past, we see a picture of our glorious future. All the events from Genesis 3 to Revelation 20 have been in preparation for a grand restoration greater than anything we have ever experienced. God is preparing a people for Himself who will live together with Him for all eternity. You’ll recall that the Bible began in a garden, the garden of Eden. But with God’s people increasing to a multitude no one can count, it ends in a city, the heavenly city of Revelation 21.

Of course, the description of this Heavenly City does not begin in Revelation, but way back in the Old Testament where God’s prophets prepared us for what John would describe here. You’ll see on your handout some of the parallels between Rev 21 and various passages in the Old Testament. Isaiah 65:17 describes the new heavens and new earth, Ez 37:27 and Lev 26:11-12 proclaim God’s dwelling will be with His people, Is 55:1 and 2 Sam 7:14 describe the provision that is made for citizens of this City, and throughout the OT we see physical descriptions of this City.

Do you think of Heaven as a City? You have may have mixed attitudes towards cities and for good reason. Even the Bible presents cities as Godforsaken places of through his judgments on Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jerusalem itself, and (in the book of Revelation) Rome…With all this in mind, it is amazing to read what John sees in this last and perhaps greatest vision in the Bible. He does not see a bunch of disembodied beings inhabiting clouds and reclining in everlasting laziness. No, he sees an entirely new creation, and primarily he sees a new city—the city of holiness, the city of God, the city of God’s people.

God has prepared something even better than a garden for His people. **This City is the hope of all God’s people.** John describes it like this,

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”* (21:1-2).

Skipping to verse 23, *“And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day –and there will be no night there.”* (21:23-25).

Furthermore, the very effects of the Fall will no longer be with us, *“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.”*  (22:1-3).

What a glorious place this will be! Death is replaced by life (21:4). Night is replaced by everlasting light (21:23-26). Corruption by purity (21:27). Divine curse by divine blessing (22:1-5). The city is one of brilliance (21:9-21). And the rebellion of mankind? Rebellion is pictured throughout the Bible as a raging sea (e.g. Is 57:20, Ps 89, 93). And so the sea we saw around the throne in 4:6 was *“as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.”*  Without any perturbation. Rebellion quenched. And yet in this new heaven and new earth, 21:1: *“and the sea was no more.”* Rebellion? There is no such thing anymore.

And thus the peculiar shape of this city. 21:16, it is pictured as a perfect cube. Can anyone think of another structure in the bible of that shape? [wait for an answer]

Yes! The Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place within the temple (1 Kings 6:20). With rebellion done, the entirety of God’s people will live forever in the very presence of God, in the heavenly holy of holies. We will worship Him, and him alone, for all eternity!

## Conclusion

Well, time to conclude. We will finally come face to face with God and rejoice. He designed it that way since the beginning of the beginning -- before time. He will wipe away every tear from your face. So, trust him! His Kingdom is coming!

God cares about the world He has created. He is in control. And He will finally act to restore all things to Himself.

The revelation of the New Testament is the revelation of the Kingdom of God. It began with the announcement of the Kingdom and the coming of the King in the Gospels. It progressed with the Kingdom’s expansion to the ends of the earth in Acts. It continued with various letters from the servants of the Kingdom, detailing how the Kingdom should be organized here on earth, who its members are, and what their life should look like. Those letters also warned that the Kingdom would face opposition. But the New Testament ends with the ringing declaration that the Kingdom of God, established through the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, would prevail. And that this Kingdom, unlike every other kingdom this world has ever known, will never end. Which leaves each of us with the question: Are you a member of this Kingdom? Do you know the King? Are you serving the King? If so, then you will understand why John ends the New Testament on the same note that Matthew began it. Come, Lord Jesus. Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

Let’s pray.

1. See William Hendriksen’s *More Than Conquerors* for a careful critique of other methods of interpretation in the book of Revelation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. But what you should notice is that it begins with the beginning of the church age. This is the millennium, in which the power of Satan is being bound by the progress of the Kingdom. And at the end of which, he will be finally overthrown! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)