

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH

AGENTS *of the*
APOCALYPSE

A Riveting Look at the Key Players of the End Times

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Agents of the Apocalypse: A Riveting Look at the Key Players of the End Times

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INTRODUCTION

AGENTS OF THE APOCALYPSE came about because so many people urged me to write another book on Revelation. I can well understand the current interest in the end times. We live in an increasingly chaotic and godless world, and many Christians believe the dark shadows of the Apocalypse are looming on the horizon. In the last century we saw brutal persecution of Jews and faithful Christians in nations such as Germany, Russia, and China. Today God's people continue to face torture and death in countries throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Even in Western nations, which have long upheld Christian principles, the repression of Christian expression and practice has begun. And if history is any guide, this discrimination against believers is bound to increase.

I encounter Christians every day who are anxious about the future, not only because of this increase in anti-Christian sentiment but also because of the decline of economic and social stability. In times like these, people tend to look even more closely at the book of Revelation, because perhaps above all others, it encourages Christians to keep hope alive. It recognizes the hard facts of worldwide disintegration and persecution, yet it assures God's people of certain victory.

Because of the critical importance of Revelation and its relevance

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for our current reality, I recognize the need for fresh books to help keep its message alive. But that need also presents a big challenge. Revelation is hardly a fresh subject for authors to write about. No doubt thousands of books have been written on the topic, and I have already contributed several to that number myself. So when I was urged to write again on the subject, the burning question in my mind was, *How can I write a book that will present this important message in a new and captivating way?*

The answer that found its way into my mind was to use dramatized accounts to make the prophecies in Scripture come to life. But at first I could hardly accept the idea. I wanted to present the biblical truths of Revelation, not speculative fantasy that might lead readers to wonder about its accuracy. Yet the value of story as a vehicle for truth had been impressed on me by a man who is widely recognized as the most influential writer on Christianity in our time: C. S. Lewis.

Lewis was a young atheist when he first read *Phantastes*, a novel by the nineteenth-century Scottish Christian author George MacDonald. Lewis reported that a new quality, a “bright shadow,” leaped off its pages and that his “imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized.”¹ Though the book did not prompt Lewis to convert on the spot, it was the starting point in his journey to faith. Years later, Lewis’s close friend J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, described the ancient myths of gods who died and were reborn as stories that prefigured Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Lewis eventually became convinced that the story of Christ as presented in the Gospels “is simply a true myth.”²

In response to those who were suspicious about the power of story to present truth, Lewis said, “Reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”³ He was saying that stories can align reason with imagination and mind with emotion. When truth is put in imaginative form, it can be driven not only into the mind but also into the heart.

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So I asked myself, *Could stories be used to drive the message of Revelation into the human heart?* The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that they could. While the book of Revelation presents an overview of the future, it provides little detail. That is not its purpose. Yet the cataclysmic and triumphant events it portrays will affect real people in real situations. The players identified by Revelation in this end-times drama will also be real people—either people who go bad and wreak destruction, such as the Antichrist and the false prophet, or faithful people such as the martyrs and the two witnesses, who stand against these demonic individuals.

Capturing these players through the lens of story allows Revelation to come to life in a new way. It enables us not only to see the overarching truths of Scripture but also to experience them vicariously. It gives us the chance to see the actions of these individuals up close and personal as they play out this cosmic drama.

In this book I've devoted one chapter to each of the most prominent players in Revelation—those who are the primary agents of the Apocalypse. After I did the research on the key players or groups of players, I asked my friend Tom Williams if he would write the dramatizations that illustrated the biblical truths. He agreed to do so, and we have ended up with this unique book.

I want to emphasize that in the writing of these fictional accounts, nothing presented in the Bible has been altered. The dramatized elements are constructed firmly on the facts of Revelation. The stories merely fill in the gaps that Revelation does not address. They present possibilities about how the biblical events could play out. I recognize fully that these scenes cannot fill in the gaps with perfect accuracy, but they offer one possibility among many with one goal in mind: to drive the truths of the end times not only into the mind but also into the heart. My hope is that these stories will serve as a reminder that the book of Revelation isn't just theoretical; it's intended to depict real-life individuals and situations.

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Each chapter in this book is divided into two sections. The first is the dramatized account, which is followed by a section called “The Scripture behind the Story.” My hope is that the dramatization will whet your appetite to explore the biblical truths behind the story. This second section digs deeper into Scripture, with discussions about what Revelation says and how it can be interpreted and applied. This setup enables you to separate the facts from the fiction and understand the biblical foundation that undergirds the story. Thus you get everything from this book that C. S. Lewis would want. The story drives the truth into your heart, and the Scripture behind the story drives it into your mind.

