



Unveiled: Sermons on Revelation

**Lemoore Presbyterian Church
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By Rev. Dave Dack

How to Read Apocalyptic Literature in the Bible

Revelation belongs to a genre of writing called “Apocalyptic Literature.” The purpose of this genre is to reveal divine mysteries through symbolic visions and messages. It often deals with the end times (eschatology), cosmic battles, and the ultimate triumph of God over all who oppose God.

Context

- **Historical Context:** Recognize that these texts were written during times of crisis or persecution. They offered hope and encouragement to the faithful.
- **Literary Context:** Compare with other biblical genres. Apocalyptic literature uses vivid imagery and metaphor, differing from historical narrative or poetry.

Key Characteristics

1. **Symbolism:**
 - a. **Imagery:** Expect symbolic numbers (e.g., 7, 12), creatures (e.g., beasts, dragons), and objects (e.g., lamps, seals). These symbols often have specific meanings rooted in the cultural and religious context of the time.
 - b. **Interpretation:** Use the Bible to interpret its own symbols. Look for explanations within the text or similar symbols in other biblical books.
2. **Dualism:**
 - a. **Cosmic Conflict:** Apocalyptic literature often portrays a struggle between good and evil, light and darkness.
 - b. **Eschatology:** It emphasizes the end of the current age and the inauguration of a new, divine era.
3. **Revelation Through Visions:**
 - a. **Prophetic Dreams:** These books feature complex visions given to a prophet or seer. Understand these as God’s way of revealing hidden truths.
 - b. **Angelic Mediators:** Angels frequently appear to interpret visions or deliver messages.

Reading Strategies

1. **Historical-Critical Method:** Investigate the historical circumstances of the text’s composition. Understand the socio-political challenges faced by the original audience.
2. **Theological Themes:** Identify core themes such as God’s sovereignty, judgment, salvation, and hope. Reflect on how these themes apply to both the original audience and contemporary readers.
3. **Literary Analysis:** Pay attention to the structure and flow of the visions. Notice the transitions between scenes and the buildup to climactic events.
4. **Parallel Reading:** Compare apocalyptic passages with other biblical texts. Books like Daniel and Revelation often reference earlier scriptures. Cross-referencing can illuminate obscure passages.

Practical Application

1. **Discernment:** Approach apocalyptic literature with a balanced perspective. Avoid overly literal interpretations or wild speculation about modern events. It doesn’t have to be literal to be true, and prophecies can be fulfilled more than once and in more than one way.
2. **Hope and Encouragement:** Embrace the central message of hope and divine justice. Apocalyptic texts remind believers of God’s ultimate control and the promise of redemption.
3. **Community and Worship:** Use these texts to foster communal reflection and worship. Discuss their relevance and how they inspire faith and perseverance.
4. **Prayerful Reading:** Engage with the text through prayer, seeking insight and understanding. Allow the symbolic and mysterious elements to deepen your awe and reverence for God’s plan.

By approaching apocalyptic literature with these strategies, readers can gain a deeper appreciation of its rich symbolism, profound themes, and enduring message of hope and divine sovereignty.

Week 1: The Churches

Reading: Chapters 1-4

Sermon text for Sunday, September 15th: Revelation 1:1-8

Introduction to Revelation

- Revelation (singular! Not “Revelations”) is *good news* first and foremost.
- The Greek word for revelation is *apocalypse*, which just means unveiling.
- It is a letter written to seven specific churches and to the Church generally.
- It is *not* a tool for decoding the future, but for “beholding the Lamb.”
- It has many parallels to the book of Daniel, and reinterprets some of Daniel's prophecies for a later time (a common practice back then).

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, as you revealed yourself to your servant John ages ago, grant me the blessing of beholding you through the help of your Holy Spirit, and increase within me the longing to behold you face to face when you come in your glory. Amen.

Read Revelation chs. 1-4

Exposition

- The opening verse makes clear the source of this revelation: “from Jesus Christ.”
- John’s greeting in 1:4-8 highlights the dual purpose of the book, namely “grace to you” (v. 4) and “glory to God” (v. 6).
- In 1:9 John identifies with his readers using three themes that will recur throughout the book: suffering, kingdom, and endurance.
- In 1:19 Jesus tells John to write “both what is now and what will take place later.” At least some of Revelation referred to then-current events, but it still speaks to us as well.
- In chs. 2-3, Jesus gives John messages for seven churches. Each one has three basic parts:
 - Something Jesus knows about them;
 - Something Jesus holds against them (except Smyrna and Philadelphia);
 - Something Jesus promises to “those who are victorious.”
- In ch. 4 John is invited into heaven’s throne room, which will be the stage from which he sees most of his visions. The clear central focus is God and His worthiness and holiness.

