



The Book of Revelation

Understanding Its Message of Encouragement

Perhaps one of the reasons that the last book of the Bible is so mysterious, so confusing, or so fearsome, is that we don't look at it as a loving, personal message from God. We focus on its meaning for the world and try to interpret it as a warning about a destructive and inevitable end. We search for clues about the timing of the Anti-Christ and the Second Coming of Jesus, while forgetting that the Word of God always has multiple levels of meaning, and that God always wants to speak to us individually in every scripture.

He wants His Word to affect our lives in the here and now. He wants His Word to help us grow closer to Him. He wants His Word to challenge us to more lovingly serve our brothers and sisters. And He speaks to us through all scripture — including the Book of Revelation — to make a difference in the only moment we've got: The Now Moment.

The "REVELATION" given to John was information about what *has* happened, *is* happening, and *is yet* to happen. When he received this vision, he was in his late 60s and had become known as a visionary prophet. He had been exiled on the Island of Patmos (a Roman penal colony) because of his Christian faith.

At that time, the Romans were persecuting the Christians ruthlessly, and the followers of Jesus desperately needed encouragement. Are you in need of encouragement today? Think of the trials and sufferings you're in the midst of right now. Would you like the Book of Revelation to minister to your present needs? Of course you would!

To be a Christian means to imitate Christ. We can measure how well we're loving everyone by how much trouble it causes us. Unconditional love is not easy, and many people misunderstand it or reject it because we're not like them. Persecution is a nor-

mal part of Christian living. Today — this single day — approximately 1600 people are being killed because they're Christian. What sacrifices are you suffering because of your faith? Jesus said:

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: "No servant is greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15: 19-21 NIV)

John wrote the Book of Revelation in symbols so the Roman persecutors wouldn't understand what he was talking about. Imagine that a person of the 25th century will read something from today's books: "It rained cats and dogs" or "The Giants slaughtered the Braves" or "That kid is a real pig" ~ all of these would cause the reader to misunderstand the true meaning of these phrases if he took it literally. To learn what the symbols in Revelation mean, refer to our Glossary at the end of this article.

The theme of the Book of Revelation is "Stand firm in your faith!" It's something we all need to be reminded of for life in the here and now. A summary of the book would be: Avoid compromises with paganism, don't cave into adversity and martyrdom, wait patiently for the fulfillment of God's promises, God has triumphed over evil through Jesus, and we must let God triumph through each of us as we follow the way of the cross.

John used imagery to teach about the struggle that Christ and His followers are having with Satan and his followers. Think of the battles you've been having lately against your own sinful tendencies. This book is telling us that, at the end of the present age, Christ is coming in glory to defeat the kingdom of Satan and usher in the everlasting reign of God.



What exactly *is meant* by "the end of the present age"?

A moment from now, isn't *this present moment gone*? Ended? When you die, isn't that the end of an age or a phase of your life? Whatever Satan's kingdom has been doing to your life, be assured that Christ truly IS coming — right now — in glory to usher in His love, His peace, His joy, His solutions to your problems, His forgiveness, and His victory over your sinfulness! Isn't that more encouraging to know — right now — than what time it will be when the Anti-Christ arrives and what cloud over what hill Jesus is going to descend upon when He comes again?

We are fascinated by the future, but we can only live in the here and now. We can only love God in the here and now, because this moment is all we truly have. We can only serve others in the here and now. And God ministers to us in the here and now!

It's tempting to associate the Book of Revelation with the Battle of Armageddon, and to focus only on the tribulations and war and Anti-Christ and Second Coming of Jesus. For 2,000 years, people have extrapolated clues from scripture and the immorality of the world to speculate about the time and location of this battle. But how does God want us to apply this scripture to our lives in the here and now?

"Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty." ... Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. (Rev. 16:13-16)

Armageddon is in Israel, in the Valley of Jezreel, not far from Nazareth where Jesus grew up. The valley of the battle described in Revelation is vast, as far and wide as the eye can see. Tel Megido is the small brown hill in the photo below. "Tel" means an archeological hill or man-made mound. Megido (from which we get the name "Armageddon") was a Canaanite town 4,000 years ago.



