

Isn't Revelation a Depressing Book About Doom & Gloom?



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In our last segment we looked at the question, Is Revelation too difficult for me to understand? And again, like any other New Testament book, we need to ask, What did the author intend? What most likely did the first readers understand? We need to understand it in light of its historical context like we do any other book. And especially with Revelation, there's probably more of a need because it's such a unique book; and because of some of the complexities, we need to rely on good commentaries that serve as our teachers, our instructors, our companions in reading Revelation.

Another question I often hear is, "Isn't Revelation just a depressing book about doom and gloom?" I heard someone raise that question just the other day. The impression Revelation sometimes gives is that because of all the judgment scenes—the three series of judgments, the three series of sevens: the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven bowls; the pictures of end-time judgment with Christ coming back as a rider on a white horse and slaying the nations; and visions of fire and brimstone and other things—all these can leave some with the impression that Revelation is indeed just a doom and gloom book that's depressing to read.

However, that would be to miss the focus of the book. As we've already seen, Revelation tells us a lot about the character of God and of the person of Jesus Christ. It actually begins in chapters 4 and 5 with this beautiful vision, not of judgment going on in earth, but this heavenly vision of all of heaven bowing down and worshiping God, who is seated on the throne, and worshiping the Lamb. It describes God in majestic terms as the one who is "Holy, holy, holy," and that the angelic beings bow down and sing to Him. It portrays God as eternal, in control of all things, and seated above all things. It portrays Jesus Christ as the one who has redeemed us, who has stooped down to earth and redeemed His people from their sins.





Chapters 4–5 present this beautiful vision of heaven. Everything begins with this scene where God and the Lamb are on the throne and all of heaven acknowledges their sovereignty. It's a beautiful picture of worship. These chapters have inspired all sorts of hymns and worship songs, old and new, and hopefully will continue to do that. But we miss that if we think Revelation is just a book about gloom and doom. It doesn't begin that way. It begins with a vision of God in all His splendor and beauty sitting on His throne, and all of heaven encircling and worshiping Him and acknowledging His sovereignty. And then it presents a vision of the Lamb who was slain for our sins, who redeemed us, who made us His people, and who will one day return to redeem us. And because of that, the Lamb is also worshiped as well. And then Revelation ends in chapters 21 and 22 with another beautiful vision. A vision of a new creation, a vision of a place where there's no pain or tears. Where all sin and all evil and all oppression and all injustice has been stripped away. And now all that's left is a new creation with God dwelling in the midst of His people.

Did you know Revelation doesn't end with God's people in heaven? Revelation ends with God's people on earth. And at the center of the earth, at the center of this new creation, is God and the Lamb living with their people. That's what is so grand about this final vision: God and the Lamb are with their people. In fact, in a sense, the book of Revelation is not a message of doom and gloom, it's how this scene in chapters 4–5, this scene where God and the Lamb are sitting on the throne are in sovereign control of all things. All of heaven acknowledges their sovereignty. How does that scene eventually work out on earth?

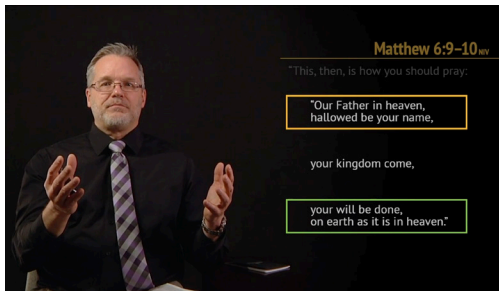
Earth is a place that contests and does not acknowledge God's sovereignty. It's a place of chaos and evil, disorder, and all kinds of problems—in the first century under the Roman Empire and today. All you need to do is read the news and look around to find that that's often the case. So, in a sense, the question Revelation asks is, How is this scene in heaven—this scene of beauty and order and worship where everything acknowledges God's sovereignty, where God's will is being done—how will that eventually transpire on earth? This earth that contests it, that challenges God's sovereignty, that does not recognize it, that's full of evil and chaos, disorder and sin, sickness and death, how will that scene in heaven eventually overcome or replace all of that? That's what Revelation is about.

And in chapters 21–22 that scene in heaven in chapters 4–5 finally becomes a reality on earth, where the Lamb of God and God and their throne are now not up in heaven but at the center of the new creation. And now it's not all of heaven, but all of humanity, all of creation, all of God's people acknowledging God's sovereignty. And they worship Him as His people in the new creation.

British scholar Richard Bauckham said, "Revelation, in a sense, is an extended commentary on the Lord's Prayer." If you go back to Matthew, Jesus taught His disciples to pray. He said, "Pray like this, Our father who is in heaven, hallowed, or holy, be your name." And then He says, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In a sense, that's what Revelation is about. God's will is done in heaven. His kingdom is already taking place in heaven. His sovereignty is already established and acknowledged in heaven; His will is done. What has yet to take place is His will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

So the "as it is in heaven" part of the Lord's Prayer is Revelation 4–5. The "on earth" part of the Lord's Prayer, "your will be done on earth," is Revelation 21–22. And in between, Revelation 6–20 tells us how that happens. How does this scene in heaven eventually become a reality here on earth? So, I would suggest to you, Revelation is not a book about gloom and doom. It has a lot to tell us about who God is and about who Jesus Christ is and what He has done in redeeming His people. It has a lot to tell us about how God is present with His people, even in the midst of suffering. It has a lot to tell us about what it means to follow Jesus Christ in obedience. And, at the heart of it, it's a book of hope. It ends with a vision of God and His Son, Jesus Christ, now on a new creation in the midst of His people with His people worshiping.

Even some of the visions of judgment that at first seem hard to swallow—one thing to remember is that they're primarily symbolic. John isn't literally describing how these judgments will look. Take, for example, in chapters 8–9, the trumpet judgments. When you read them, they resemble very closely the Exodus plagues from the first several chapters of Exodus when God led His people out of Egypt. John isn't telling us exactly what those judgments will look like. He's using images and metaphors that his readers would be familiar with to tell us something about the certainty of God's judgment, that just as God judged a wicked evil empire in the past when He led His people out of Egypt, you can be certain that God will judge a wicked evil empire again in Rome or any other empire that would be idolatrous and oppressive and



challenge God's authority.

But at the heart of it, the judgments simply remind us, when you get to the end of the book, I mean, think about it, what kind of laurel do you want to live in? Do you want a world that's full of evil, full of chaos, full of injustice, full of pain and suffering? Or do you want a world where all those things are absent? And God's judgment is simply His means of removing all that is opposed to all those things that we cry out for now: justice and lack of oppression, peace, salvation, and no evil and pain. Can you imagine a world like that? That's the kind of world Revelation offers to the faithful people of God. No matter what they experience in this present life, they can be assured that God one day will judge and remove all that brings evil and oppression, chaos, and injustice to this world to bring about a world where God and His beauty and the Lamb reside with their people—and they worship Him.