

*Revelation 3:7–13 (NIV)*<sup>7</sup> “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. <sup>8</sup> I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. <sup>9</sup> I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. <sup>10</sup> Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

<sup>11</sup> I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. <sup>12</sup> The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. <sup>13</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

*Revelation 4:1–5:14 (NRSV)*

**4** After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! 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.” <sup>2</sup> At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! <sup>3</sup> And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. <sup>4</sup> Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. <sup>5</sup> Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; <sup>6</sup> and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: <sup>7</sup> the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. <sup>8</sup> And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

“Holy, holy, holy,  
the Lord God the Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come.”

<sup>9</sup> And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, <sup>10</sup> the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

<sup>11</sup> “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.”

**5** Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals; <sup>2</sup> and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” <sup>3</sup> And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it.

<sup>4</sup> And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. <sup>5</sup> Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe

of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

<sup>6</sup> Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. <sup>7</sup> He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. <sup>8</sup> When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. <sup>9</sup> They sing a new song:

“You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God  
saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;  
<sup>10</sup> you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,  
and they will reign on earth.”

<sup>11</sup> Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, <sup>12</sup> singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!”  
<sup>13</sup> Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the  
sea, and all that is in them, singing,  
“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor and glory and might  
forever and ever!”

<sup>14</sup> And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.

### *In the presence of the Holy One*

For the next two weeks, we are going to be in the book of Revelation, hearing Jesus’ words for the churches in western Asia Minor, experiencing John’s vision of the throne of God and the saving lamb, and, finally, the culmination of the *Missio Dei* in Revelation 21 and 22.

First, I know included a large amount of Scripture at the top of this study, indeed, all of chapters 4 & 5 in addition to Jesus’ letter to ancient Philadelphia. I tried to abridge chapters 4 & 5 and gave up. What would I cut? These are some of the greatest scenes of worship in the whole of the Bible. We meet the Lamb who is able to open the scrolls, No . . . read it as a whole piece, not gliding over a single word. Read slowly, even aloud, and it will move your soul.

#### *Revelation*

Revelation was written in the late first century to encourage and comfort powerless Christians who were being persecuted, jailed, and even killed for their faith.

This mystifying and often troubling book seems endlessly fascinating to many. Perhaps a few are bored by John’s apocalypse but, if so, I haven’t met them. Instead, most of the adult Christians I’ve met would like to understand why such a strange book is in the Bible and, at best, hear a word or message that will have abiding meaning for them.

Right at the beginning, I ask that you strive to shed any preconceived notions you have about the book, including what you saw on the Discovery channel or read in one of the *Left Behind* installments. Instead, try to come as if you were reading Revelation for the first time. Of course, that may be exactly the case for many of us. You’ll really need only two things: a Bible (NRSV or NIV 2011, preferably) and your imagination. You’re going to need to think cosmically and allow God to open new vistas for you through the

presentations of John's vision. Revelation, more than any other book of the Bible, is written to speak to your imagination, so be prepared to use it.

### *The beginning (chapter 1)*

The book of Revelation begins simply enough. It is a "revelation" given to Jesus by God. In turn, Jesus has entrusted it to an angel who has revealed it to John, the one who wrote down what he experienced in a series of visions. (Perhaps it isn't really so simple, after all.)

A "revelation"<sup>1</sup> in the sense that the word is used here is an "unveiling," a pulling back of the curtains so that we can see the truth about the world, about God, and about what is to come.

We all lead "real world" lives filled with families and jobs and governments and politicians and wars. It has always been this way. An apocalypse, like the New Testament book of Revelation, strives to show us the cosmic struggles which, though unseen, are very real indeed.

The early Christians struggled with the Revelation of John for some time, but, in the end, settled on it being a piece of writing every bit as sacred and inspired as any of the four gospels. These Christians, collectively called the Church, embraced John's stark visions as a word from God, a word to be heard and to be heeded.

The opening verses of Revelation tell us that these visions are prophetic and that we are to hear and keep them, implying that these are words we are to understand. How can we "keep what is written" if what is written makes no sense? Thus, the book itself often interprets for us the meaning of the most important symbolism.

John<sup>2</sup> has been banished to the island of Patmos, where he has visions. These begin with his opening vision of Christ. What he sees transcends the power of words to express directly, thus, much like the prophet Ezekiel, his descriptions center on comparisons; i.e., Jesus' voice is "like the sound of many waters." The vision draws heavily on the Son of Man imagery of Daniel 7, in which God, the Ancient One, gives the Son of Man dominion over creation. Jesus stands amid seven golden lampstands which, we are told by the book itself, represent seven churches. He holds seven stars in his hand, which we are again told in the book, represent the angels of each of the seven churches.

And the sword in Jesus' mouth? It's an image that we find only in Revelation where the metaphor occurs four times, culminating in Jesus' victory on the battlefield (Revelation 19). The sword is probably a metaphor for the tongue, with its sharpness conveying the power of Christ's words. What Jesus speaks is the truth.<sup>3</sup> And he is about to tell it to the churches.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Greek, the word is *apokalypsis*, from which we get our word, "apocalypse." It simply means "unveiling" or "revelation." This type of writing is called "apocalyptic" based on both its message and its style.

<sup>2</sup> Though the early church held that this John was also the writer of the gospel and the NT letters bearing the name of John, this is almost certainly another John. Based on clues in the book, this John was probably Jewish and a native of Palestine who emigrated to Asia Minor. David Aune speculates that John's knowledge of the seven Christian communities shows he was an itinerant Christian prophet in western Asia Minor. Most scholars hold that the book was written late in the first century, toward the end of the Roman emperor Domitian's reign (81-96AD).