This land has endured unending hostilities throughout the millennia. Today, it's the Israelis versus the Palestinians, Jews versus Muslims versus Armenians. Prejudice and hatred are evident everywhere. Residents, since childhood, are taught to fear and to cause fear in their enemies. Passersby in the street treat each other with distrust, and even pilgrims from other countries unconsciously pick up this atmosphere. There is little eye contact and fewer smiles — that is, until we decide to overcome it.

We don't have to accept the atmosphere of hostility in our families, our workplaces, or the divisions within our churches. We can bring peace to our own Armageddons by doing good to our enemies, showing that we care, and giving the unconditional love of Jesus to everyone — even to the people who are hostile toward us.

The Book of Revelation gives us plenty of encouragement for this. It tells us that as we wait for victory, it helps to remember that although persecution and martyrdom are evil, it is actually through this suffering that we triumph over evil. For example, when someone gives you a difficult time for believing in God, by turning the other cheek and going the extra mile (more suffering), you are giving Jesus to that person, whether he or she realizes it or not. Just as the evil of Jesus' beatings and crucifixion brought redemption to the world, our sufferings can bring redemption into current-day hardships.

To further comfort and encourage us, there are *seven beatitudes* in Revelation ("seven" means "total amount, full, complete"). Notice that none of them are original ideas from John. All of them are reflections of words Jesus spoke in the Gospels:

(Verse 1:3) Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time [Jesus] is near.

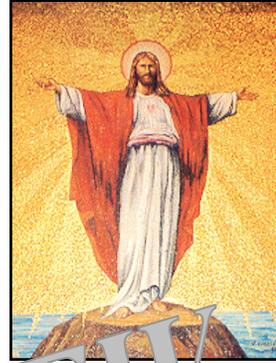
(Luke 11:27-28) As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it."

7. (Verse 22:14) Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

(John 10:7-10) Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.... I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.... I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

At the end of his book, John brings us full circle to the first book of the Bible. Genesis 2:9 says, "In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." After Adam and Eve sinned, God said, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and live forever" (Gen. 3:22).

God decreed this because of His great mercy: He didn't want us to live forever in the state of original sin. But at the end of the story — the ending that Jesus ushered in with His sacrifice on the cross — we once again have access to the tree of life. "The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2).



Are you letting Jesus heal you, in the here and now? He wants to give you life in abundance, instead of watching you be destroyed by the evil of your sins. Jesus is the tree of life! He did not die so that you can live in the fullness of joy, no matter what battles are raging around you.

Read the Book of Revelation as a personal letter of encouragement from Jesus to you. Let it challenge you to purify your life so that you can live like Jesus did and experience the awesome treasures of eternal life — in the here and now!

Glossary of Symbols

To read the Word of God in this apocalyptic book without letting our imagination give us misguided interpretations, we need to understand the symbolism the same way the first readers did. These symbols were easily recognized by the first readers, because the meanings had been familiar to the people throughout Jewish history, as can be seen frequently in the Old Testament.

666 = tripled (the most) imperfection; anyone who viciously persecutes Christians

SEVEN = fullness, complete amount

SEVEN CHURCHES = all the churches of all the world of all times

10 DAYS = a short time

THREE-AND-A-HALF = a very short time

1260 days or 3&1/2 years or 42 months = period of persecutions of God's people

1000 = a large amount

7000 PEOPLE = a large number of people from all social classes

1500 miles or 12,000 stades = 12 apostles times 1000 (leaders representing all Christians)

144,000 (the square of the 12 tribes of Israel multiplied by a thousand or a large amount) = the new Israel, embracing all Christians from every nation and tongue; NOTE: in the list of tribes (7:5-8), Dan is omitted because of a belief that the antichrist would arise from it

ABADDON = Aramaic name for destruction or ruin

ABYSS = the netherworld, where all the demons are kept for many, many years before being cast into the pool of fire

ACCUSER = Satan