

DISCIPLE

THE BIBLE TEACHING

Nero lighted Rome by burning Christians on tar-soaked crosses in A.D. 64. Others were crucified or decapitated. Apparently, both Peter and Paul were martyred at that time in Rome. Tradition says that Peter was crucified upside down because he said he was not worthy to be crucified as Jesus was. Vespasian, Nero's successor, sent his son Titus to destroy Jerusalem in A.D. 70 in an effort to put down the Jews. When Domitian became Roman emperor in A.D. 81 and declared himself a god, the entire empire trembled. Domitian, a jealous, moody, unpredictable tyrant, cut down everyone he considered a threat. He executed his niece's husband on a charge of atheism, presumably for his refusing to consider Domitian a god. Coins found around the empire show his face and the words *Domitian Divine Caesar*. He demanded worship of himself as lord and god.

Domitian used selective terrorist tactics against the Christians during his reign (A.D. 81–96). A letter from Clement of Rome to the church at Corinth about A.D. 95 refers to “the sudden and repeated misfortunes and calamities which have befallen us.”

A new temple for the cult of the emperor was built in Ephesus, putting additional pressure on the Christians of Asia. John, the author of Revelation, was exiled on Patmos, the penal island for political offenders, because of his loyalty to Christ (Revelation 1:9). A Christian named Antipas, a member of the church in Pergamum (a center of emperor worship) had been put to death for his fidelity to Jesus (2:13). John says that some Christians in Smyrna will face death (2:10), and he prophesied that even more fierce persecution lay ahead for the church. Persecution did continue from time to time until the emperor Constantine saw a cross in the sky and became sympathetic to Christianity in A.D. 312. John wanted his revelation to give Christians encouragement to hold fast and remain faithful to the Lord. Take heart; the martyrs would be close to the altar of the Lord (6:9-11).

A Difficult Book

Most scholars today believe that a great Christian leader, highly respected and very well known in Asia, whose name was John, wrote his Revelation toward the end of this time of trouble, tension, and impending martyrdom (A.D. 81–96). A probable date for the writing would be A.D. 95/96. Scholars debate whether the author was John the apostle or another John.

The title of the book is “The Apocalypse,” which means revelation. It has been translated “The Revelation to John” and has come to mean the revelation of end times. We were introduced to apocalyptic literature in Daniel. Prophecy in apocalyptic writings moves beyond preaching about soon-to-

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The Roman emperor Domitian was the younger brother of Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. His severe and cruel persecution of Christians probably prompted the writing of the Book of Revelation. This coin shows Domitian with a laurel wreath, symbol of honor and victory.

come events, as in Amos or Hosea, and enters into visions of last days or end times.

We know that we are going to have difficulty understanding the book. Everyone does, for several reasons.

First, apocalypses do not yield their messages easily to us because we are so far removed from the historical events, strange symbols, and ancient concepts. We must first ask what the book meant to its original readers. Like Daniel seeing visions of beasts (Daniel 7), like Ezekiel seeing the valley of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37), so John is describing his vision in symbolic language for his day. We are reading a spiritual vision of end times in ancient terms.

Second, as John said, he was caught up in the spirit. An important gift of the Holy Spirit is the ability to prophesy, to proclaim the truths of God. John claimed to be standing in the role of prophet, caught up in the Spirit of God. “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (Revelation 1:10). In a vision he ate a scroll (God’s Word) as Ezekiel had done (10:10; Ezekiel 2:8–3:3). And he was told, “You must prophesy again” (Revelation 10:11).

A third reason the book is difficult is that it was intended to be. Ordinary words lacked the power to carry its message. So John used symbolic language from the Old Testament—reinterpreting the symbols and images for his day. To outsiders it was meaningless. But to insiders the message was clear. They understood the symbolic language:

- Babylon—really means Rome, the great city set on seven hills (18:2);
- the great beast like a leopard, bear, lion—the evil empires of Daniel, now rolled into one—the Roman Empire (13:1-2);
- the great whore—again Rome;
- the Lamb—Jesus;
- the beast—the antichrist;
- Sodom—Jerusalem (11:8; see Isaiah 1:9-10);
- the woman (Israel), the child (Jesus), and the dragon (Satan) (Revelation 12);
- the scarlet beast—the Roman Empire (17:3);
- “full of blasphemous names” (17:3; 13:1)—divine titles given to Roman emperors (17:9-11);
- Harmagedon (Armageddon)—hill of Megiddo in Palestine where important battles had been fought for thousands of years, symbolically the place of final victory (16:16).