Reflection Questions

- What has been your history with Revelation? Have you ever read it yourself?
- Does remembering that Revelation is a letter to the Church change how you approach it?
- With which church(es) in chs. 2-3 do you identify most personally?
- How do you think Jesus is revealing himself to *you* in these chapters?

Other Reading

- Isaiah 6:1-8 Isaiah's vision of the Lord and his commissioning.
- Ezekiel 1 Ezekiel's vision of the glory of the Lord.
- Daniel 7:9-14 Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man.
- Hebrews 1:1-4 The supremacy of Christ as God's final revelation.

Week 2: The Lamb

Reading: Revelation 5:1—7:8

Sermon text for Sunday, September 22nd: Revelation 5:1, 6-14

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, as your servant Job was prepared to trust you even if you slayed him, so prepare my heart to trust that you were slain for my sins and that your blood alone, and the grace it purchased, is sufficient for my salvation. Amen.

Read Revelation 5:1—7:8

Exposition

- The central focus of these chapters is the worthiness of the Lamb to open the scroll.
- In 5:5 one of the elders describes Jesus as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” and “the Root of David,” but that’s not what John sees in the next verse. The worthiness of Jesus is symbolized not by his powerful titles, but by “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain.” Jesus’ weakness reveals his worthiness.
- The breaking of the seals unleashes the rest of the events in Revelation, and therefore the rest of God’s salvation plan. Jesus is worthy to finish God’s work of creation & salvation.
- It’s not necessary to speculate about what the horses and riders in ch. 6 represent. The main point is that the conquering, betrayal, economic hardship, and death in our world are, somehow, well within the bounds of God’s sovereign plan. Nothing escapes God’s sovereignty.
- Between the 6th and 7th seals, there is a pause while an angel seals the foreheads of God’s servants. The number 12 and its multiples represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The precise numbering is less about literal amounts and more about God’s favor, ownership, and protection. It is *God* who numbers, protects, and ultimately saves.

Reflection Questions

- What reasons are given for Jesus’ worthiness in 5:5 and 5:9?
- The glory of ch. 5 contrasts sharply with the gloom of ch. 6. How might the abrupt change reveal a fuller understanding of the person and work of Christ?
- In 6:9-11 it talks about God waiting for the full number of martyrs to be killed. We can’t know God’s motivation, but is there comfort in knowing that God keeps count of martyrs and that each one moves history a step closer to its final goal?

Other Reading

- Isaiah 53 The suffering servant.
- Zechariah 1:8, 6:1-3 Zechariah’s vision of four horses.
- Psalm 2 God’s anointed King.
- Romans 9-11 Paul’s thoughts on God’s future plans for the Jews.
- Hebrews 9:11-28 Christ as the high priest and His sacrifice.

Week 3: The Sealed Scroll

Reading: Revelation 5:1—8:5

Sermon text for Sunday, September 29th: Revelation 5:1, 7:9-8:5

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, receive all my past, present, and future prayers and join them with the prayers of all your saints throughout time, that each one may be answered at the great and glorious revelation of Jesus Christ when he comes to judge the earth. Amen.

Read Revelation 5:1, 7:9-8:5

Exposition

- This text is still in the section about unsealing the scroll and the worthiness of the Lamb.
- Last week ended with the numbering and protection of Jews from every tribe. This week begins with a “multitude from every nation.” Salvation extends to Jews and Gentiles.
- The seventh and final seal indicates that the scroll is now open, allowing the final stages of God’s salvation plan to commence.
- Of special note in 8:3-5 is the “incense with the prayers of God’s people.” Earlier in 5:8 the incense *is* the prayers of God’s people. So the rest of Revelation is not only the fulfillment of God’s plan; it’s also God’s answer to our prayers. God keeps, remembers, and ultimately answers our prayers in the fullness of time. Our prayers play a part in the unfolding of God’s salvation.

Reflection Questions

- What is similar between the multitude in 7:9-17 and the 144,000 servants from the tribes of Israel in 7:3-8? What is different?
- What is distinctive about the multitude? How does the angel describe them in 7:14?
- What is their reward in 7:15-17?
- In 8:5, the angel hurling to earth the ignited prayers of God’s people is a striking visual. What does it suggest about how—and when—God uses our prayers? Would you pray differently if you knew that your prayers would one day be “hurled on the earth?”

