

Revelation Readings



Senior's Bible Study: Extra Reading Plan



Hello Seniors Bible Study!

I am not yet sure how long we are going to be apart because of the Coronavirus, but we did end at a fun cliffhanger. The throne room of God had been revealed, and then a question is about to be asked. Who can read the book that is in God's hand? Who is worthy to open the seals and read? And then... silence... So much that the prophet weeps. Go ahead and read ahead if the tension is too much, finish chapter 5 and you'll find out who.

In these days of home isolation, I have a few optional reading assignments that you might enjoy. They will all enhance your read of Revelation and they will also be good reminders of what we have studied so far:

Page 2: A reading comparison project connection Revelation to Isaiah and Ezekiel

Page 3: An invitation to read the book of 1 John. It was written by the same author as Revelation and you will notice some themes in common.

Page 4-5: Review on your Roman Emperors during the time of the Bible and after, a lot of extra information on the Roman Emperor Domitian.

Pages 6-7: These come from the Bible Guide I wrote for the congregation last year. They are two introductory pages to Revelation, that can give some good background and review.

Page 8: References and citations for the different pictures included in this document.

A large amount of Biblical prophecy builds upon previously revealed prophecy. The images and books of scripture are very interconnected and that’s extremely clear to see in our study of the Book of Revelation if we take a moment to “look back” at two other prophets who saw visions of the presence/throne/chariot of God.

Isaiah was called to be the prophet of the people of God during a time when both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel were still standing. But not for long, the Assyrian Empire was spreading across the land and would very soon take the northern kingdom of Israel and it’s capitol of Samaria.

Ezekiel was called to be the prophet of the people of God during (or right before) Babylon laid siege to Judah. This is the beginning of the end for the nation of God’s people, they will be taken soon into exile (a similar setting to what we find in the book of Revelation).

Assignment one: Compare the throne-room vision in chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation with two other unique and quite similar visions of God. You’ll absolutely need to take notes for this, there are just too many symbols to remember, but I promise it’s worth it. Look for similarities and differences between the three, emphasis on the similarities (for example, both singing, and four living creatures are in more than one vision). Write your questions down and bring them to class when we meet again. This is where we’ll start our next discussion. Here’s a chart below to help:

Briefly describe the symbol you recognize, in general terms.	How it appears in: Revelation Chapters 4 and 5	How it appears in: The book of Isaiah Chapter 6	How it appears in: The book of Ezekiel Ch 1-3

Pastoral Letter: 1 John



While it is not a Biblical story, there are stories in church tradition about what happened to John towards the end of his ministry before his exile on the island of Patmos. The tales tell of attempted poisoning, and of surviving being boiled in oil (all for what he believed). Here in a French painting from the 1600's by Alonso Cano, John is exposing poison in the cup. The painting is called *Saint Jean Evangeliste at la coupe empoisonnee*. Which just sounds cool in French.

A very valuable piece of information that nobody ever told me, but I'm happy to share with you: If you have someone in your life who you respect, and they are ending their days, getting old, you ***absolutely should*** take them out for coffee/dinner once or twice and let them tell you their story. There is so much to learn, wisdom to be passed down, and you'll be so glad you invested the day in doing so. Because you'll learn a lot, and because listening is an act of love. And take notes!

Some of the last letters in the Bible (from James to 3rd John) are exactly that. Old pro's at sharing the gospel and challenging people to walk in the way that leads to life, share what they've learned toward the middle/end of their career. We call them Pastoral Epistles. Epistle is a fancy word for letter that we just don't use anymore... but feel free to bring it back in style.

John's work is straight up beautiful, inspiring, and extremely quotable and memorize-able. This leader of the church (the last and longest lived of all the original 12 who followed Jesus), understands the **LOVE OF GOD** in a way that can transform the reader. John has literally walked with Jesus Christ, devoted his life to spreading the gospel and has worked directly with at least 7 different churches (as you'll see soon). The man has deep levels of understanding and experience about what is and what is not true love, and he writes about it so well.

One of John's favorite metaphors, and honestly, one of my own, because of his works, is the metaphor of light and darkness. God is light, God's love is light, and it has come to bring light to you, and to the world. Sin is

darkness, evil and selfishness are darkness, and when the light arrives they must flee. They cannot exist in the presence of both the truth and the love of God. What a beautiful image of becoming a Christian. We invite God to shine light into our lives and the lives of those around us. This shows us both what and who we *are* and what and who we *are not*.

Know your Emperors

Tiberius: 14—37 AD



The one on the Roman throne for the latter half (and therefore the days of ministry) of Jesus Christ. He's referred to by name in the beginning of Luke, and is a safe bet that any time someone refers to Caesar in the gospels, they're referring to Tiberius Caesar. He's also the one who appointed Pontius Pilate. Within the category of "Roman Emperor" in general this one had some success, and was sorta peaceful. He actually asked *not* to be deified (made a God) which Rome did for its Emperors.

