

Question: I find Revelation, the last book of the Bible, to be very confusing. What message do you think God wants us to get from this book?

The book of Revelation was written near the end of the first century for Christians who were facing severe persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Some people have interpreted it as prophetic of events that would take place long after the first or second Christian centuries. But the readers for whom it was written are told that this revelation was about “what must soon take place” “because the time is near” (Rev. 1:1, 3). There are references to the ultimate victory that all faithful Christians will receive when Jesus comes to take them into God’s presence in the new heaven and the new earth. However, the prophecies are primarily about the persecution Christians would face in the days of the Roman emperor Domitian who reigned at the end of the first century and into the second.

The word “revelation” is a translation of the Greek word “apocalypse” that means to uncover that which is hidden. This kind of literature was filled with signs and symbols that were familiar to most of these early Christians but not understood by their enemies who were trying to destroy them. It revealed to these Christians something of the severity of suffering they were about to face, but it also gave them assurance of overcoming through continued faith in Christ. Early in the book they were told: “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). Nine times throughout Revelation blessings are promised to those who “overcome” (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 17:14; 21:7).

The Lord gave this revelation for the seven churches of Asia to the apostle John while he was in exile on the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea (Rev. 1:9-3:21). After the letters to the seven churches, John was given a view into the presence of God in heaven. In apocalyptic symbolism, we see God’s people with all creation worshipping God on his throne. The message here was that God ruled, not the Roman emperor, and that God knows the suffering of his people and will bring the wrath of his judgment upon their persecutors (Rev. 4).

In the following chapter, John was shown a scroll sealed with seven seals. He wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the seals. But by the symbols of “the lion of Judah” and the “Lamb that was slain,” Jesus Christ is shown to be worthy (Rev. 5). The heart of the book reveals three cycles of seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls of wrath. The sevens are divided into four signs of the powerful weapons God has to use against the Roman persecutors, two signs showing God’s justice at work and one final sign that transitions into the next series of seven (Rev. 6-16). Interspersed within these chapters are apocalyptic images portraying the spiritual warfare with Satan and his ally, the Roman rulers.

Next, the city of Rome is portrayed in the image of the ancient Babylon drunk with the wine of her own power and excesses. The great city along with her allies would all be destroyed, and the hallelujah chorus of God’s people rejoiced at the fall of the great beast (Rev. 17-19). The final destruction of God’s enemies, including Satan, is described in the closing chapters; and the people of God are pictured as safe in the presence of God in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 20-21).

This brief overview does not explain every detail of Revelation, but it does help us see something of the message of the book. That message brings hope. Whenever the enemies of God and his people seem to be inflicting great harm, we can be assured that in the end the persecutors will be gone forever; and God’s people will gain eternal victory. Although the book was first written for the early Christians who were suffering under the Roman persecution, the message is always relevant to any group of Christians who face persecution because of their faith in Jesus. We can all rejoice in hope of proclaiming: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

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