

# 52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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# 52. Revelation

## I. BIBLE IS ONE CONTINUOUS STORY

The Bible is one unfolding story. It's the unfolding, continuous drama of God's relationship with his creation.

### A. Genesis

It's a drama that began in Genesis where we read about the creation of the world; where we read about the creation of humanity. It is there where we read about the Garden of Eden, the place where Adam and Eve enjoyed walking in the direct presence of their Creator. It was a garden in which there were two main trees. One of the trees was the tree of life, a tree that if Adam and Eve had just not eaten of it, they would have lived forever. Instead, Adam and Eve sinned. Adam and Eve did what God had asked them not to do.

### B. Sin

And as we read through this story we start to see the effects of sin. How Adam and Eve had alienated themselves from the Creator; that they were forced to leave the garden, forced to leave the direct, unmediated presence with their Creator. We read about the downward spiral of sin and it's destruction among their descendants.

And yet we begin to see God's plan of redemption; God's plan to bless the world through Abraham and his descendants. We read how God said to his descendants, "I will be your God and you will be my people." And we read about one descendant in particular, King David, who was promised that one of his descendants would sit on an eternal throne and that he would enjoy a father-son relationship with God the Creator.

### C. Redemption

And as we continue to read through this unfolding drama, we see that through this one descendant, Jesus Christ, that God's plan for redemption was implemented in Jesus' life and in Jesus' death and in Jesus' resurrection. And we read about the gospel, the good news, that there is redemption from sins in the work of Jesus Christ and we see how that gospel spread throughout the whole world.

## II. LAST BOOK OF THE DRAMA: REVELATION

Revelation is one continuous story. It's the unfolding drama of a Creator who wants to have a relationship; who wants to live in fellowship with his creation. We now come to the last book in the drama, the book of Revelation. The book that more than any other book promises that someday all of this mess that we call "life" will end. A book that

promises we will return to the Garden of Eden; we will return to full fellowship, to full relationship with God our Creator. And there God will be our God and there we will be his people.

## **A. “Apocalyptic”**

Revelation is a strange book. It’s written in a genre called “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic literature uses bizarre images and so we have a white rider on a horse with a sword coming out of his mouth. We have people with 666 etched on their foreheads. But these images are metaphors and these metaphors need to be interpreted. And like any genre, whether its poetry or fairy tales, apocalyptic literature has its own set of rules of interpretation.

And so for example, how do you tell people who are dying for their faith that heaven is more precious than anything they possibly could have. And even though they’re losing everything on earth, it’s nothing compared to the glory and richness of heaven? Will you tell them, “The streets are paved with gold where you’re going.”? People struggle on earth to earn a few golden coins. In heaven we pave the streets with the stuff. That’s how precious heaven is.

## **B. Controversial**

It’s a strange book. It’s also a controversial book; controversial partly because of the nature of apocalyptic literature, controversial because it’s highly interpretive and people come up with a lot of different interpretations. My personal position is that I think we are asking the wrong questions and as long as we ask the wrong questions we’ll coming up with wrong answers. So we sit around and make our charts, after charts, after charts. We spend countless hours arguing divisively over what is Gog and Magog; and what is the rider on the pale horse or what the third trumpet stands for. As long as we are asking these kinds of questions, as long as we ask the wrong questions, or at least secondary questions, discussion are going to continue to be unhelpful and divisive and controversial.

The whole trick in the book of Revelation is to know what are the right or at least the primary questions. And it is the primary questions that we should be focusing on. When we look at the primary questions, we will find that we are almost in unanimous agreement with one another. The trick of course is, what are the right questions? I would like to suggest this morning that the answer to what are those right questions is held in chapters 2 and 3. I’m going to use chapters 2 and 3 to discover the right questions and then ask those questions as we go through the rest of the book of Revelation.