In ancient numerology, numbers had meanings:

Number 1 stood for God, a holy number.

Number 3 stood for heaven and the Trinity.

Number 4 stood for earth, the four corners, four winds.

Number 6 is a human number, incomplete, evil.

Number 7 was considered perfect, complete, holy, divine because it was the combination of 3 (heaven) and 4 (earth). Seven churches, seven candlesticks, seven bowls (as in the

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Temple), seven trumpets. (We still say, “We’re at sixes and sevens,” meaning that evil and good do not mix, or that we cannot decide between two choices.)

Number 13 has been an “unlucky” number for hundreds of years because it is the sum of six and seven.

Number 12 is very important in Revelation. Twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and twelve apostles in the New Testament refer to the people of God. The twelve tribes provided gates into the holy city.

Number 24 is two times twelve, the twelve sons of Jacob (tribes) and the twelve apostles. Together they comprise the faithful Jews and Christians of the full covenant.

Twelve thousand times twelve is 144,000, a complete number, not to be taken literally, but to describe a “perfected people of God,” the complete household of faith.

The number 666: How would you mention the emperor Domitian without getting your head cut off? You could write 666, which means evil, evil, evil, symbolizing Domitian—the greatest evil. The language was complex but necessary to communicate the message to those for whom it was intended.

The Message to the Christians in Asia

Briefly, remember these four points:

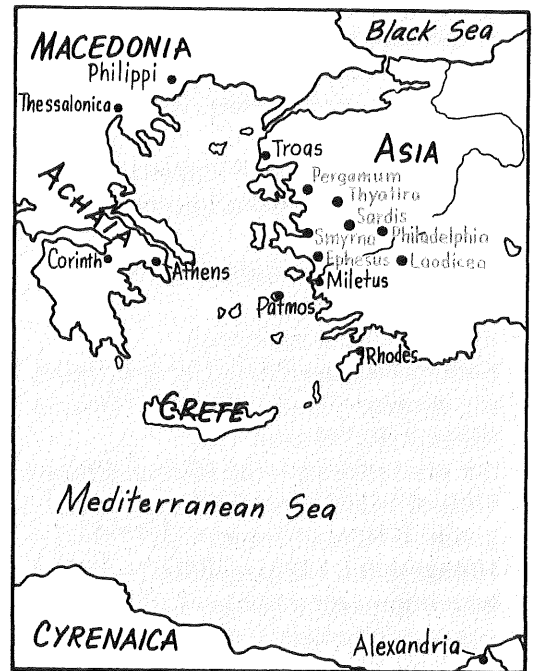
- The churches are called to burn again with the passionate fire of evangelism and faithfulness: Shun food offered to idols, immorality, the libertine teachings of the Nicolaitans who said “anything goes.” Avoid the Jews who are harassing the churches. Do not have an eye to money. Repent of lukewarm religion, and God will save you from falling away during times of stress.

- John warns that trouble is coming. Be sure which side you are on. The four horsemen—conquest, war, famine, and death—are coming. Earthquakes and plagues (as in Egypt) are God’s way of giving last-minute warnings, but many will not repent. Notice in Revelation 11:1-2 that the courtyard outside the Temple where foreign visitors or curious inquirers gathered will be trampled. You are either in or out, washed in the blood of Christ or doomed, wearing either the mark of the Lamb or the mark of the beast.

- Rome will fall. “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great” (18:2). Right then it appeared that Rome was all-powerful; but remember, as Isaiah said, “The nations are like a drop from a bucket” (Isaiah 40:15). Stand firm. The day will soon come when the Roman Empire, awful whore, slayer of God’s people, will be gone from the face of the earth.

- Evil will be destroyed once and for all. Christ is married to his bride, his holy people (Revelation 19:7). Satan first will be bound (20:2) and then finally thrown into a lake of fire (20:10). Even death itself shall die (20:14), and God will bring a new heaven and a new earth (21:1).

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The Seven Churches (Revelation 1-3)

VICTORY

The Message to Us

Read carefully Revelation 21–22. Notice that the God who will bring a new heaven and a new earth is the same God who created Adam and Eve, who called Abraham and Sarah, and who gave his only Son. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (21:6). The one God of the universe will redeem the whole creation.

In one sense, redemption is complete. “It is done!” said the One who sits on the throne (21:6). But in another sense, God’s mercy is still open, even in this last hour. To the repentant, God will still reach out. “To the thirsty I will [still] give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life” (21:6).

