

Revelation: I Am Making All Things New

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, "How sweet are your words to the taste, sweeter than honey to our mouths! Your word also is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path." May Jesus--the way, the truth, and the light be revealed to us once again along our journey of faith to the New Jerusalem. Amen.

Background

Angels blowing trumpets!
Monsters rising from the deep!
Rivers of blood and lakes of fire!

Well here we are—we've reached the final destination of our twenty-one month-long *Wayfare through the Word*: The book of Revelation.

There's nothing quite like Revelation in the Bible—thankfully! ☺ Revelation is a multi-sensory book that excites the senses:

- You've got colors: everything is red, purple, blue, yellow, green, and gold.
- Noises: There is the din of battle and loud claps of thunder. Heaven rings with lament and the angels and the multitudes sing.
- And then there are trumpets: lots of trumpets.
- There are also fascinating places: doors of heaven, glassy seas, bottomless pits, and the river of life.

Besides the Psalms, no other book than Revelation has shaped the liturgy and worship of the church. When we read Revelation, we must not forget it's a divine hymnbook that makes our spirits soar!

Of course, Revelation also contains fantastical beasts that look something like a cross between a Dr. Seuss illustration and a Stephen King novel:

- Armored locusts.
- Horses with serpents for tails.
- Beasts that have 10 horns but only seven heads!
- *And how is it* that a lion can look like a lamb?

Then there's the creature that's part leopard, part bear, and part lion that also happens to live in the sea ...

The monsters of Revelation make the Loch Ness monster seem kind of cute and cuddly!

Even the good guys wig you out in Revelation—a lion, bull, human, and eagle, each having six wings, all covered with eyes! Yikes!

And the Jesus of Revelation will give you nightmares too—

This is not bedtime reading for the little ones. He's described in one scene as wearing a robe stained in blood and a sword protruding from his mouth, as he "tramples out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

Revelation is a book that confounds, humbles, and mystifies even the smartest of minds. *And that's why we need it.*

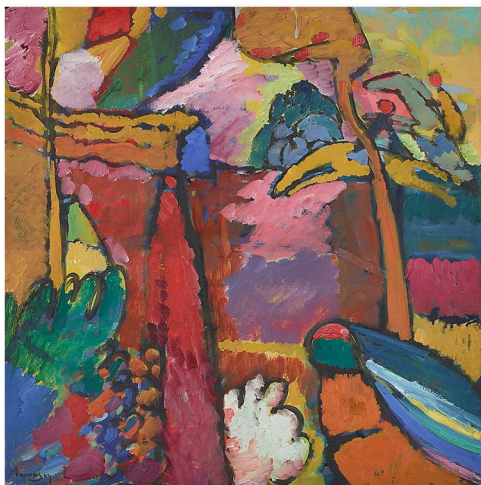
- Novelist D.H. Lawrence once said, "When we read Revelation, we feel at once that there are meanings behind meanings."
- Martin Luther struggled with not only the book of James, but the book of Revelation when he freely admitted, "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book."
- John Calvin wrote a commentary on every single book of the Bible ... *except Revelation.*

But artists and poets have been drawn to Revelation over the decades and centuries.

William Blake and Salvador Dali reveled in the breathtaking imagery of Revelation.

Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind Series* has sold nearly 80 million copies.

I think one of the best commentaries on Revelation is this abstract painting by the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky that was inspired by John the Revelator's visions.



- On the left side of the painting you can see a cross with a vast multitude gathered under it.
- Behind the cross stands a figure of Christ, where he's facing away from the painting.
- His head is blue, he's dressed in red, and he has a white hand.
- Kneeling before Christ is a woman with an orange body and blue head covering—representing the church.
- On the top right of the painting are two of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse—who are fleeing the advent of Christ.

Are you confused? You're not alone!

But this is the nature of the book of Revelation—it simultaneously reveals and it obscures. However, if you're patient and stay with it—Revelation is an incredibly rewarding and encouraging book, like none other.

John the Revelator is the author of Revelation and church tradition tells us that he's the Apostle John. John was steeped in the knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures—275 of the 405 verses of Revelation allude to passages in the Old Testament.

Revelation was composed on the Island of Patmos, which was a barren and volcanic prison island on the Aegean Sea. John was banished there because of his testimony to Jesus. The book was likely finished near the end of the Roman Emperor Domitian's rule, in the late 1st century.