## **C. John’s Vision on Patmos**

The book of Revelation begins with John the apostle, the author of the gospel, the author of 1, 2 and 3 John, who has been exiled on the island of Patmos (it’s a small island off the coast of Ephesus in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey) According to church tradition he’s the only one of the disciples that wasn’t martyred for his faith, I guess other than Judas you would have to say. He was exiled on this island and he had a vision and in his vision he was told to write letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor

(modern-day Turkey) and that's what chapters 2 and 3 are all about. If you get out your maps and look, John is making a circle through the ancient cities in Asia Minor.

## **1. First Message**

The message that goes to each of these churches is basically the same message. There are some variations, but the same basic message is given to each of the churches. Number one. God will not keep you from suffering. God will not keep you from being persecuted. In fact, get ready, don't be surprised, expect it, it is coming. Except for those people who lived in Philadelphia, who were being excluded from all this because of their faithfulness.

## **2. Second Message**

Second of all, the basic message is that God calls us to be faithful. He calls us to be faithful in the midst of suffering and in the midst of persecution. Each of these churches is called to endure, to persevere, to be faithful. And the language that John uses is a word that is easy to misunderstand. It's the word, "conquer." John talks about if you conquer. And what he's not talking about is conquering in the sense of avoiding suffering and pain. Conquering in Revelation means that in the midst of pain and in the midst of suffering, in the midst of persecution you continue to be faithful to the point of death. So if you conquer, it means you die to martyrdom, that you die faithful to your commitment to Jesus Christ.

## **3. Third Message**

Thirdly, he says if we do conquer, there is great joy, there are great rewards waiting for us. For example, in chapter 2:7 John writes to the church at Ephesus: "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." That if you're faithful unto death, then you are going to be able to eat of the tree of life, the tree that we read about in Genesis. You will live forever and you will live forever in paradise, the new heavens and new earth in heaven.

Later on to the church in Smyrna, verse 10 he says, "Be faithful unto death [there's your conquering], and I will give you the crown of life." Later on in verse 11, "The one who conquers [the one who is faithful to death], will not be hurt by the second death." The second death is what happens after the final judgment and people are either thrown into the lake of fire or they live in paradise with God forever.

Perhaps what's helpful is to look at the church of Sardis in chapter 3. In verse 5 John writes, "The one who conquers will be clothed in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." To those who are faithful, faithful to the end, the Judge will confess their name; he will say that "these are my children, these are my sheep. Go to my right and go into paradise." This is the basic message of the book of Revelation. And these are the right questions to ask: Were you surprised when persecution came? No. How are you to behave? I'm to be faithful unto death. Why? Because the greater joy waits for me on the other side of death. I guess if you want to draw charts, it's okay, as long as the chart drawing does not take away from the basic, fundamental, central message of the book of Revelation.

## D. "Eschatology is ethical"

Let me say it another way: Eschatology (the study of end things) is ethical. Yes, it does give us some hint, some clues as to the things that are going to happen, but the primary purpose of all eschatological material is that it is going to get bad: We win; they lose, so hang in there. That's the message of all eschatological material: Revelation, the passages in the gospels and in much of the Jewish literature that's out there. It's going to get bad; we win; they lose; hang in there.

One author in his commentary on Revelation starts by saying that Revelation is the easiest book to interpret in the Bible. I would submit that he is absolutely right because if every one of us sat down and spent 45 minutes and just read all the way through Revelation; didn't get lost in the details but go from chapter 1 to chapter 22. If at the end we would say, "What's the basic message?", I think every one of us, while we may be scratching our heads about swords and numbers and whatnot, we would say it's going to hurt to be a Christian but we're going to win, so we must persevere.

The fundamental truth of the book of Revelation: that's the clue from chapters 2 and 3 and I think that's the key to understanding the rest of the book of Revelation.

## II. VISION OF THE FUTURE

John then moves into his vision of the future and in chapters 4 and 5, marvelous chapters; if you haven't read them, please do so.

