

The book of Revelation is a prophecy. It tells a vivid story that foretells God's ultimate triumph over the evil forces of the world. It speaks to people who are under pressure for their faith in Christ. It speaks to people who live in uncertain and dangerous times. It speaks to imagination and emotion more than to reason and logic. It speaks to faith. We would know all this instinctively, if we had sat among first-century believers in Ephesus or Laodicea on the Lord's Day. They could not read what John wrote. They had only one copy. They could only listen as someone read the book of Revelation to the congregation. They would hear it as the theological thriller it is.

This theological thriller challenges any vision of reality that paints Jesus Christ out of the human story, stroke by stroke, day by day; any vision of reality that says the problems of the world are only economic, political, and educational. The persecuted followers of Christ, who first heard the book of Revelation needed its different vision of reality. We who see freedom of religious expression diminished and moral values turned upside down need the same vision and for the same reason. The tempter whispered to them and whispers to us, "It's pointless, you know. You've lost. Why are you wasting your time? You could be doing some real good if you'd focus on something else." (R. R. Reno, "The Public Square," *First Things*, March 2014, 7)

Revelation says to them and says to us, "Here is another way to look at the world. Here is a vision of Jesus Christ. It will expose the fragile foundations of all other visions of reality. Look at this vision. Absorb it. Trust it. This is a vision worth living for and dying for. You can overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil with this vision.

The Vision of Heaven

The voice that spoke to John like a trumpet at the beginning of Revelation speaks again: **"Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."** (Revelation 4:1) John, once again in the Spirit, was taken up into heaven. The throne there and the unimaginable One who sits on the throne exude beauty, power and holiness. The 24 august elders of heaven on lesser thrones surround His throne. Four living creatures you might mistakenly draw back from as from a nightmare worship Him. **Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is come."** (Revelation 1:8) They declare the Cause of their ceaseless praise: **"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."** (Revelation 1:11)

"Thy name be hallowed!" cries the Church on earth, **"Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!"** Not yet. The kingdom of the world arrogantly covers up what the One on the throne has revealed. The world's thinking has become futile. Its foolish heart is dark. Although it claims to be wise, it has become a fool. (See Romans 1:21-22)

The One on the throne prepares to reverse that. John sees **in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.** (Revelation 5:1) In spite of the visual overload and the overpowering majesty and praise in that everlasting hall, the whole company turns its gaze upon the scroll, rolled up and sealed. What does it say? Someone must break the seals and open and read it. John sees a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, **"Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?"** (Revelation 5:2) The 24 elders, who administer the affairs of heaven, look away in humility and truth. None of the four, unearthly, living creatures with their many-eyed vigilance even twitches. **No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth is able to open the scroll or to look into it.** (Revelation 5:3). A solemn hush brings a pause to their praise. All that can be heard is the weeping of John, almost the

wailing of John, **because no one is found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.** (Revelation 5:4)

The tears of Man, not often seen yet not unseemly in those realms of praise, receive a hopeful answer from one of the 24 elders. **“Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, overcame, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”** (Revelation 5:5)

The elder says so much and says so little. The Lion, worthy to open and read it, is one who overcame. Overcame what? Overcame how? However He did it, He did what John knows the seven churches have to do in their time of trouble: “Overcome!” His fierce name, **the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David**, suggests He overcame by military force.

The Worthy One steps forward to take the scroll, and John does not see a king or commander. He sees **a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and elders.** John, hardly daring to breathe, watches as the Lamb takes **the scroll from the right hand of him who sits on the throne.**

Praise shatters the hush of heaven. The 24 elders and the four living creatures sing a **new song** to the Lamb. **“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”** (Revelation 5:9-10)

The authority of the Lamb and the praise offered to Him flow from His sacrificial death and its effect on the world. That is how the Lamb of God overcame and sat down with His father on His throne. He is the one who said: **“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”** (Revelation 3:21) John knows that what he has just seen will govern the meaning of everything else he sees in his visions. The Church must prepare herself to imitate the Lamb, to overcome as the Lamb overcame.

Judgment

The Lamb breaks the first four seals one after the other. They visit conquest, war, famine, pestilence, and death upon a quarter of the earth. The Lamb opens the fifth seal, and John’s heart is in his throat. He sees **under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”** Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, **until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.** (Revelation 6:9-11)

The congregations listening to Revelation do not want to hear that. They are already at risk because of their faith and face the threat of worse. And now, heaven’s purpose calls for more suffering, including martyrdom. Pleas for justice are met with the answer, “You have to wait. There will be more like you who suffer and die.” This seems dark. What does it mean? When the Lamb opens the sixth seal, we know He has unleashed judgment on the world. People great and small call **to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?”** (Revelation 6:16,17) The seventh seal promises to bring an end to all things.