Caligula: 37—41 AD



Notice how *short* his rule is. Usually that's a sign that "something went wrong". In his case it was a combination of bad administration and um... straight up insanity. Some historians believe that he had caught some kind of disease that literally drove him crazy. It's not good when the king is talking to his horse (I seriously, did not even make that up). Consider this 4 years of scary political uncertainty.

Claudius: 41—54 AD



Poor guy had to clean up the mess of the previous emperor and ends up getting poisoned by his wife! He ruled while Herod persecuted the newfound Christian sect, and himself expelled all the Jews from the city of Rome which had a major impact on the Roman church. For 10 or more years, the Roman church would ONLY have been made of Romans (not Jews). But Jewish believers would have returned after Claudius's death.

Nero: 54—68 AD



This is the guy who is charged with playing the fiddle while the city burns in the background, actually that may have been a savvy political smear campaign. Nevertheless Rome did burn (well over half of it) during his reign. Nero needed a scapegoat to pin the fire on, and he chose the Christians, beginning one of the most intense (though pretty localized) eras of persecution that the church has ever faced.

Historically speaking, we believe that this is the emperor who ordered the execution of the apostle Paul, by beheading.

A New Opponent in the Story

When preparing to read the book of *Revelation*, as a Bible interpreter you kind of have to *pick a side*. There are (by my count) at least 5 different and respectable ways to interpret the timing and meaning of the last book we're about to read. They all agree on what's most important: that Jesus is returning, and God is on the throne of the universe, AND that *Revelation* is supposed to be about hope and not despair. But they all disagree on how the book should be read with regard to the future, AND with regard to its application to history. So, to simplify, I'm only sharing ONE interpretation with you, just know there are others, and that they are worth considering before you make your final determination.

For my part, as your guide, and the author of this resource, I am convinced that the book of Revelation was written during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. There are a few things you need to know about him:

- He insisted on being deified (thought of and referred to as a god) *while he was alive*. Usually that's done posthumously for Roman Emperors (after death)... not every Roman Emperor did this (though some others did)... and this should tell you a lot about him.
- Church tradition says he's the guy who had John the apostle banished to the Island of Patmos.
- His reign was considered pretty oppressive, but he did have some goals/successes. Domitian worked to rebuild the capitol of Rome (still gutted and damaged by fire), and also wanted to rebuild Roman civilization. He thought that would happen best with a return to the old ways (old religious systems of idolatry... absolutely including emperor worship). And that put both the Christians *and* the Jews in his crosshairs. Interestingly, not *because* they were Christian and Jewish, but because of their refusal to bow and worship Roman emperors, culture, and idols. And he was relentless in seeking out and destroying those who stood in the way of his vision for Rome's future.
- Rome will persecute Christianity on and off from the book of Acts on till 313 AD when the reign of Constantine will begin, but Domitian is considered one of the more intense in doing so. Where Nero attacked the Christian church locally in Rome, to blame them for the fire, Domitian took the persecution of Christianity (and Judaism) across the whole empire, with everything from oppressive taxes, to arrests, imprisonments, and even executions and public punishments.



The Roman emperor Domitian, who reigned from AD 81 to AD 96, and was a major opponent of Christianity.

Selections from the book of Revelation



One of the stained glass windows in the Downs United Methodist Church features an image inspired by the book of Revelation. A victorious lamb (victorious because of the flag), clearly marked as Jesus (there are 3 crosses... see the one behind its head?). Then the lamb is atop a book (modern day scroll) that has seven seals. Line this image up with what you read in chapter 5, and it fits perfectly.

The apostle John has been arrested, imprisoned, and if church tradition is correct, he has also been tortured. All for spreading the gospel, for preaching the message of Jesus Christ. The Roman Emperor/Government has decided to exile him on the island of Patmos (a sort of prison colony) until his death. This is likely because they fear how powerful of a symbol he will become if he is killed and can be called a martyr.

He may have thought his ministry was over, but it was not. There was one final letter to send, one final message, this one directly from God. John receives a vision while he is stuck on this prison island. It's full of meaning, hope, inspiration, and judgement and it speaks in layers (as all good prophecy often does). Every page of it very clearly addresses the first century concerns of persecution under Rome, and the struggles and trials the church faces. He even writes specifically to 7 churches (likely 7 that he had a lot of contact with).

Once the vision is received and recorded on paper then... John had to find some way to get it off of the Island. What a clandestine effort that must have taken. It's highly likely that the final book of the Bible was a carefully guarded (and often smuggled) letter passed among Christians during the Roman persecution. At it's heart it says "Hang in there, you're on the winning team, God is God and Rome is not!"