### A. Throne room scene (4-5)

Chapter 4 is the throne room scene and we see the Lamb of God and there's a scroll and no one is found worthy to break the seals and open up the scroll. Finally they say the Lamb is worthy to break the seal and to open the scroll. So for example, in Revelation 5:6: "And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw 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 [don't get lost in the details]. And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne [God the Father]. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." Do you want to know where your prayers are going? They're incense in the bowls in the ongoing worship service in heaven; they're an offering, an incense fragrant to our God. "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you [the Lamb, Jesus] to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'" Amazing scene of the worthiness of Jesus Christ who was slain for your sins and mine. By that he is worthy to break the seals on this scroll.

## B. Seven seals (6)

Chapter 6 then, we go through this series of the Lamb breaking the seals and its seven seals on one scroll. It doesn't get opened until the very end. I just want to walk through chapter 6 because I want you to have a feel for what apocalyptic literature is like.

The Lamb opens up the first seal and a rider comes out and he's on a white horse and he goes out and he wages war. Things are going to get rough. The Lamb breaks a second seal and another rider goes out on a red horse and this rider removes peace from the world so people are killing each other. The Lamb breaks a third seal and a rider goes out on a black horse and we start seeing the consequences of war, specifically in this case, the financial devastation of war. The Lamb breaks the fourth seal and another rider goes out on a pale horse. He not only kills with the sword, but he also kills with famine and with pestilence, the things that follow in the aftermath of war. He breaks the fifth seal; but things change and we go from earth up to heaven and we start seeing all the events of all the horrors on earth from heaven's standpoint; specifically from the standpoint of martyrs, of Christians that have died for their faith. So in chapter 6 starting at verse 10 the martyrs cry out to God, "Oh Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" How long will you wait until you punish those who have killed us, your people? And Jesus says, 'Wait just a little.' "Until the number of [your] fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves have been." The saints are up there saying, "How long, Oh Lord, how long until your justice reigns. How long until sins against you that were effected on us are judged. How long until your vengeance?" And Jesus says, "Don't be in such a rush. There are many more Christians who still have to die."

Then the sixth seal is opened and we have the final judgment. And the final judgment comes with great cosmic signs. The very people who were killing Christians, the very people who had worldly power but no spiritual power, start crying out down in verse 16: They cry out for the rocks of the mountains to "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne [they know exactly what's going on. They know what's going on and they want to be hidden from God], and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" I believe at this point that we are at the end of time and the Great Judgment has come and the people who fought the kingdom of God now see that they were on the wrong side and they're about to lose.

## C. Interlude (7)

But before you get to the seventh seal there's this interlude and John does this a couple of times, because in midst of all the pain and the turmoil and the hurt and the death, John wants Christians to understand that they're not alone, that God is protecting them; not from death, but protecting them through death. So you have this sealing of the 144,000, chapter 7 starting in verse 2: "Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, saying, 'Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their

foreheads. And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel.”

## 1. Sealing of the 1440,000

There are 12 tribes in Israel and the church is 12 X 12,000 or 144,000. And each of us who are truly a disciple of Jesus Christ are going to be sealed. And what happens when you seal a scroll? You put on a mark of ownership and you protect the contents of the scroll. So you and I will be sealed and we will have Christ’s mark of ownership on us and we will be kept safe. Not safe from death, otherwise Revelation 2 and 3 makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. We are kept safe through death as we go on to paradise.

## 2. Final Judgment

Then starting in verse 9 you have final judgment. “After this [the sealing] 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, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” When you read that passage, do you understand that that is you? This is me. This is us together with people of all color, of all times, everyone who is the 144,000, all who are the true believers in Jesus Christ. You have to put yourself into this where we belong and we’re going to be there and be clothed in these white robes. We’re going to have palm branches, at least as the metaphor goes. We’re going to be crying out, “Salvation!” This is what is really important, not that short, three-second period of suffering on earth, but what is now: “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb. And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God saying, ‘Amen’ [There’s your biblical mandate for interrupting my sermons with ‘amens.’ Do it all you want] Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever, Amen.” That’s what we’re going to be crying out in heaven.

“Then one of the elders addressed me [meaning John] saying, ‘Who do you think these people are? Who are these clothed in the white robes? And where have they come from?’ John said to the elder: “You know.” (I don’t have the foggiest idea, in other words.) And the elder said to John: “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” It’s the only time that a red wash makes white clothes.