It is my heartfelt prayer that this book will impress the truth of Revelation into both your mind and your heart, and that it will strengthen your resolve to stand firm for Christ in the face of the worst of circumstances. I also pray that this book will help you to realize the overarching truth of Revelation: that the Christian’s victory in Christ is an absolute certainty.

Dr. David Jeremiah

FALL 2014

chapter one

THE EXILE

IT WAS A SUNDAY MORNING in the first century AD, and the members of the Ephesian church were gathering to worship in the spacious atrium in the villa of Marcellus, a wealthy Roman convert who freely offered his home as a meeting place.

As the members arrived, their faces were taut with uncertainty. Tension filled the air, like a mooring line ready to snap. The meeting began as usual, with a hymn, but today the church sang with little feeling. Their minds were distracted by the ominous rumors coming out of Rome. After a prayer and a reading from the prophet Isaiah, Tychicus, one of the deacons, stood to address the congregation.

“Dear brothers and sisters, the church leaders have asked me to inform you of evil tidings. A decree has just been posted in the forum telling us that the Roman emperor Domitian has assumed the title ‘master and god.’ He has demanded that everyone in the empire swear an oath to worship him. He has already launched an aggressive

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campaign to enforce the edict in every city under Rome's jurisdiction. What is worse, he has especially singled out Jews and Christians because he suspects our disloyalty to Rome."

A voice from the crowd called out, "Are the rumors true that the edict has already been enforced in some of the other churches?"

The deacon nodded soberly. "A fortnight ago Roman soldiers invaded all the Christian homes they could find in Pergamos and demanded that every member immediately take the oath of worship to Domitian."

"Did they do it?" another tremulous voice asked.

A pained look crossed Tychicus's face. "It grieves me to report that two-thirds of them gave in and took the oath."

A gasp rippled through the crowd. "What happened to those who would not bow?" someone asked.

"I am sorry to tell you that they were brutally flogged and executed. And we can be sure the same thing will soon happen here in Ephesus."

The room fell silent. Finally someone asked, "What can we do?"

At that moment, an aged man who had been sitting to the side stood slowly, aided by the staff in his hand. Unlike the other faces in the room, his showed no distress. In fact, he positively radiated joy. "It was almost as if his face glowed," one member later observed.

The apostle John faced the group. "My dear brothers and sisters," he began, "you ask what we can do. There is but one answer." At the age of ninety, his voice still rang out clear and strong. But there was a warmth in his delivery that dissolved much of the tension in the room.

"We can stand ready to give back to our Lord Jesus Christ what He has given to us. He gave us life by giving up His life, and we must do no less for Him."

"Perhaps we should stop meeting for a while," Marcellus said. "That would keep us from being so visible and identifiable."

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“No, that is exactly what we must not do,” John replied. “We must look at this trouble coming our way as a test of our faith. Will we love our Lord enough to stand firm and suffer with Him? Or will we turn our backs on the One who gave us the greatest gift of love in history? With such trouble coming, we need more than ever to meet together in order to support and encourage one another to stand strong. If we stop assembling, we will isolate ourselves and lose the strength we draw from each other. We must never stop meeting, no matter how severe the persecution.”

“As long as this threat remains, we have decided that we should meet all over the city in separate homes,” Tychicus said. “The Romans will never be able to find us all. Some of us may fall, but the church in Ephesus will survive.”

“And, I hope, grow even stronger in the face of the persecution,” John added. “Sometimes I fear that we are becoming complacent and that the love we originally had for our Lord and for each other is beginning to cool. Persecution could rekindle that love by drawing us together as we face a common danger.”

“Why is God letting this happen?” a voice cried out from the back. “We have been loyal and dedicated. We have done many good things in Christ’s name. Yet the more good we try to do, the more the world seems to hate us.”

“Do not marvel, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you,” John replied. “Our Lord and Savior was perfect in every way, and yet the world hated Him. People hate what they do not understand. We should look on this coming trial as a great honor. We are being chosen to share His cross and His sacrifice for us. Many who have already died for Christ have received their suffering with joy. In the years since His death and resurrection, all my fellow apostles, including that late-coming firebrand Paul, have been called to suffer death for Him. I am the only apostle remaining who has been denied that honor. And now that I see it on the horizon, I welcome it with all

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my heart. I urge all of you, my dear brothers and sisters, to remain steadfast and true to Christ, no matter the cost. You will receive a reward in heaven that will make your sacrifice seem as a mere trifle.”

John resumed his seat, leaning heavily on his staff. After another hymn and several prayers, the assembly dismissed.