Other Reading

- Isaiah 49:6 The messiah serves Israel *and* is a light to the nations.
- Isaiah 66:18-23 God gathers all nations.
- Matthew 24:30-31 The Son of Man and the trumpet call.
- 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 Jesus’ return and the trumpet call of God.
- Psalm 67 God’s blessing on all nations.
- Hebrews 12:22-24 The blood of Jesus which perfects the righteous.

Week 4: The Trumpets

Reading: Revelation 8:6—11:19

Sermon text for Sunday, October 6th: Revelation 8:6, 11:15-19

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, I repent of all my sins and of the idolatry of my wayward heart. I revoke my allegiance to earthly nations and false gods and pledge my loyalty to your anointed king, Jesus Christ, who will reign forever and ever. Amen.

Read Revelation 8:6—11:19

Exposition

- Generally speaking, the trumpets represent God's judgment.
- The first four trumpets allude to the plagues of Exodus and contrast with the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22.
- In 8:13 there are three woes that will correspond to the final three trumpets.
 - Fifth Trumpet/First Woe (9:1-12)
 - The smoke imagery draws from Joel 2, and contrasts with the incense of the prayers of God's people.
 - The locusts represent demonic forces, but note that they can only do what they are "allowed" and "given power" to do (9:3-5).
 - These forces have now betrayed the people who worshiped them. Those who tortured and killed Christians are now being tortured. They are being judged with the same judgment they used (Matthew 7:1-3).
 - Sixth Trumpet/Second Woe (9:13 - 11:14)
 - Repentance is the ultimate goal of these judgments and woes (9:20-21).
 - God's revelation to John is bittersweet, as are suffering and salvation (10:9-11).
 - Measuring the temple is similar to Ezekiel 40, except that the outer court is left unprotected. God will protect them spiritually but allow evil forces to persecute and kill them.
 - The two witnesses may be actual historical figures in the future, but either way they also represent the witnessing Church, the spirit of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, all of whom bear witness to Christ.
 - Seventh Trumpet/Third Woe (11:15-19)
 - This final judgment is declared here, then plays out in the following chapters.
 - God's judgment (the trumpets) inaugurates Christ's Kingdom, which is heaven for those who repent, but hell for those who don't.

Reflection Questions

- What role does God's judgment play in completing God's plan for human history?
- What role does our suffering play?

Other Reading

- Exodus 7-13 (the plagues)
- Joel 2 (the devouring army)

Week 7: Babylon Falls

Reading: Revelation 17-18

Sermon text for Sunday, November 3rd: Revelation 18:1-3, 19-24

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, deliver us from the seductive wealth, power, and safety promised by our earthly nations. May our patriotism never eclipse our allegiance to you, and may we willingly forfeit the world in order to gain our soul. Through Christ, Amen.

Read Revelation 17-18

Exposition

- Babylon the Great represents the seduction of Rome and every self-centered empire of history, including our own. Perhaps most seductive is the wealth she promises (17:4, 18:3).
- The hierarchy of authority is: the dragon (Satan) > the beast (the final earthly ruler) > the woman Babylon > peoples and nations. However:
 - God is still sovereign over all of them (17:17);
 - Babylon is eventually betrayed by the very powers she serves (17:15-18).
- The fall of Babylon the Great was first announced in 14:8 and is fulfilled here in ch. 18.
- The angel in v. 1 “had great authority.” Babylon’s authority is small by comparison.
- Verse 3 mentions “adulteries” and “excessive luxuries.” The great sin of any earthly nation is to demand our allegiance (adultery) in exchange for wealth (luxuries).
- Verses 4-8 warn readers to flee the seduction of Babylon before its impending judgment. This warning applies to whatever earthly nation Christians feel most patriotic about.
- Verses 9-20 repeatedly mention the great wealth of Babylon, the sudden loss of which causes sharp grief and a realization of adultery/idolatry among those who benefited most.
- Verses 21-24 emphasize the finality of Babylon’s doom. In the end, God will overthrow our greatest temptation.

Reflection Questions

- What do the real sins of Babylon turn out to be?
- What do these chapters reveal about the dangers of money and wealth?
- On what is Babylon’s success actually built? See 17:6 and 18:24.
- How are we invited to reevaluate our own relationship to money, safety, and comfort?
- How do various competing authorities in our lives fit in with God’s overarching authority?