“Therefore, [we] are before the throne of God. [We] serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will shelter [us] with his presence. [We] shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore. The sun shall not strike us, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be [our] shepherd and he will guide [us] to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.”

There’s a theological word for that, it’s called “Amen,” or in the vernacular, “Wow!”

There are 144,000, the sum total of all believers sealed. We are protected and because we are protected, we are able to endure persecution. We are able to conquer; we are able to

be faithful even to death. And our reward? Our reward is living in the presence of God. We will be before the throne of God; we will hunger and thirst no more and the Lamb will be in our midst and he will be our shepherd; and God, not my handkerchief, not my wife, not my parents, God will wipe away every tear from my eye.

Is there anything that this world has to offer that is more joyous and more satisfying than what's waiting for us on the other side of the passageway? Anything?

I was listening to a lecture from Dr. Stein on Revelation and he tells a story about a man, his name is Virgil Olsen, who was the head of foreign missions for many years at the Baptist General Conference. It was back in the early 1990's and Dr. Olsen had gone to Ethiopia to see what was going on and he came back and was just chatting with Dr. Stein and he said, "Bob, what do you think the Ethiopian's two favorite books of the Bible are?" And Bob thought for a bit and says, "Well, they would certainly want to know about Jesus, so one of the gospels, probably John. And of course everybody would want to have a good systematic theology, so I would guess Romans. So certainly the two favorite books of the persecuted Christians, (because they were under Communism at the time) would be John and Romans." Dr. Olsen just looked at him and shook his head and said, "Not even close." "Well, what are they?" "They're Daniel and Revelation." Because the persecuted church in Ethiopia wanted to know that there was purpose; that there was meaning; that there was significance; that there was strength from God in the midst of horrible untold persecution. They wanted to know that there was a reason to hang in there and be faithful. And the book of Revelation showed them the joy unspeakable that waits for those who have conquered, for those who are faithful even unto death. I suspect that when the American church finally gets around to being persecuted, that the charts and the arguments and all those things that have a secondary place will all dissipate. And what will become important, is the persecution worth it? Is God in it? Will he protect me? And at the end of the day, is it worth it? And the answer we will all have is: "Yes. Yes."

### **3. Two more cycles (trumpets; bowls)**

Now for those of you familiar with Revelation, you know that I've already been taking some interpretive positions. I'm going to start taking even more interpretive positions because at chapter 8 how you look at Revelation as a whole really starts to affect; and frankly it doesn't matter if I'm right or wrong on this. It's irrelevant to me. But I think what happens in chapter 8 is that we enter a series of cycles. I think what happens is that there are two or perhaps, if you're an amillennialist, three more cycles where John tells us the same thing. He makes the same point, but he's tightening the noose, the cycles are becoming shorter and they're getting worse, but it's the same thing over and over again. So you have a cycle of seven trumpets, because when you open the seventh seal you get seven trumpets and you go through the message of the seven trumpets with the same basic message that the seals had. Then there's more information and you have another cycle of seven bowls being poured out and you have the same basic message in those seven bowls.

### III. Final judgment

That brings us up to chapter 19 where we are, in my interpretation, once again talking about final judgment. And in chapter 19 John starts by rejoicing; rejoicing in the justice of God. We said the other day that one of the fundamental questions of life is, "is God good all the time?" And the presence of evil and the presence of pain does call God's justice into question. And so chapter 19 starts with an affirmation of rejoicing in the very justice of God. "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just.'" And he goes on to say that God has judged the great prostitute, a character earlier in the book.

John goes on and talks about how the faithful, you and I who are disciples of Jesus Christ, are going to be prepared for the marriage supper; that we are going to be married to the Lamb; that you and I (men and women alike) are the bride of Christ, the bride of the Lamb. And we are going to be married to him and there's going to be a feast of no calories and incredible taste. A great feast.