<sup>3</sup> Though commentators do not seem to make much of it, every time I come to this passage, I think of Hebrews 4:12-13: "12Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." To my mind, this is another of those echoes of Scripture that God hopes we'll hear.

### *Being Jesus' Church*

There are seven letters to seven churches. All are actual Christian communities in western Asia minor. Each of the seven Christian communities (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) gets a different message from Jesus. A good exercise is to read each one and ask yourself which letter would be written to your own church. The specifics of the letters aren't always easy to understand, but the thrust of each is clear. The Christians in Smyrna are encouraged in their suffering and poverty. They are rich in what matters. The Philadelphians are encouraged in their patient endurance. Jesus' words to these churches, when laid against the warnings given to the wealthy Laodiceans, reminds us that for 2,000 years, the way of Christ has been marked by suffering, not prosperity.

The letter to Philadelphia, which means "brotherly love," is the sort of letter any Christian community would hope to receive. The Philadelphians have kept Jesus' word, i.e., they've been obedient to Jesus' teachings. They have also not denied Jesus' name; refusing, I suppose, to recant their faith in the face of persecution. They are patiently enduring the trials that have been set before them. They are being Jesus' church, faithful and obedient. It is that simple and that profound. Let's pray that the same would be true of us. Obedient and faithful. This is what it means to be Jesus' church.

#### The helicopter view of Revelation

Revelation is easier to understand if we grasp the big picture, what a professor of mine liked calling the "helicopter view." Broadly speaking, the book has three sections:

Chapters 1-3 consist of John's opening vision of Christ, and Jesus' letters to seven churches in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

Chapters 4-11 focus on God, Christ, and a world that chooses to trust itself rather than its creator. In chapter 11, the unbelieving come to faith and the heavens ring out with the worship of God. In some ways, the book could end right there, but John's visions retell this story beginning in chapter 12.

Chapters 12-22 are not a continuation of the story, but a second telling of the cosmic conflict between the creator and his idolatrous creation. This time the story focuses on Satan and a world in thrall to the powers that oppose God. This story culminates in God's victory through Jesus Christ, the judgment of all people, and the arrival of the long-awaited new heavens and earth. This is the completed restoration of the cosmos and of humanity's relationship with God.

### *In the throne room of God*

When the fourth chapter of Revelation opens, we stand with John in the throne room of God where we witness all the company of heaven worshiping the Lord Almighty. Yet, amidst this worship there comes sadness and tears. The One on the throne holds a scroll that, unlike most papyri, is written on front and back. It is sealed with seven seals, which signifies that the seal is completely and utterly closed, for seven is the number of completion and totality. What does the scroll contain? We are not told. It could be God's plan for creation or it could be the rest of the book. Whatever the scroll contains, there is no one, in all the heavens and the earth, who is worthy to open it, so John begins to weep.

Then, one of the twenty-four elders comes to John and tells him that the Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Thus, we'd expect that John would turn to see a lion, the symbol of Israel's power and strength, standing ready to open the scroll.

Yet, when John turns, he doesn't see a lion at all. He sees a lamb. But not a cute, white, leaping little lamb. John sees a lamb standing there as if it had been slaughtered. (Take a moment and read Isaiah 53:7.) This is one of my favorite moments in all the Bible. John *hears* "Lion" but *sees* "Lamb." The contrast couldn't be more striking.

We think we know what power and might are, but Jesus Christ has revealed that the truth is far from our expectation. It is the Lamb who conquers. Craig Koester writes, “What John *hears* about the Lion recalls promises from the Old Testament, and what he *sees* in the lamb reflects the crucifixion of Christ. Both images point to the same reality. According to the Old Testament, God promised to send a powerful and righteous ruler. These promises are not rejected but fulfilled through the slaughtered yet living Lamb, who is not a hapless victim but a figure of royal strength.”<sup>4</sup>

It is the Lamb who takes the scroll from the hand of God, causing all the elders and cherubim to fall down before the Lamb in worship, singing their acknowledgement that the Lamb, and the Lamb alone, is worthy to open the scroll. Then angels too numerous to count join the elders and the cherubim in their worship of the Lamb. The crescendo presses forward as all the creatures of all the cosmos join in the praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb. Finally, the four living creatures say “Amen!” The crucified Lamb of God has triumphed and now rules.

### Apocalyptic Literature

In Greek, the word “apocalypse” means “unveiling” and it is often used to describe an entire genre of writing that was very popular in the 200 years before and the 200 years after Jesus. Authors used apocalyptic writing to describe momentous and cosmic 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 writings report mysterious revelations and usually entailed a cosmic transformation of the heavens and the earth, as well as a 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 is another example of apocalyptic writing.

Like all apocalyptic writings, the book of Revelation is filled with many 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 their 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. Anyone in the ancient world would hear this as a very thinly veiled reference to the Seven Hills of Rome, for it was Rome who persecuted the Christians. All these symbols seem strange to us, but they were not strange to readers of ancient apocalyptic literature, in which seven always symbolized completeness.

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 life beyond the grave!

*Could any words really 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).

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<sup>4</sup> If someone asks me for a book on Revelation, I usually urge them to pick up a copy of Craig Koester’s, *Revelation and the End of All Things*. More than any other, this book has helped me to grasp the narrative of Revelation and understand better the symbolism. It is very suitable for laypeople and received excellent reviews from biblical scholars. N. T. Wright also has published his helpful, *Revelation for Everyone*.

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