So why was Revelation written?

John's congregations were barely holding on for dear life. Rome commanded the worship of the emperor—so Christians who refused to do this were deemed unpatriotic and even atheists. Christians who refrained from the riotous Roman parties and religious festivals were labeled anti-social. Followers of Christ were also banned from joining trade guilds—which ruined their careers. Believers were persecuted and martyred for their faith. So John wrote to encourage his flock to keep the faith and endure. God will lead them to victory, even in the face of suffering.

Revelation is a combination of several genres of literature.

First, Revelation is a letter to be distributed and read in certain congregations in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey.

Second, Revelation is a prophecy and so like the Hebrew Prophets, it's a call to repentance, a declaration of judgment, and an encouragement to persevere.

Third, Revelation is an apocalypse. Apocalypse means "disclosure" or "unveiling." This type of literature was wildly popular among Jews and Christians at the time of its writing.

Let me give you a crash course on *How to Read an Apocalypse*.

1. These types of books were often addressed to people experiencing suffering and persecution.
2. The purpose was to motivate the faithful to stand strong in a time of crisis.
3. The reader would be taken to settings of worship such as temples, altars, temples, and the singing of hymns.
4. The world was described in dualistic terms of black and white, with no ambiguity.
5. There is a heavy use of symbolism—especially numbers, which is called gematria.
6. Interactions with angels and demons are common.
7. Mysterious dreams and troubling visions need to be interpreted.
8. There are mystical journeys between heaven and earth.
9. Cosmic catastrophes were predicted, and secrets were revealed about natural disasters and wars.
10. Hope remained for a favored remnant who waited for a radical divine intervention.

Ancient Christians were a little more prepared than we modern Christians are to encounter a book like this.

Another crucial thing to remember is that Revelation is not chronological or linear. Revelation is an entirely different time zone that requires every reader to radically reset their internal spiritual clock. You've got to change from *chronos*-clock time to *kairos*-God's time. In other words, Revelation's a loopy book—fluidly moving back and forth between past, present, and future. Beware of any interpretation that puts Revelation into a nice, organized timeline with confident interpretations.

Revelation is a book that refuses to be domesticated or controlled by humans—it's just too mysterious for that. We need it—especially us cerebral Presbyterians, because it keeps the magic and mystery in our faith. Revelation peels back the curtain for us so we can be reminded of eternal reality.

Even though life feels out of control, the Sovereign God is steadily sorting things out. God's timing is very different than our forecasts, projections, strategies, and master calendars. Revelation beckons us to let go and trust God in the thick of the chaos, confusion, and opposition. But by the end of the book, God's plan for humanity is completed.

It started in Genesis with God's creation of the heavens and the earth. And in Revelation, it's concluded with God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth, where he will live with us, for all eternity. Suffering, evil, and death is vanquished. Or as the Psalmist puts it: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other." Psalm 85:10 (NRSV)

So let's hear now the Word of the Lord from:

Revelation 21:1-7 (NRSV)

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, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.

Revelation 21:22-27 (NRSV)

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Revelation 22:1-7 (NRSV)

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. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place." "See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Revelation: I Am Making All Things New

The book of Revelation gives us hope to carry on: the war has been won, even though the battle still rages—but the battle will not go on interminably. The battle will be won too. Evil will be held accountable.

This knowledge helps us persevere and endure, bare and forbear. And so we have a call and a charge to keep worshiping, witnessing, remembering, resisting, and hoping—even in the thick of the chaos and opposition, because *God knows* what's going on. God is at work.

Revelation reminds us to use wisdom and discernment—don't buy hook, line, and sinker into strong men or the state. Worship God and God alone. God has Rome and all the powers that rule the earth on a short leash.

The real truth is that God is creating a people from every tribe, tongue, and nation who are loving persons. And the victorious Lamb of God is at the center of this community—sustaining them and present with them for all eternity.

Revelation reminds us where our earthly journey is taking us—to our heavenly home. The Lamb's suffering gives our suffering meaning and hope.

But there will be a time when accounts are settled. Justice is meted out. Evil is forever rendered powerless. And then, finally, we will drink from the river of life and eat of the tree of life that brings healing to the nations.

This is our hope and our destiny. Amen.

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