Then there's a rider that comes on a white horse, he's got a sword stuck out of his mouth. He's the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; he's Jesus. He destroys the beast. He destroys the false prophet, demonic figures who have been persecuting the church and He throws them into where they belong, the lake of fire. The story continues and eventually Satan is destroyed. Revelation 20:10: "And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Then we read about the great white throne judgment in verse 12: "The dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done." The final judgment. And then verse 14: "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire." The second death to which we who have conquered will not be subject. "And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he [and she] are thrown into the lake of fire." All of those who oppose you in this life and die that way will be thrown into the lake of fire. All of those who did not respond to you and to others when the good news of Jesus Christ was shared with them are thrown into the lake of fire. And those with whom the gospel was never shared, your neighbors, those people living in Bangladesh, those people too will be thrown into the lake of fire.

This passage really makes you ask the question, "Do you really believe in hell?" This neighbor of yours that for some reason is so hard to share the gospel with, unless someone does, is going to be thrown into the lake of fire and burn forever and ever. That's the final judgment. It's a scary thing.

### IV. WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR? (21-22)

But then in chapters 21 and 22 we finally get to what one person says, "What are we waiting for? What are you waiting for?" Waiting for the kids to graduate from college and marry a neat Christian guy or girl? Waiting for the next raise? Waiting for retirement? What are we waiting for? Well, chapters 21 and 22 tell us exactly what we're waiting for.

It starts in chapter 21 with the destruction of everything here and the creation of the new heaven and the new earth. Verse 1: "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. [Everything is being destroyed; your house, your car, your bank account, your influence, your perceived power. It's all gone. It's going up in flames. And there's no fire insurance in a sense.] And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [That's you and me. We're going to get married.] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'" We're back in the garden, aren't we? We're back where we belong. "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither will there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Genesis 1 and 2 is being fulfilled. We are living in the presence of our Creator in a father-son relationship. All pain will be gone, replaced with the bliss of God's very presence. But you know who is going to be in the new heaven and the new earth? Verse 7: "The one who conquers [the one who is faithful to the end] will have this heritage [namely] will be his God and he will be my son." John continues and talks about the coming down of this New Jerusalem. Verse 22: "And I saw no temple in the city [the New Jerusalem] 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 gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb." And finally we get down to where the imagery of the Garden of Eden comes through most clearly in chapter 22. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God [it's going to come out right from under the throne] and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city." Evidently there's a big street and the river is flowing down the middle of it. "And 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. [That's one big tree.] No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants [you and me] will worship him. [We] will see his face, and his name will be on [our] foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be [our] light, and [we] will reign forever and ever." We're back at the beginning. We're back at Genesis 1 and 2 where we're supposed to be.

## V. WE WERE CREATED FOR FELLOWSHIP

We were created for fellowship. You and I were created for a relationship with God. That relationship was broken by sin in the Garden of Eden. It's been repeated in the life of every sinful human being. Creation is therefore alienated from its holy Creator and the penalty of that separation simply is death. That Jesus, the Lamb of God, died to pay that price so that we could have open access to God and live in his presence once again. He can do that because he is God, because only God can offer the sacrifice. Jesus is also fully human because it had to be a human sacrifice for human sins. And we who are faithful, we who conquer, if necessary to the point of death, will have our names written in the book of life. And we will hear Jesus say one of the last verses in Revelation chapter 22:20: "Surely I am coming soon." And we will respond in the

earliest creedal statement of the early church, "Maranatha!" Which in English means, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

The question of Revelation is, do you long for Christ's return? Or are you in love with this world and never want it to end? Those friends that have led you to compromise your commitment to Jesus Christ are going to burn. Those few golden coins that we work so hard to earn, often at the expense of our children and our marriages, are going to burn. All those things that we find on earth to be more joyful those things that keep us from living as fully devoted disciples of Jesus Christ are going to burn. The book of Revelation calls us not to love this world but to love God; to live out our times on this earth as exiles; be faithful to God to the very end, even if that means death knowing that someday you and I are going to eat of the tree of life and live forever in fellowship with our Creator. The world has nothing compared to that. Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!