But the end doesn't come. The Lamb does not break the seventh seal. The action stops. The attention of heaven turns to a large body of people, making its way to appear before the One who sits on the throne and before the Lamb. John hears them announced with the military roll call of a Jewish army: 12,000 soldiers from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. They are the strangest army you ever saw. They never fight. They turn out not to be an army in the traditional sense at all. We are to think of them as an army, but when John sees this army, it doesn't even look like an army. He sees **a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes** (Revelation 7:9) – robes given to the martyrs of the fifth seal. This is an army of martyrs. This is an army that overcomes like the Lamb overcame.

One of the 24 elders explains: **“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** (Revelation 7:14) The blood of their sacrificial witness mingles with the blood of the Lamb's sacrificial witness and makes their festal robes white. That is why **the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.** (Revelation 7:17)

Only then does the Lamb open the seventh seal. Once again, we expect the end of all things, and once again the end does not come. The seventh seal, like a nesting doll, contains seven more actions, as if heaven is in no hurry to ring down the curtain. It reveals seven angels prepared to sound their trumpets, each heralding new judgments. This time, the judgments are more severe. More of the earth is affected; **A third of the earth is burned up.** (Revelation 8:8) **A third of the sea turned to blood.** (Revelation 8:9) The suffering of humanity is considerably greater. **During those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.** (Revelation 9:6)

Then John receives a nasty shock. **The rest of mankind who were not killed by these plagues still do not repent of the work of their hands; they do not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood – idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor do they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.** (Revelation 9:20, 21)

How does repentance get into this story? Who cares if they do not repent? They deserve judgment, and judgment is what they get. Once again, John does something we will find throughout this remarkable prophecy. Along with language we may never understand, he says plainly what he means. Repentance matters to heaven. The One on the throne cares – the Merciful One, the Compassionate One, the Longsuffering One. **The Lord . . . is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** (2 Peter 3:9) But if judgment does not bring people to repentance, what does?

Redemptive Witness

The seventh trumpet promises to bring all things to an end. But the end doesn't come. The seventh angel does not sound his trumpet. Once again, the action stops. It's as if heaven in mercy is unwilling to deliver the final blow. Then we realize: The Lamb has broken all seven seals. John can read the contents of the scroll. The angel tells John to devour its contents until they work their way into every fiber of his being. He will find the message of the scroll sweet to the taste, when he sees how the message ends. But it sickens him, when he sees how the end must come about. John does so, and this is what he reads.

The scroll tells a remarkable romance. It is the story of two witnesses, symbols of the Church that bears faithful witness even to the point of death. They bear witness in the power of Moses and Elijah, and for a while none can resist them. Then, a mysterious figure, the beast, rises up against them and slays them. Hatred for the witnessing Church is so great that the City of Man leaves the bodies of the slain witnesses lying in the street for three and a half days, and **the inhabitants of the earth ... gloat over them and ... celebrates by sending each other gifts, because these prophets had tormented those who live on the earth.** (Revelation 11:10)

But God vindicates them, as He vindicated Jesus, when He raised Him from death. No one expects what happens next. **The survivors** of God's judgments are **terrified and give glory to the God of heaven.** Their glorious conversion comes not through God's judgments, but through the Church's faithful witness even to the point of death. That is the message of the scroll. That is heaven's secret weapon against the evil in this world. When the blood of the martyrs' sacrificial witness mingles with the blood of the Lamb's sacrificial witness, the Church overcomes as Christ overcame, and the conversion of the nations takes place.

The seventh trumpet affirms it: **The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever."** (Revelation 11:15)

Let Us Bear Witness

John does not see every Christian as a martyr. He does call every Christian to be willing to pay the ultimate price, if necessary. His call applies to us as much as it did to the seven churches of Revelation, but our circumstances are very different.

It has not been granted to us, as it was granted to them, **on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.** (Philippians 1:29) 2100 Christians died as martyrs last year. Not one died in this country. It has been granted to Christians here to live out our faith in a culture that bombards us every day with the seductive message: "It's okay to do anything you can get away with."

That message is relentless. It wears us down. The Internet detaches us from accountable relationships, which would help us to resist. Friends and co-workers look at us in disbelief when we don't join them in their trendy indulgences. And so the devil finds us vulnerable when he whispers in a thousand different ways, "'It's pointless, you know. You've lost. Why are you wasting your time?'" (Ibid, Reno)

The coming of the kingdom arrives on the actions of millions of people like us, who stay in accountable relationships with fellow believers, who take the social hostility around us without striking back, and who seek the glory of God in all we do, whatever the cost. Doing that is what it means for us to take up our cross every day and follow Christ. It is not glamorous. Crosses were never glamorous.

In those terrible moments of self-doubt and self-pity may God grant that the images of Revelation fill our souls. Not the moon turning to blood or the sun going dark or the destruction of nature or people wanting to die but can't! No! We see coming out of the darkness, coming out of the great tribulation the white-robed army of martyrs, whose sacrificial blood mingles with the blood of Christ, and whose faithful witness to the point of death has always set on foot the conversion of nations and will someday signal the seventh angel to sound his trumpet, and time shall be no more, and **the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever**, and we shall reign with him.