

REVELATION: APOCALYPSE NOW

April 19, 2026

Preaching: Michael Swartzentruber, Senior Minister



Revelation 19:11-21

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹²His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. ¹³He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will

tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, 'King of kings and Lord of lords'.

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in mid-heaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.' ¹⁹Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. ²⁰And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. ²¹And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

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REFLECT & DISCUSS

1. Read the passage slowly. Then take a deep breath and read it again. What word, phrase, or image stands out to you?

CONTEXT NOTE

Each “Then I saw...” marks a distinct vision (three in this passage, extending to a total of seven in chapter 20). While these visions are linked, they are not necessarily “linear.” They may well be a version of the same thing from several different angles, each angle meant to highlight something of theological significance.

2. These scenes of a cosmic end-times battle have inspired predictions and prognostications about when, where, and how of “the end of the world.” What experience do you have with such predictions, ideas, sermons, or theologies? Do you think the “end of the world” can be predicted or known? Why or why not? (See *what Jesus makes of this in Matthew 24:36*)
3. The first vision is *not* a gentle Christ floating down from heaven. Instead, it is a warrior-King, charging out of heaven. Christ appears to be using the very tools of empire (violence and bloodshed, domination and destruction) that define evil elsewhere in Revelation.

Does this fit with your sense of Christ, his teaching, his ministry, and his death and resurrection? Why or why not?

4. Notice, there are some peculiarities in this first vision that might complicate the violence:
 - Christ uses a sword from his mouth: a “word-sword” and perhaps not a physical weapon
 - He is already soaked in blood *before* the battle, perhaps indicating it is *his own blood* - not that of anyone else - and Christ’s blood is shed *for the redemption and not ultimate destruction of those ensnared in sin and death*
 - Where we would expect a physical sword to hang from his robe and against his leg, instead, there are only words “King of Kings and Lord of Lords”--no sword.
 - Wearing white is what kings did, parading through streets *after* victory, not during battle
 - Even the heavenly armies do not wear armor, but linen robes suitable for a festival

What do you think of this portrayal as actually *subverting* war and violence?

5. The “small and great” are shown earlier in the throneroom of God (19:5). But now the “small and great” alike are aligned to make war against Christ and his people. This may well be a warning that just as anyone is welcome to the ways and goodness of God, anyone (including church folk) can be unwittingly caught up in the ways of sin and death.

This intense imagery may be

intended to disturb the complacent (church) people who don't see the harm in what they are doing.

How do people in the 21st century become complacent or indifferent to the harm and hurt others bear? How do you keep from becoming complacent in your spiritual journey and moral life?

6. Some Christian leaders have gotten all worked up about “joining the army of Christ” to slay the enemies of God. Notice, the army doesn't do any slaying... only Christ. The wrath of God is never something that humans enforce, and thus never something that can be done *then or now in the name of God/Christ*. What are your thoughts on the relationship between faith, war, and violence?
7. The symbolism of these visions is rooted deeply in the “already victorious” nature of God in Christ. How might this be encouraging, strengthening, and inspiring for those who were under the thumb of Roman rule? How might these visions help or warn those who were tempted to “go along to get along” with emperor-worship, status-seeking, and participating in an economy that enslaved and impoverished people?

CONTEXT NOTES

The Apocalypse of John

The Greek title for this book uses a word with a very specific meaning.

Apocalypse translates to “unveiling” or “revealing”—what is hidden is uncovered. The purpose of the book is to provide a way of seeing the world that might not be obvious or clear, especially for those suffering or excluded. While we have come to associate an apocalypse with planetary destruction, that is not actually what this book—or apocalyptic literature—is really about (even if warfare, death, and destruction are depicted).

The book was written during the last part of the first century or early second century, and is dripping with imagery from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: Genesis, Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and so much more.

The images, characters, and storyline can be confusing, overwhelming, and opaque, especially to those of us so far removed from the first readers, the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean world, and non-Canonical books like Enoch. To read Revelation well requires patience, curiosity, and a good guide.

Many have made much of Revelation and its symbolism, using the imagery and storyline for purposes that are problematic, misguided, and sometimes downright destructive. Predictions of the “end times” too often flow out of this book—never materializing, but not stopping the next religious prognosticator from identifying a date,

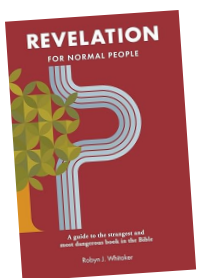
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leader, or circumstance. Some have even tried to initiate violent conflict in order to make the end times come about.

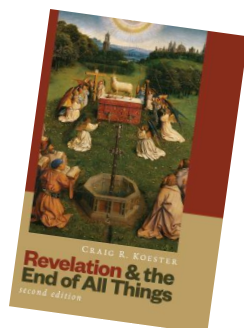
Importantly, Revelation is *not* primarily about some distant future—it is mostly about how to live in the world now with a sense of what is finally true *in God as known in Christ*. It might not seem obvious, especially amid the oppressive conditions of the Roman Empire (or the conflicts of our present day), but God is at work to bring about justice, healing, and wholeness in God’s time and with God’s ways. Revelation is about encouraging and strengthening the Christ-followers to keep the faith, act justly, and stay focused on worshiping God.

Book Recommendations:



Revelation for Normal People: A Guide to the Strangest and Most Dangerous Book in the Bible
by Robin J. Whitaker

Revelation & The End of All Things
by Craig Koester



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