As usual, the members clustered around John with questions or prayer needs, or simply to bask in the man’s magnetic presence. But today a tense undercurrent ran through the conversations. It wasn’t long before Marcellus pushed his way through the group and stood facing the apostle. His face was as red as wine, and his eyes blazed with anger.

“How can you ask us to do this?” he demanded. “I have a wife and five young children. Do you expect me to just stand by while they are tortured and slaughtered? I will not do it! The rest of you can meet next Sunday like cattle waiting for these Roman butchers. But not I! You must find another place to meet. There will be no worship here until this crisis has passed. I am perfectly willing to live for Christ, but it’s too much to ask me to die for Him!”

Without another word, Marcellus turned on his heel and walked away. Soon the remaining members dispersed to their homes. How would they react when the Romans came? They weren’t entirely sure. Would they face the crisis with the courage of their apostle John or with the fear of Marcellus?

* * *

The following Sunday, a small group of families assembled in John’s home to worship. Five of the expected twenty-three members were not in attendance. Nothing was said about those who were missing, but the morning prayer included a petition that all would regain their courage and stand fast. After a few hymns, a Scripture reading, and more prayers, John stood to speak.

Suddenly the door burst open, and eight Roman soldiers barged

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in. They were dressed in armor and carried swords. The startled Christians stared wide eyed, and mothers drew their children close to them.

The commanding officer opened a small scroll and read the emperor's demand. "You must cease to worship your God," he proclaimed. "It is lawful to worship only Domitian."

After the reading, one of the soldiers held up a bronze statue. It was over a foot tall and bore the precise image of the emperor's face.

The commander rolled up the scroll and said, "The emperor Domitian requires that you show your compliance with his order this day by bowing down before his image. If you refuse, you will be put to death."

Not one of the Christians moved. This was a fragile moment, and they all knew it. If any of them broke and bowed to the image, others might lose courage too and do the same. After a tense moment of silence, the commander nodded to his men. They drew their swords.

A woman near the front shrieked and fell to the floor. She knelt before the image and swore the oath. Her husband quickly followed, as did four other members. But the rest of the assembly held firm, some of them mouthing silent prayers.

"The six of you who yielded have saved your lives, for whatever they are worth." The commander made no effort to hide his contempt.

As the six scrambled out the door, the officer strode toward John. "I believe you must be the one your people call John the Apostle."

"I am he," John replied.

The commander turned to his soldiers. "We have finally found him, men—the ringleader of all the churches in Asia Minor. This is the chief rebel who has led thousands of citizens to deny the authority of Rome and worship a man who was executed as a criminal."

The commander turned back to John. "Word of your disloyalty has reached the ears of the emperor himself, and he has a special

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punishment reserved for you. Instead of slaying you outright, he wants to make you suffer until you wish you were dead. Your fate will show your followers the futility of resisting Rome.”

The commander seized John and shoved him out the door. The other soldiers followed and bolted the door from the outside, trapping the Christians who remained within. One soldier produced a torch, lit it with his flint, and set fire to the house. As the soldiers led John toward the Roman garrison, John could see the house begin to blaze.

They were fifty paces away when the commander stopped and turned toward the now-flaming cottage. “What is that noise?”

“It is singing,” John replied. “My faithful brothers and sisters are singing a song of praise to their true Lord, Jesus the Christ, whom they will meet face-to-face within this very hour.”

John leaned heavily on his staff, struggling for breath, but they forced him to march on. Upon arrival at the garrison, he was handed off to a prison guard, who clamped chains on John’s ankles and dragged him out to the yard. The soldiers stripped him to the waist, chained his wrists to a post, and flogged him with a metal-studded whip. Then they locked the apostle inside a damp, reeking cell. For several days he lay there suspended between life and death.

Yet in spite of his shredded back, the filthy conditions, and the meager food portions, John never cursed his guard. The soldier, impressed by John’s perseverance, began to slip additional food to him. Over the next few weeks, John’s wounds healed, and eventually he was able to stand and limp about his cell. One day the guard called for him to come close.

“I have learned what is to become of you,” he whispered. “You are to be taken to the Isle of Patmos, where you will be exiled for the rest of your life.”

“Patmos!” John repeated. He knew of the island—an infamous dumping ground for Rome’s convicted prisoners. “When will I be sent to exile?”

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“In two days. You will not be fed well on the voyage—and not at all on the island. I will bring you a small sack with bread and grapes that you can slip under your robe and smuggle aboard the ship.”

“Thank you, but if it’s all the same to you, I would much prefer a roll of parchment and a vial of ink.”

“I will do what I can.”

* * *

Two days later John boarded a ship leaving the Port of Ephesus for the three-day voyage to Patmos. Beneath his robe he carried a flat leather bag containing his parchment and ink.