The faithful must hold on, living the Christlike life; for they are married to the bridegroom, the Lamb of God. “Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children” (21:7). Do not sell out or betray the Lamb!

The holy city is symbolic in its size, its imagery, its gates, its light. What do you think each symbol means (21:10-27)? What meaning do the symbols have for you?

Watch carefully the closing of the book, beginning 22:6.

“See, I am coming soon!” (22:7). There is still time to offer the gospel to others.

“Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:7). In Revelation 11, two witnesses prophesied, clothed in sackcloth. They appealed to people to repent. In the earthquake seven thousand were killed, but “the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven” (11:13). A moment of possibility remains.

Where does it end? It ends in a garden, a garden of innocence like the garden of Eden before the Fall. No evil is permitted there, not even a snake, for the Tempter is dead. The spiritual death has been overcome by the blood of the Lamb. Death has been slain. We stand beside a tree, in the intimacy of God. It is the tree of life, the “other” tree in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9). We are “naked” and not afraid. Whereas Adam and Eve hid, lonely, guilt-ridden, afraid, hoping God would not find them, we will then live with God in the full light of day. The Bible begins with people hiding from God; it ends with people praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20).

We pray now for the coming, the soon coming, of the kingdom of God, which Jesus the Christ introduced and which he will one day fully complete. Meanwhile, we never lose hope, because the final victory belongs to Christ Jesus, our Savior and our Lord.

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Artistic representations of the letters *alpha* and *omega*, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, symbolize God and sometimes Christ as the first and the last, the beginning and end of all things (Isaiah 44:6; Revelation 1:8; 22:13).

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MARKS OF DISCIPLESHIP

The disciple must remain faithful even in the midst of persecution and suffering. No matter how bad the times, we hold on to our loyalty to Jesus Christ, knowing that the victory rests ultimately with God.

Most of us have suffered little for our faith, yet we are tempted to drift away. What do you think are the greatest temptations we face that would keep us from “conquering”?

If you were to describe a “Babylon” today, what would it look like? Who or what would be its agents?

Do you feel like one of the seven churches sometimes? Which one? What keeps you steady?

How is the vision of God’s final victory helpful to you?

In some ways do you find the vision lacking in power to keep your faith strong? Can you identify those feelings?

If time is short, and it certainly is for us as individuals, who are some people you should be praying for, witnessing to, right now? Name them.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE

Compare Daniel 7 with Revelation 11–13. Describe similarities and differences. If you have time, also compare Matthew 24, often referred to as a “little apocalypse.”

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Disciples remain faithful to God in the midst of persecution and suffering.

Chart of Biblical History

2000 B.C.	Period of the ancestors Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
1700 B.C.	Jacob’s family enters Egypt
1260 B.C.	Moses leads the escape from Egypt
1220 B.C.	Joshua leads the people into Canaan
1020 B.C.	Period of the judges Beginning of the monarchy Saul, David, Solomon
922 B.C.	Division into Northern and Southern Kingdoms after death of Solomon
722/721 B.C.	Fall of Samaria to Assyria
587/586 B.C.	Fall of Jerusalem to Baby- lon
	Temple destroyed Exile into Babylon
539 B.C.	Persian Period Edict of Cyrus
538 B.C.	Return of exiles
515 B.C.	Temple rebuilt
333 B.C.	Greek Period
167 B.C.	Alexander the Great Jews revolt (Hasmonean Period)
63 B.C.	Romans capture Jerusalem
37 B.C.	Herod the Great appointed king over Palestine
4 B.C.	Birth of Jesus
A.D. 10	Paul’s birth
A.D. 29–30	Crucifixion of Jesus
A.D. 30–31	Stoning of Stephen
A.D. 30–31	Paul’s conversion
A.D. 44–49	The Jerusalem Council
A.D. 46–47	Paul’s first journey
A.D. 50–52	Paul’s second journey
A.D. 52–56	Paul’s third journey
A.D. 60–61	Paul’s voyage to Rome
A.D. 62–68	Paul martyred
A.D. 62–68	Peter martyred
A.D. 70	Fall of Jerusalem Temple destroyed

Look Back on Your Journey and Remember

Record here the high points (and perhaps the low points) of your journey into and through the Bible—the insights, truths, and experiences you now treasure; the distances you traveled in time and faith; the friends you made and the companions you had along the way; and the view you now have of discipleship.

If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples.

—John 8:31

The New Jerusalem Bible