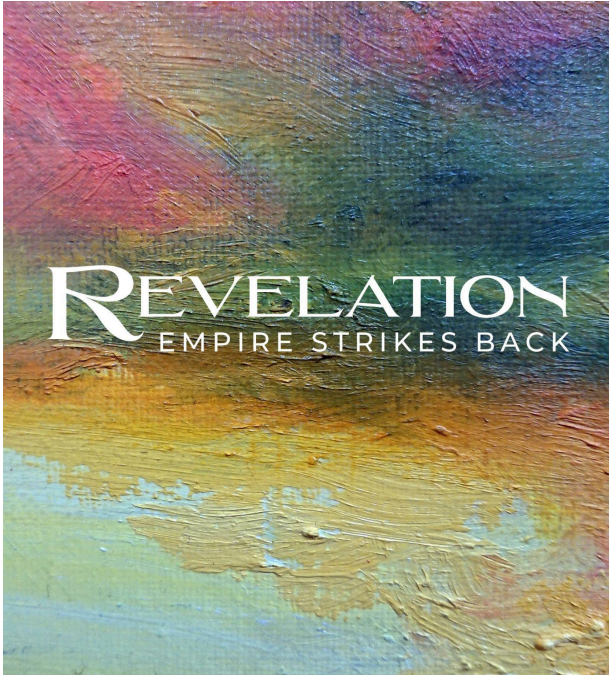


# REVELATION: EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

April 12, 2026

*Preaching: Michael Swartzentruber, Senior Minister*



allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. <sup>16</sup>Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, <sup>17</sup>so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. <sup>18</sup>This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six.

## Revelation 13:11-18

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb, and it spoke like a dragon. <sup>12</sup>It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. <sup>13</sup>It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; <sup>14</sup>and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; <sup>15</sup>and it was

## 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?
2. Revelation is about uncovering and presenting spiritual realities at work in our world. The writer, John, is given visions of heaven and earth. What has been your experience with people interpreting and talking about this book? Have you read it? Do you enjoy it? Why or why not?
3. Do you have a favorite verse, image, or section of Revelation? If

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so, what is it, and why is it important to you?

4. The imagery of Revelation can seem scary and confusing (see context notes below). In Revelation 13 John sees a Dragon/Serpent/Satan, then a sea beast, and finally a land beast (an “unholy trinity”). This is one of the most famous passages in Revelation, describing a beast who leads people astray and is eventually defeated by God.

Assuming Revelation is meant to predict some specific future time, some have interpreted the mark to be the modern use of credit cards or bar codes, others claim it is vaccines or tattoos; still others think it is wearing a politically branded red hat. What experience do you have with people identifying “the mark of the beast,” and what do you make of this idea?

5. Verse 18 makes it very clear that “666” is supposed to be interpreted in a particular way. Ancient languages also had numerical values, and so the letters of names could add up to a number (called gematria).

Scholars have decoded 666 to mean Emperor Nero, which is consistent with other imagery in Revelation (Rome famously had 7 hills, see Revelation 17:9). Revelation is full of very thinly veiled symbolism for the ways the

Roman empire enslaved, oppressed, and often persecuted Jews and Christians. Indeed, coins had an image of Caesar, sometimes even showing the emperor standing on or above his foes (such as the Jews defeated in the Jewish-Roman War). Note the coin issued by Emperor Vespasian in 71 CE and the words *Judaea Capta* (“Judea Captured”).



How does this context change or sharpen how you understand and engage the disturbing images of Revelation?

6. Notice how the unholy trinity symbolism in Revelation 13 is meant to be a poor imitation of the holy trinity described in John’s vision: God enthroned, Christ the lamb who was slain, and the Spirit. In our world today, how are good things twisted and leveraged for power, prestige, or dominance? How is Christianity used and abused by people trying to gain power, influence, or control?
7. What tools or resources have you found helpful for interpreting Revelation? See the book resource mentioned in the Context Notes.

## 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.

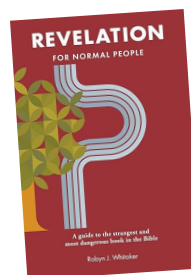
The images, characters, and storyline can be confusing, overwhelming, and opaque, especially to those of us so far removed from the first readers, the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean world, and non-Canonical books like Enoch. To read Revelation well requires patience, curiosity, and a good guide.

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,

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

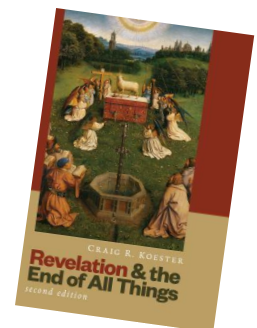
Importantly, Revelation is *not* primarily about some distant future—it is mostly about how to live in the world now with a sense of what is finally true *in God as known in Christ*. It might not seem obvious, especially amid the oppressive conditions of the Roman Empire (or the conflicts of our present 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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