The ship—a converted Roman merchant vessel—was propelled by a single square sail and forty oars below deck. The departing exiles were forced to man the oars—with the exception of John, who was still wearing ankle chains, and three others, who were exempted because of age or disability. They were kept on deck near the prow of the ship.

As the ship sailed into the port on Patmos, John looked out on a landscape of barren hills, arid fields of sand and salt, and rocky crags dotted with brambles and stunted trees. As the prisoners disembarked, each was given a three-day ration of dried meat and fish. “That’s all you get,” the quartermaster told them. “When it’s gone, you’re on your own.”

John soon learned that the exiles were on their own in other ways as well. They would not only have to gather their own food but also would have to find shelter. While there were two or three crude settlements that had been built on the ruins of ancient towns, these struggling villages provided no protection from the island’s population of exiled criminals. The only law was self-preservation and survival.

Incoming exiles either found their own shelters among the island’s caves or built huts from rocks and deadwood. When John was aboard

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the ship, he had heard rumors that the far side of Patmos was the least populated. He reasoned that food and shelter would be more readily available there, so he headed out on a trek across the island.

The aged apostle was nearing exhaustion when he stumbled upon an abandoned cave. It overlooked the sea, and a trickling stream flowed nearby.

Born and raised a fisherman, John gathered some tough vines and wove together a serviceable net. He hobbled down to the shore and climbed onto a promontory that was strewn with boulders. When he reached a ledge overhanging the deeper water, he dropped the net, retaining his hold on its long leaders, and waited. Two hours later he returned to the cave, his makeshift net filled with three large crabs and two silver fish.

* * *

As the days wore on, each like the one before it, John began to feel that his life had become meaningless—that he was doomed to live out his remaining time on earth without purpose. He often wondered why he hadn't been martyred like his fellow apostles.

One bright Sunday, after his morning worship and midday meal of fish and berries, John hobbled off toward his favorite spot overlooking the sea. He sat down on his usual rock, shaded by a towering boulder, and gazed out on the gray-green water. Placing his parchment on his lap, he took out a quill to write a letter.

That's when it happened.

A great voice boomed from just behind him. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last." The mighty words reverberated through the heavens like rolling thunder.

John dropped his quill and began to tremble. Nearly paralyzed with terror, he could hardly bring himself to look toward the source of the voice. But there was something so compelling about that voice that he finally had no choice but to turn around.

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Before him stood the most magnificent and majestic Man he'd ever seen. His face shone with the brilliance of the sun. He was clothed in a shimmering robe of pure white that was bound about His chest with a golden band. His hair was white—not the lank, faded white of advanced age, but the vibrant, glistening white of pure snow.

The Man's eyes burned into John's soul like piercing flames. In His right hand He held seven brilliant stars. When He spoke, the words rolled off His tongue like tidal waves. Everything about the Man exuded such perfect beauty and glory that John's senses were overwhelmed. He fell to the ground in a dead faint.

He was awakened by a gentle touch on his shoulder.

"Do not be afraid," the Man said, His voice so infused with love and warmth that John's fear dissolved like wax in the sunlight.

"I am the First and the Last," the Man said again. "I am He who lives and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death."

John realized that he was once more in the presence of the Lord he adored. He basked in waves of unforeseen joy.

The golden voice told John to take up his quill and record the wonders about to be revealed to him—wonders concerning things existing and things yet to come. John, now filled with expectation, sat again with the quill in his hand and the scroll on his lap.

The voice spoke: "What you see, write in a book. . . ."

Immediately the Lord began to dictate warnings, rebukes, and commendations to the seven churches that had looked to John as their patriarch. As John completed the final letter, the vision of Christ vanished, and His voice called from somewhere above: "Come up here, and I will show you things that must take place after this."

In that moment, the familiar landscape of Patmos faded, and John gazed awestruck at what no earthly human being had ever seen—the very throne room of heaven. Vision after vision followed—some

horrifying to behold and others majestic beyond imagination. As the last vision faded, the apostle heard these final words: “I am coming quickly!”

Suddenly John found himself sitting back on his rock in the shade of the boulder. He had been given a vision of things to come—a message that would assure the Lord’s churches across the world that although terrible persecution loomed in their future, their ultimate triumph in Christ was certain.

“Yes, Lord, please come quickly,” he said as he rolled up the scroll.