Other Reading

- Isaiah 21:9 The fall of Babylon
- Jeremiah 51:45-48 Warning to flee Babylon
- Ezekiel 26:16-18 Lament over the fall of Tyre, a prosperous city
- Luke 6:17-36 Jesus’ woes to the rich and attitude toward enemies
- Luke 12:13-34 Jesus’ warning against greed

Week 8: The Wedding

Reading: Revelation 19

Sermon text for Sunday, November 3rd: Revelation 19:1-10

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, prepare my heart for your glorious return. Teach me to rejoice now in my suffering, that I may patiently love my neighbors and even my enemies, whatever the cost to myself. I will leave vengeance to you, who alone judges justly, and will clothe myself in your righteousness until your wedding day comes. Amen.

Read Revelation 19

Exposition

- This is a transitional chapter, moving from the turmoil of chs. 6-18 to the triumph of 19-22.
- The defeat of Babylon is followed by heavenly celebration and the return of Christ.
- The fourfold “hallelujah” is the only place in the New Testament where the word occurs. Its Hebrew root means “Praise Yahweh” which is the theme of the whole passage.
- The movement here is the reverse of chs. 4-5:
 - Chs 4-5: throne > elders & living creatures > multitudes
 - Ch 19: multitudes > elders & living creatures > throne
- The contrast couldn’t be greater between the “condemned prostitute” and the “bride prepared.” The church’s patient endurance is finally rewarded.
- The passage notes in v. 8 that the “fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.” Only Christ’s righteousness saves, but our righteous acts will carry over into heaven. We dress for the occasion with our actions today.
- Verses 11-21 feature the return (second coming) of Christ. During his first advent, he entered Jerusalem on a donkey in peace. Here he returns on a white horse in power as a warrior.
- Verse 11 notes that “with justice he judges and wages war.” Jesus’ “violent side” is reserved for the end, and it’s entirely good and justified.

Reflection Questions

- Rejoicing over Babylon’s fall might seem like *schadenfreude* (pleasure in others’ pain), but what is actually being rejoiced over in 19:1-8?
- How does God’s final condemnation of evil square with Jesus’ command to love our enemies?
- How does the assurance of evil’s future defeat help us patiently endure in the present?

Other Reading

- Deuteronomy 32:43 God will avenge the blood of his servants
- Psalm 96:10-13 The kingship of God and the good news of his judgment
- Isaiah 11:4 The Messiah’s righteous judgment & victory over the wicked
- Zephaniah 3:14-17 God as a mighty warrior who saves
- Luke 10:18-20 Jesus saw Satan fall like lightning
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Christ’s second coming

Week 9: The Judgment

Reading: Revelation 20

Sermon text for Sunday, November 3rd: Revelation 20:11-15

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, forgive my sin and empower me to do the good works you have prepared, that on the day of judgment my works would follow me, and my name would be found in the book of life. Through Christ alone, Amen.

Read Revelation 20

Exposition

- The main theme of this chapter is the defeat of Satan and the vindication of the saints.
- The thousand-year reign of the saints during Satan's imprisonment has been hotly debated. Three main positions stand out:
 - Premillennialism: Christ will return *before* the thousand years;
 - Amillennialism: the thousand years is not literal; it refers to the present time between Christ's first and second coming;
 - Postmillennialism: Christ will return *after* a thousand-year period of peace & belief.
- All three views are valid, and we simply won't know until it happens.
- The fact that the nations return to Satan so quickly upon his release (v. 7-8) serves to justify their eternal punishment. If 1,000 years isn't enough to repent, nothing will be.
- In 11-15 the dead are judged. First, "books were opened" containing their works. Second, the "book of life" was opened. It seems that all people, believers or not, will be judged by their actions (a sobering thought!). But there is still hope if one's name is written in the book of life.
- The main "work" with which believers should be concerned is keeping the testimony of Jesus (see 12:17 and 14:13, "their works follow them").
- Death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire in v. 14. This signals a full shift from the old age to the new. Death itself has died!

Reflection Questions

- Whatever your take on the thousand years, what does it teach us about the destiny of the saints? What is our heavenly vocation?
- What does Satan's imprisonment and final defeat tell us about his power and authority? Is the battle between good and evil a fair fight?
- Why is God's judgment necessary? What good purpose does it serve in this passage? What promises does it fulfill?
- How is the final judgment a feature and not a flaw of our faith?
- What encouragement do you find for your own life in this passage?

Other Reading

- Daniel 7:9-10 & 12:1-2 Books are opened & the book of life
- Isaiah 24:21-22 God punishes and imprisons the "powers in heaven"
- Matthew 25:31-46 The judgment of the wicked and the righteous
- John 5:28-29 The dead raised for judgment
- 1 Corinthians 15:24-26 Christ's reign over enemies and the defeat of death
- 2 Peter 3:7-13 God's impending judgment and how we should live now

