



St Helen's
Bishopsgate

BIBLE STUDY RESOURCES

Reading Revelation 1–11



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Why read Revelation 1–11?

During the weekend away we will be looking at Revelation 12–14 and by reading 1–11 beforehand we will help ourselves get ready for it and really make the most of it. But more importantly, on the surface, life and the world can appear to be a bit of a mess, and if we are Christians, there can be great pressures to compromise and fit in with the world around us, and it can be hard to keep going, and what really is our purpose in the world now anyway? Well, in Revelation we get a vision of what's really happening in the world, where we are heading, and what it looks like to live in line with that reality.

How to read Revelation 1–11?

At first glance, Revelation can seem quite intimidating to understand, but it was written to be understood by all sorts of people in the churches at the time (22:10), and just keeping a few things in mind can go a long way in beginning to grapple with it. So here are three tips for reading revelation:

1. Style

Revelation is a type of apocalyptic literature, which just means it is an unveiling, or a revealing. In Revelation's case it is revealing God's control room, it's pulling up the curtain and letting you see what is really happening and who is really pulling the levers of the universe. So, although there are some things about the future, much of the letter and most of our section is describing why the world is really like it is now. It does this using symbolism, that is, it is a Picasso painting not a photograph.

For example:

Picture language: 'a lamb standing, as though it had been slain' is not physical description of Jesus now as a woolly quadruped, but it does tell us something true about Jesus.

Numbers: Revelation uses lots of different numbers symbolically to communicate to its readers. For example, '144,000' is the sum of 12 (representing the tribes of Israel, the people of God in the Old Testament) x 12 (representing the apostles, the people of God in the New Testament) x 1000 (symbolic of large number) = All the people of God.

2. Scripture

If Revelation is a painting, it includes lots of Old Testament colours, as lots of the imagery and symbolism comes from the Old Testament. Just in the examples above we see Jesus as a slain lamb, a sacrifice for sin, or the twelve tribes of Israel making up the 144,000 sum. You don't need to be able to identify everything to understand the big picture of what is going on, but if you have a Bible with notes or references it might be worth your while looking up some of the Old Testament passages that are alluded to.

3. Situation

Revelation was written to seven historical churches in the Roman province of Asia (modern day Turkey) in the second half of the first century. It is a world that appeared to be dominated by the Roman emperor, and even the Christians may have been tempted to believe that he was in complete control of the present and the future of all his subjects. This was leading to great pressures to compromise and conform to the demands of their society. Maybe in not too dissimilar a way from how we might be tempted to see secularism being the dominant force in the world and in control of our futures. But in the first instance it was written to them then, so to understand the message of the book for us, we will need to think about what it meant for those first seven churches. We are actually given the applications to them up front in chapters 2–3, and the rest of the book provides the basis of that application. So thinking about how chapters 4–11 provide some of the basis for what is said in chapters 2–3 might be helpful.

Like with any Bible book, you are unlikely to comprehend everything fully first time around, but even reading it carefully through a couple of times, although you might find some bits a bit tricky, you will be being addressed by the living God as he speaks to you by his Spirit, through his word in Revelation 1–11.

Chapters 6–7

Six seals are opened, and God's people's identity in the last days is revealed

The seals are opened and four horses attack the key pillars of Roman society (the prices in v6 show a wrecked economy due to hyper-inflation). Remember, the scroll is good news for Christians, and seals opening represent the good news, the vindication of God's people. Therefore, you get the martyrs in the fifth seal crying out for rightful justice. And as the sixth seal opens, it seems like it all about to be finished, the universe is shaking and then... a remarkable pause in chapter 7. Four angels preserve the universe for a moment because v3–4, God's people need to be saved. And in v5–8 we have God's people written out like an army census from the Old Testament showing there is a battle to be had in these 'last days', there is a job to do.

Notes box:

- Why does Jesus think it is worth waiting, before he brings about justice for the martyrs 6:9–10?
- How would knowing that they were part of Jesus' army in the last days, effect how the people in the seven churches think about how they use their time?

Remaining question: what are Jesus' army meant to be doing now (during the 'last days')?

Chapters 8–11

Trumpets of judgement and the two witnesses

While the seals are directed as good news for God's people, the trumpets are seen as bad news for the world that rejects Jesus. These judgments are meant to lead the world to repentance but in 9:20–21, they do not listen. So how will anyone else join in God's people? It is through the two witnesses who testify, which is the church, the lampstands of the Lord on the earth (the number 2 is the number of reliable testimony in the Bible). But it will be bitter before it is sweet (10:10). Their role is to testify and face the consequences of that. They are partially protected if they are testifying, but they will also suffer and be trampled on like Jesus, but they will ultimately be vindicated and raised with him. And as they testify, they have powerful words like the prophets (11:3–6, 10), some of the world who would not repent earlier at judgements alone, will repent in light of the life and testimony of the witnesses in these last days (11:13).

Notes box:

- How does help explain why Jesus is unhappy with those who are too cowardly to speak for him (e.g. 22:8)?
- Given this is speaking to everyone in the churches, how will this affect how people in the churches prioritise what they do in their lives?

Remaining question: what is this all for, why did Jesus need an army?