* * *

THE SCRIPTURE BEHIND THE STORY

The apostle John, in writing his great book from the Isle of Patmos, joined an exclusive band of chosen servants who had received similar instructions from the Lord and had done their work under adverse circumstances. Moses wrote the Pentateuch in the wilderness. David wrote many of the psalms while fleeing from the murderous King Saul. Isaiah wrote while watching his nation degenerate, and according to tradition, he died a martyr’s death. Ezekiel wrote while he was in captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah’s life was one of trial and persecution. Peter wrote his two letters just before he was martyred. Paul wrote his letters amid being beaten, shipwrecked, stoned, and robbed, and while facing hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, slander, and just about every other kind of tribulation known to humankind (2 Corinthians 11:24-28).

And John received the most extensive revelation of future events shown to any writer of the New Testament while he was banished to Patmos—a small, rocky island in the Aegean Sea. He was shut out from the world but shut in to God, and from that lonely island he gave us the book we know as the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

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God very well may have allowed John's banishment so he could be alone with Him and receive this monumental vision of the future. Sometimes the work He has for us requires removal from our normal environment. Abraham's call, Joseph's slavery, Moses' flight from Egypt, and Daniel's captivity come to mind. Many writers I know get away to a mountain retreat or even a hotel room so they can concentrate fully on their task. My schedule calls for frequent flying, and I tend to do my best writing, planning, and thinking in the isolation of an airplane at thirty thousand feet.

As we open the book of Revelation, it quickly becomes apparent that we are about to encounter a message with a high purpose. Though it bears certain similarities to prophetic passages in Daniel, Ezekiel, and Matthew, Revelation is unique. It tells us what kind of book it is in the first few paragraphs.

A Prophetic Book

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.

REVELATION 1:1

This verse displays the prophetic nature of what John wrote through the use of one key word and one key phrase. The key word is *revelation*, which is the translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis*, or “apocalypse.” In the Greek New Testament, this is the first word of the entire book.

When we hear the word *apocalypse*, we think of horrible disasters associated with the end of the world. But in Greek, the word simply means “an uncovering; an unveiling; a manifestation of.” The primary purpose of the book of Revelation is not to paint a picture of the end times, although it does do that. It was written primarily to

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unveil, or uncover, the majesty and power of Jesus Christ. The book is neither a puzzle nor an enigma but a disclosure of who Jesus is.

The key prophetic phrase used in verse 1 is translated “must shortly take place.” This expression describes something that suddenly comes to pass. It indicates rapid progression after something commences. The idea is not that the event may occur soon but that when it does, it will occur suddenly. It’s like a California earthquake: we don’t know when the next will come, but we know that it will. And it will come suddenly and without warning.

A Personal Book

John . . . bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.

REVELATION 1:1-2

The book of Revelation is cosmic and far reaching in its scope, yet it is also very personal. This is a message that John received personally from the Lord. John writes to those with whom he is intimately acquainted, referring to himself as a “brother and companion” in tribulation (1:9).

Christ said to John, “What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea” (Revelation 1:11). The seven letters we find in chapters 2 and 3 were personal letters written to actual congregations in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) at the end of the first century AD.

According to theologian John Stott, “The seven cities mentioned form an irregular circle, and are listed in the order in which a messenger might visit them if commissioned to deliver the letters. Sailing from the island of Patmos . . . he would arrive at Ephesus. He would then travel north to Smyrna and Pergamum, south-east

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to Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, and finish his journey at Laodicea.”¹

Each of the letters begins with the phrase “I know your works,” and each contains a promise to the one “who overcomes.” But each message between these bookend phrases was personally tailored to the needs of the church to which it was addressed. As such, the letters must be read in their own context.

Even so, there are applications for us today. Although John wrote these letters with first-century churches in mind, they accurately identify the kinds of Christians who show up in church in every age—including today. Anyone who reads the letters will likely think of individuals or churches that fit some of the descriptions. I believe the Lord’s recommendations to these seven churches could solve all the problems modern churches face. This principle seems confirmed by the fact that all seven letters were contained in a single parchment, meaning that each of the churches was required to read the letters written to the others.

A Pictorial Book

He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John,
who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony
of Jesus Christ, to all things that he saw.

REVELATION 1:1-2

On thirty-nine occasions, John indicated that he was recording things he saw. His words paint vivid pictures to reveal the future through memorable symbols and images.

Symbols occur throughout Scripture as vehicles for divine revelation, but this book contains more symbols than any other. Sometimes the symbols represent people. For example, in the first chapter, Jesus is seen as a judge with a two-edged sword coming out of His mouth. In chapter 13, the Antichrist is presented as a beast

coming out of the sea, and the false prophet as a beast originating from the earth.

Why is there so much symbolism in the book of Revelation? First of all, symbolism is not weakened by time. Well-chosen symbols span the centuries and allow us to apply them not only to ancient or future times but also to our own. They create a compelling drama that encourages persecuted and suffering saints throughout the ages.

