

## START AT THE ENDING: THE BOOK OF REVELATION

### *Holy Vision*

Revelation 1:1-8

January 4, 2026

We're starting 2026 at the end of it all. The strangest book in our Christian canon.

Most of us have treated Revelation like that drawer in the kitchen. You know the one—full of all the things that don't quite fit anywhere else. Old. Odd shapes. Broken pieces of things you once treasured. All the items you're not sure what to do with but also can't quite seem to let go of. You know that drawer. The one we always keep shut.

Church historian Justo González put it plainly: "No other book in the Bible has been interpreted at cross purposes with the writer's original intent more than the book of Revelation." He's right. Over the centuries, this book has been used to stoke fear, to sanctify cruelty, to manipulate the faithful, to justify judgment, all with verses ripped from the context that gives them meaning. Some of you have the scars to prove it.

Confession: I have mostly avoided it in preaching. I've used the abuses of the book to defend my avoidance of it. After all, the baggage is heavy. But lately I've started to think maybe that's a mistake. Maybe this isn't the time to keep the drawer shut.

For six weeks, we're going to read Revelation the way it was meant to be read. Not as a calendar or a preview of coming disasters, but a kind of survival guide for people trying to follow Jesus in a culture that wants their souls. In the coming weeks, we will devour a scroll. We will sing hymns of dissent in the court of the king. We will meet a Lamb who shepherds, and we will face the dragons that hide in plain sight.

We begin with a holy vision. It is Epiphany Sunday. The Church remembers the magi who follow a star to find a king who looks like no ruler they could have imagined.

What they discover is a new beginning that forces them to walk a different way.

That first word in the Greek text you heard this morning—*apokalypsis*—doesn't mean catastrophe. It doesn't predict the end of the world. The word means "revealing." Revelation: pulling back the veil. That moment when Toto exposes the man behind the curtain.

Revelation is a book all about learned perception. Think of it as an optometry appointment for the soul. What if you could see the world as it really is? Not the world the empire advertises—prosperous, peaceful, under control. But the world behind the propaganda. The beast behind the brand. The blood beneath the profits.

Revelation comes with a warning: once you see, you can't unsee. And some of what John exposes we'd rather not look at.

John writes from Patmos, a little rock of an island on the Aegean Sea. He is in prison. Exiled. Why? The text will tell us: "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." In other words, John is not in prison for a crime, but for a confession. For saying out loud and repeatedly what the Roman empire could not tolerate.

From prison, he writes seven letters to seven churches scattered across Asia Minor—what we'd call Turkey today. These are churches full of ordinary people trying to figure out how to follow Jesus when the world demands everything. The pressure wasn't persecution. Not yet. It was more subtle than that. It was economic. It was social. It was cultural.

Can you be successful if you refuse to sacrifice to Roman gods? Can you get promoted at work if you refuse to attend festivals that honor Caesar? Can you

fit in—in the classroom, at the office, in the neighborhood, the public square—and still follow Jesus? We've changed the names, but the questions persist.

Here's what John discovered, what he reveals. Empire does not need to kill you to win. It needs to make you comfortable. It needs to make you tired. It needs to make you think that resistance is futile, that nothing ever really changes, and that the best you can do is to keep your head down and keep going, get along.

Nobody says to the churches in Asia Minor, "Stop believing." They simply say, "Just play along. Bow your head when the royal procession passes by. You can believe whatever you want—in private. Just keep it contained. Of course you can follow Jesus. Just don't let it change the way you live."

And every time you comply, the next compromise comes more easily. Every time you look away...

You see, we become what we worship. Every minor genuflection reshapes us—not in some grand, dramatic fashion, but persistently, the way water shapes rocks. The goal is not open persecution. The goal is absorption. Blend in. Don't make trouble. Keep your faith—but keep it in its place.

We give Jesus our Sundays. To whom do we bow the rest of the week?

I think that's why John's vision is so dramatic—the beasts and the dragons, the lakes of fire. I think he's trying to wake up people who've been numbed by normalcy. I think John shouts because the danger is so quiet.

Revelation is both dangerous and necessary. It names what our polite religion often avoids: that there are powers in this world that want your soul, and they are patient enough to take it one compromise at a time.

Now listen to how John opens his letter. It sounds like a greeting, but it is really an act of defiance. *Grace to you and peace from the one who is and who was and who is to come.* What we may not know in 2026 is that in the first century, these were fighting words.