But that message of hope is wrapped in a literary form we are not used to (see next page), and steeped in "first-century-Christian-code". The people who read it when it was written would have understood every symbol or word (like you and I using emoji's) but now, almost 2000 years later, so much has changed, it's a challenge for us to unravel some of Revelation's symbology.

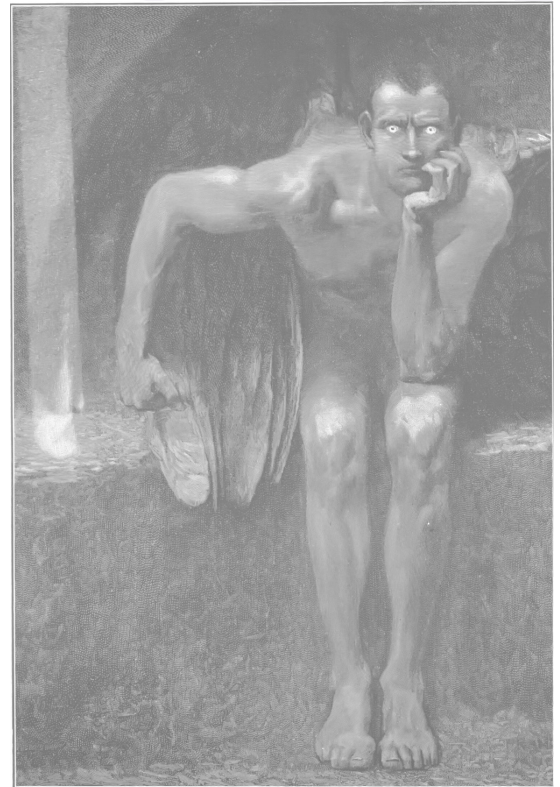
Read just chapters 1-5: They're the easiest ones, and they share two visions of a triumphant Jesus Christ, along with 7 letters to churches that John himself likely served. Beyond chapter 6 is very challenging territory. You're welcome to give it a go, in fact you may find yourself better able to understand it now, than before the reading challenge (that was the point after all). Revelation opens up even more for you as a reader after you've taken a turn through the rest of the Old Testament prophets, and the other letters in the New Testament.

Apocalypse!

Fun bit of trivia: Apocalypse does not actually mean “the end of the world”. Our culture has been using that word wrong for a while. The technically correct word for “the end of the world” is *Eschaton*. An *apocalypse* is a revelation (something that was shown to the prophet by God). Usually it’s in the form of a vision, and most often it is about *future events*, with some of the most popular ones being about the end of the world (so you can understand the confusion). Technically though, if you want to be snarky in a conversation you can say that Apocalypse means the vision of the end, not the end itself... You could also say (and be correct) that the last book of the Bible is *Revelation* not *Revelations* (not plural) the whole thing is just ONE self-contained vision. Of course, you should be ready for all the eye rolls you’ll create by doing so =)

Why is an Apocalypse so hard to read?

- 1) *It’s Written in Code*: This letter assumes you’re “in” the club, you’re a Christian and know scripture (and first century Christian-speak) very well. This is an important feature because if a Roman soldier picked up *Revelation* then they’d have a hard go at deciphering it, while a first century church-goer should be able to read it much more easily.
- 2) *Some things are hard to describe*: John has seen a vision, literally, of God, of the throne of heaven, of Jesus, and of future events (some immediate, some quite distant). He is doing his best to describe *with words* what he saw and experienced *with his eyes, ears, and senses*. There are limitations to being able to describe something. When John says it’s “a rainbow” does that mean it’s an *actual* rainbow, or does it mean it’s something else but if you saw it too you’d say “oh yeah I totally get why he called this a rainbow”.
- 3) *Some things we aren’t meant to know*: Jesus was very clear about knowledge on the end of the world in Matthew 24. Nobody knows when it’s going to happen, and I would add as pastor, that if you’re cracking open the book of Revelation so you can make a checklist and *know* either when (or sorta-when) the end is coming, you’re misusing the book. It was written for the purpose of hope and inspiration.



An artist’s interpretation of Revelation chapter 20 (which you’ll read later). This is a picture of the Devil, a fallen angel, bound in prison, powerless and with nothing to do. In the end, it will be the forces of wickedness that are imprisoned, even though for the original readers of Revelation... Christians were the ones being arrested now. It’s a powerful picture of the tables being turned... Plus I like how the artist has drawn this... even though the devil still looks creepy, he also looks TOTALLY bored. Wickedness incarnate, completely robbed of its power. Now that is hope.

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Know Your Emperors: The Bust of Tiberius is in the Romisch-Germanisches Museum in Cologne, Bust of Emperor Caligula (attribution Ny, Carlsberg Glyptotek), Bust of Claudius from the Naples National Archaeological Museum,

1 John: Painting by Alonso Cano. Statue of Domitian from the Vatican museum in Rome.

Revelation: Satan Bound is from *The Bible and its Story Volume 10*