Second, symbols impart values and arouse emotions. To call a tyrant a beast evokes a primal fear that the word *dictator* misses. It is more colorful to refer to the corrupted world system as Babylon the Great than to dull it with a mundane list of descriptions.

Take a look at what Eugene Peterson says about how the imagery in Revelation affects him: “The truth of the gospel is already complete, revealed in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new to say on the subject. But there is a new way to say it. I read the Revelation not to get more information but to revive my imagination. . . . [John] takes truth that has been eroded to platitude by careless usage and sets it in motion before us in an ‘animated and impassioned dance of ideas.’”²

Last but not least, these symbols functioned as a kind of spiritual code that was generally understood by believers but not by outsiders. John’s book was circulated to the churches during the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96). If it had been written in more direct, prosaic language and happened to fall into Roman hands, those associated with the book would have been executed. Historian Ethelbert Stauffer writes, “Domitian was . . . the first emperor to wage a proper campaign against Christ; and the Church answered the attack under the leadership of Christ’s last Apostle, John of the Apocalypse. . . . Domitian was the first emperor to understand that behind the Christian ‘movement’ there stood an enigmatic figure who threatened the glory of the emperors. He was the first to declare war on this figure, and the first also to lose the war—a foretaste of things to come.”³

THE EXILE

A Profitable Book

Revelation is the only book in the Bible that motivates its readers by promising a blessing for those who will read and obey it. The promise is made at the beginning and the end:

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.

REVELATION 1:3

Behold, I am coming quickly! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

REVELATION 22:7

The word *blessed* means “happy; blissful; joyous.” It may seem strange to associate joy with the sometimes chilling drama of the book of Revelation, but Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones helps us understand why this is a logical reaction for those who read the book: “Revelation was written in order that God’s people who were passing through terrible persecutions and terrible adversity might still be able to go on rejoicing. It is a book that showed them the ultimate victory of the Lord over Satan and all the other forces of evil. . . . It was written for men and women who had been in trouble, and it was meant to help *them*, not only people who would live 2,000 years later. . . . If your understanding of the book of Revelation does not help you rejoice, you are misunderstanding it.”⁴

PROFITABLE FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

John was not interested in merely stimulating the imaginations of his readers. His goal was to influence their lives and change the way they lived. Scripture is a guide for conduct as well as the source of doctrine. Seven times in the book of Revelation we read this phrase:

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“He who has an ear, let him hear” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). What we read in this book should govern our conduct.

Our conduct today is affected by what we know of tomorrow. The book of Revelation tells us of God’s plan for the future and assures us that we are on the winning side. It often appears that the enemy is winning, but Revelation puts everything into perspective. Satan may win some present battles, but the outcome of the war has already been determined—and Satan knows it. When we know that truth as well, it gives us courage to persevere through the downturns. Like castaways who keep on rowing because the map shows an island ahead, we’ll have the courage to press on.

Perhaps this is the reason the devil tries to discourage people from reading this amazing book. “The devil has turned thousands of people away from this portion of God’s Word. He does not want anyone to read a book that tells of his being cast out of heaven, bound in a bottomless pit for a thousand years and eventually cast into the lake of fire to be ‘tormented day and night for ever and ever.’ Nor is he anxious for us to read of the ultimate triumph of his number one enemy, Jesus Christ. The more you study the Book of Revelation, the more you understand why Satan fights so hard to keep God’s people away from it.”⁵

PROFITABLE FOR PUBLIC ASSEMBLY

The dramatization at the beginning of this chapter portrays an assembly of the first-century church, inspired by the writings of the early church leader Justin Martyr (AD 100–165). He describes the nature of their worship in his *First Apology*: “On the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things.”⁶

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The Beatitudes of Revelation

1. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it. (Revelation 1:3)
2. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. (Revelation 14:13)
3. Blessed is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame. (Revelation 16:15)
4. Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb! (Revelation 19:9)
5. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (Revelation 20:6)
6. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book. (Revelation 22:7)
7. Blessed are those who do His commandments that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. (Revelation 22:14)

Public reading and exhortation were an integral part of gatherings in the early church. Paul told young Timothy, for example, to “give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Timothy 4:13).

Revelation 1:3 indicates that the public reading of the Revelation will meet with a special blessing from God.

PROFITABLE FOR PROPHETIC ANTICIPATION

The third verse of Revelation 1 ends with the phrase *the time is near*, and Revelation 22:10 declares that “the time is at hand.” Many people have interpreted these phrases to mean that fulfillment of the prophecy must be just around the corner. This has resulted in rash predictions about when the Rapture, the Tribulation, the Millennium, and the second coming of Christ will occur.