Grace and peace belonged to Caesar. Those very words were stamped on coins that featured his picture. Proclaimed at public gatherings. *Grace and peace to you from Caesar, son of God.* Those words carved into monuments dotted all over the empire. The emperor was the source of grace. The empire was the guarantor of peace. Rome brought order to the world—the Pax Romana—and don't you forget it.

And here's this man, this John, this prisoner. Exiled. Writing to tiny churches nobody important has ever even heard of. And he has the audacity—the breathtaking, treasonous audacity—to suggest that grace and peace come from someone else.

*Jesus Christ—the faithful witness.*

*Jesus Christ—the firstborn of the dead.*

*Jesus Christ—the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

*To him be glory and dominion forever and ever.*

Glory and dominion. Those belonged to Caesar too. And John says: no, glory and dominion belong to Jesus Christ. To him alone.

You know what we pray every week? *For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory.* Those aren't just nice words to end the Lord's Prayer. That's a kind of political claim. Every time we pray those words, we're saying, "Not Caesar's kingdom. Not a national kingdom. Not an economic kingdom. Not our kingdom."

*Thine is the kingdom.* Yours the kingdom. Only yours.

Journalist Tim Alberta—a pastor's son from Michigan—recently wrote a book with that title: *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory.* It's a kind of lament. He documents what happens when the church—his church, his people—forget which kingdom they serve. When Christians start believing that God relies on human power. That the gospel advances through political domination. That Jesus needs us to seize authority on his behalf.

When this thinking takes hold, the cross becomes a prop. Jesus is made a mascot. The church confuses influence with faithfulness. Tim Alberta saw it up close.

Not just the growing political ferocity, but the spiritual deforming. People shaped by that vision begin to resemble the idols they've embraced. They get meaner. More tribal. Less able to see the image of God in another. And the Church doesn't just risk its witness; it sacrifices its soul.

I think old John would recognize it immediately. He saw it in his own day—Jesus followers tempted to blend the empire's agenda and the Lamb's agenda, to add a little Jesus to their Roman identity and call it good enough.

John has a word for that: Babylon. And the call of Revelation is to come out of Babylon. To see it for what it is. To refuse its mark, its allegiance, its formation. But here's what we must not miss. John is not just critiquing empire. He's building a Church.

N.T. Wright puts it this way: the church is called to be "the small working model of new creation." A colony of the future. A community that lives now as if Jesus is already Lord—because he is. And that's what Christian formation aims to do. Every Lord's Day, we gather in these pews in this space, and we rehearse a different story. We pass peace. Not Rome's peace, but God's peace. We confess sin. Not someone else's, but our own sin. We share the heaviness in our hearts. We hear words that comfort and challenge us. We commit our lives to the way of Jesus, and when we do, it's not that we're learning new ideas. It's that we're becoming a different kind of people. Gradually. Like water shapes stone. We become people who see and people who will not bow to lesser gods.

I do worry we've settled for less. I do worry we've let the Church become chaplain to the culture, blessing what scripture condemns. Or worse—an instrument of power, trading the gospel for influence, convinced that proximity to power is the same as faithfulness to Christ.

In the coming weeks, you will find that Revelation will not let us settle. Contrary to popular opinion, this is not a book about escape. It is a book about formation. How we raise children who don't worship the beast. How we do business without bowing to Babylon. We gather

every week and rehearse a different story—one where the Lamb is on the throne and every knee bows before the cross.

You see, my friends, the Church does not make an argument; the Church *is* the argument. We don't need to seize power. We need to be the alternative. That's harder. And it is the only way to be faithful.

John, from that prison rock in the Aegean Sea, says the curtain is rising whether we're ready or not. Every eye will see him. The question remains. To whom will we bow? What will we worship?

John offers a holy vision—not escape from the world, but clarity within it. The ability to see what is true when everything insists on the lie.

As for us, we'll keep rehearsing the truth on which we stand. We'll be here next week, and the week after, and the one after that, offering grace and peace, not from any empire, party, or power that demands our soul—but from the one who is and who was and who is to come, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Jesus Christ *alone* be glory and dominion forever and ever.

As with maximum force and every resource, the empire insists: don't look up. A man stands on a rock. In chains for his faith. His eyes are fixed, and his heart is unshaken. He sees the truth—he tells it at great cost.

So must we. This is how we begin.

Pray with me.

Oh God, open the eyes of our hearts. Amen.