However, the expression “the time is near” does not necessarily

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mean the event will occur immediately. It indicates nearness from the standpoint of prophetic revelation, which operates according to its own timetable. To say that an event is near means it is the next major occurrence on the prophetic calendar. These events were near in that sense when John recorded them; they were the next major event on the calendar. And they are even closer today. Prophecy is God's way of giving us fair warning so we can prepare our hearts and minds to be ready for what is ahead.

A Practical Book

More than a century ago, William E. Blackstone wrote a little book called *Jesus Is Coming: God's Hope for a Restless World*. It had a significant impact on the Christian world and spurred much of today's interest in the study of prophecy. In his book, Blackstone devotes an entire chapter to the practical benefits of studying prophecy, which he calls the true incentive to a holy life. He writes, "No other doctrine in the Word of God presents a deeper motive for crucifying the flesh, for separation to God, to work for souls, and as our hope and joy and crown of rejoicing than this does."⁷

Blackstone goes on to give forty benefits listed in the Bible for those who study prophecy. I don't have space to mention forty, but I would like to share three practical paybacks that come to us from studying prophecy—and especially the book of Revelation.

STUDYING PROPHECY MOTIVATES US TO LIVE PRODUCTIVE LIVES

Some people think a keen awareness of the second coming of Christ will turn us into lazy souls who stand around gazing upward in some kind of useless trance. But in reality, the opposite is true. In the greatest sermon ever preached on the Second Coming (the Olivet discourse in Matthew 24–25), Jesus listed the "signs of the times" and described the events surrounding His return. Then He told a series of stories illustrating the importance of being productive and

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prepared. “Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing,” He said (Matthew 24:46).

Denis Lyle, a Baptist pastor in Belfast, Northern Ireland, tells of a tourist who visited a beautiful mansion on a lovely lakeshore in Switzerland. The house was surrounded by well-kept gardens connected by tidy pathways. There wasn’t a weed in sight.

“How long have you been caretaker here?” the tourist asked the gardener.

“I’ve been here twenty years.”

“And during that time how often has the owner of the property been in residence?”

The gardener smiled. “He has been here only four times.”

“And to think,” the visitor exclaimed, “all these years you’ve kept this house and garden in such superb condition. You tend them as if you expected him to come tomorrow.”

“Oh no,” replied the gardener, “I look after them as if I expected him to come today.”⁸

Jesus is coming back—coming any minute, coming soon, maybe coming today. These are some of His last words recorded in the Bible: “Surely I am coming quickly” (Revelation 22:20). The more aware we are of His impending return, the more motivated we’ll be in our work for Him in these last days.

STUDYING PROPHECY MOTIVATES US TO LIVE POSITIVE LIVES

The book of Revelation also promotes a positive mind-set. As we study it, we begin to realize that everything that is happening in our world today is heading somewhere. In the book of Revelation, as in no other book, we see God’s sovereign hand upon the affairs of the world. We see Him in control even though so much here on earth seems out of control.

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John says that Jesus Christ is “the ruler over the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5). This is not a statement about the future reign of Christ. It is a statement about His present reign. Jesus not only *will be* King, He is *already* King over the kings of the earth.

Vernard Eller drives home this point quite forcefully:

We are here at the heart of John’s message. . . . It is this: things aren’t what they seem! From everything . . . most of us can see, it appears clear that “the kings of the earth” are where the action is: theirs is the clout that makes things happen; theirs are the actions determining the course of history. . . .

No, things are not what they seem! Contrary to their own inflated opinion, that crew does not hold the reins of history. John’s very first notice of the kings of the earth is to proclaim that they have a ruler, they are being ruled. That ruler . . . already has won the decisive victory and established his control. . . . God’s is real power clothed in apparent powerlessness; Evil’s is apparent power which is really powerlessness. Things are not what they seem! Jesus is Lord—and that not only of us . . . who accept his lordship but of everyone else, up to and including the kings of the earth.⁹

As the conditions of our world worsen, Jesus said we shouldn’t hang our heads in depression or shake our heads in confusion. We should lift up our heads in expectation, for our redemption draws near (Luke 21:28). After Paul told the Thessalonians about the sudden return of Christ for His people, he said, “Comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18).

Our world is in a state of depression, and anti-depression pharmaceuticals are being swallowed at a faster rate than ever before. According to a recent study, the use of antidepressants has skyrocketed

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in the past several decades. In fact, one in ten Americans now takes an antidepressant medication. Among women in their forties and fifties, the figure is one in four.¹⁰

When I read those statistics, I thought of Proverbs 12:25: “Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad.” I believe there are times when medication is absolutely called for, but *meditation* is often better. When we read the book of Revelation, some of the very first words we encounter are these: “Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him” (1:7). As we visualize our Lord’s return, we’re treating our souls to a “good word.”

STUDYING PROPHECY MOTIVATES US TO LIVE PURE LIVES

Here’s a final benefit from the study of Revelation: it fosters purity in our lives. Several years ago, a prominent minister named Dr. J. C. Masee went to a show he felt he shouldn’t have attended. After a few minutes, he abruptly rose and left. His friends followed him out, asking what was wrong. Dr. Masee explained that Jesus could come at any moment. “I don’t want Him to [find] me here!” he said.¹¹

The Bible says, “When He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

The study of Revelation isn’t just for “prophecy freaks” or “Second Coming scholars.” It’s for every Christian who loves Jesus Christ and is anticipating His appearing. It’s comprehensible and it’s compelling, and it will change our lives. It is a practical book with tangible benefits, and those who study it are happier, holier, healthier people.

A Purposeful Book

Revelation 1:7-8 presents the twofold purpose of the entire book, which is to affirm Christ’s return and His ultimate reign over the earth.

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THE RETURN OF THE KING

Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him.

REVELATION 1:7

The Bible most often expresses the second coming of Christ by using the Greek word *parousia*. This is the Greek term for “coming” or “advent,” but it came to be applied in a technical sense to the arrival of Christ. The Greek word carries specific connotations that are helpful: a *parousia* is an entrance that immediately changes the existing situation it enters.

Picture a teacher who momentarily steps out of the classroom. At his departure, the students become loud and boisterous and begin to throw wads of paper. But when the teacher steps back into the room, everything changes. At his *parousia*, the students quiet down, and order is restored. This is a snapshot of what will happen when the King returns. Everything will change—evil will be shut down, order will be restored, and justice will reign.

Revelation 1:7 stands in a long line of biblical truth. Daniel predicted that the Messiah would come through the clouds: “I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven!” (Daniel 7:13). In His Olivet discourse, Jesus spoke of His coming in similar terms: “The sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matthew 24:30).

John expanded upon Jesus’ words to describe what every person will experience at His second coming. When the King returns, “every eye will see Him” (Revelation 1:7). In that moment, the great question for all of us will be whether our eyes are filled with tears of joy

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and thankfulness for what the King has done for us or tears of sadness and terror for the judgment that awaits us.

THE REIGN OF THE KING

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,” says the Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

REVELATION 1:8

Alpha and *omega*—the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet—point not only to the eternity of Christ but also to His all-inclusive power. In Genesis we read of how Satan subverted the first humans and usurped the title “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). Since then, we humans have lived in what C. S. Lewis called “enemy-occupied territory.” The earth still belonged to God, but He did not move immediately to drive Satan out.

This was not due to a lack of power; it was a matter of timing (Ephesians 1:10). As the Alpha and Omega, He is greater than the bounds of time. He precedes the beginning of Creation and survives the end of humanity’s day. He is the eternal, omnipotent God. And when the time was right, Jesus began His campaign to regain His rightful sovereignty over the earth.

The book of Revelation is the account of that campaign. It tells of His appointment by the Father to the throne, His battle against the forces of evil, His final victory, and His relationship with the redeemed.

Because of Christ’s triumph, His people are presented as overcomers. In the first three chapters of Revelation, Christ makes seven promises to “him who overcomes,” and a similar phrase occurs five more times in the book. The simple meaning of the word *overcome* is “to conquer” or “to win the victory.” The promise of victory is certain, but its final reality awaits the return of the King.

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The prophet Daniel foresaw this victory long before John did, and he wrote about it with the same clarity: “I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed” (Daniel 7:13-14).

Likewise, the New Testament leaves no doubt about Christ’s ultimate victory: “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming quickly.’ Amen” (Revelation 22:20). It is in the heart of every believer to join with the saints of old in longing for that day as did John when he completed his scroll: “Even so, come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20). Yet while we wait, let us remember this:

[W]e still live in the time of John’s crisis and . . . the Revelation he received from Jesus is still the definitive answer to today’s big questions. . . . It’s time for us to rediscover the book of Revelation and its message of hope.

In a world where [more than 100,000] Christians are martyred for their faith each year, we still need the Revelation which Jesus gave to John.

In a world where the Church remains terribly flawed and where every week sees another church close down and its building turned into a nightclub, a restaurant or a mosque, we need the Revelation which Jesus gave to John.

It’s a Revelation which changes everything. It’s a Revelation that God is on the Throne. And he is working out his strategies from the control room of Heaven.¹²