

Reading Revelation Responsibly

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, August 27, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 1:20; Genesis 37:6-8; Genesis 40:12-13; Genesis 41:26-27; Daniel 4:20-22; Jeremiah 1:11-12; Daniel 7:15-18; Daniel 8:20-21; Zechariah 5:5-11; Revelation 17:15; Isaiah 58:6-9
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:17:47 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Revelation is not a sneak peek at next year's headlines. It is a call to God's people to become and remain loyal to Jesus regardless of circumstances, and the engine driving the whole book is a greater and greater glimpse of him. Its strange imagery works the way strange imagery has always worked in Scripture — beyond us without God's help, and plain the moment he gives the interpretation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Pursuing righteousness by extending a finger at other people is one of the things Isaiah tells God's people to repent of. It is absorbed from the culture without thinking about it, which is exactly why it needs naming.
- ◆ Two movements have made ordinary Christians hand Revelation over and walk away: the mystical groups who use it to reinforce their own private culture, and the groups who treat it as a play-by-play of the news. Neither of them owns the book.
- ◆ In Joseph's dreams the literal imagery never happened once — no sheaves bowed, no stars bowed — and yet what the imagery meant happened literally. That is the pattern.
- ◆ The imagery is bizarre; the interpretation is a no-brainer. Three branches are three days. The tree is Nebuchadnezzar. The goat is Greece. No PhD in Hebrew required.
- ◆ There is no decoder ring. A king can be a tree, a beast, or a horn on a beast; stars can be angels in one book and Joseph's brothers in another. God is not bound to your chart.

- ◆ Being smart does not crack this, and neither does praying harder than everyone else. People who had memorized the Torah and people who fasted seriously were standing in front of Jesus and missed him.
- ◆ Less than half the imagery in Revelation is explained — and wherever it is explained, it follows the same pattern as the rest of the Bible.
- ◆ Revelation belongs to the whole church. It is the inheritance of God's children, and he means to speak through it even to people it intimidates.

► 1:17:47

Matt's own preview of the morning was disarming — “I don't have a very long sermon” — and what he brought instead of length was a case. Before making it, he took the microphone back from Thomas, who had just introduced the Dream Together 2030 gathering at the Capitol, a public act of repentance timed to the exact sixtieth anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech.

Before the sermon: the pointing of the finger

► 1:19:23

Some people, Matt acknowledged, hear the word repentance in this context and quietly wonder what exactly they are supposed to repent of. So he named something. Movements that want to lead the charge on racial reconciliation — or on any other kind of positive change — tend to camp on what other people do wrong. It is the reflex of politics: join our team, look how bad they are. That approach lacks creativity, which may itself be a symptom of a nation losing heart and soul. But it is worse than uncreative.

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?... If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness...”

ISAIAH 58:6-9 ↗

Isaiah is telling the people of God to repent of pursuing righteousness by extending a finger at somebody else. “That is something probably all of us could repent from,” Matt said, “because without thinking about it we absorb that very quickly from the culture around us.” What makes King's speech remarkable is not only that it is simple and memorable but that it is positive — it speaks what could be,

even though it is not. That, Matt argued, looks like God's character, and it stands a long way from how we usually go about pursuing justice.

Why open this book at all

► 1:22:53

The sermon proper was an introduction to a series through the Book of Revelation, and Matt confessed to an immediate internal need to justify wanting to preach it. In an environment where Revelation is the key text for movements that feel like the fringe, a lot of what he called normies simply leave the book alone — and the problem with that is that it is Scripture, and God wants to speak through it.

► 1:24:09

He named the two movements that put people off. One is the groups who get very mystical, for whom the book is mostly a way to reinforce their own private culture — “that can come off weird, because it is.” The other is the groups, sometimes political and sometimes not, who obsess over granular end-times points, working from the premise that “Revelation as a book is essentially a DVD of the future sent backwards in time in book form.” Rather than antagonize either, he put both on the shelf.

His own reading: the book is “primarily a call to God's people to become or stay loyal to Jesus despite circumstances,” and the engine behind it is a revelation of Jesus himself. Even the stretches that are not obviously about him — the vision of the prostitute, the long looks at how gross wickedness really is — are indirectly about him, because they reorient us to think the way he thinks. What is right, what is wrong, what is good and what is bad are all measured from his perspective.

► 1:26:47

He had considered calling the series Rescuing Revelation and thought better of it — antagonistic. Reading Revelation Responsibly is stuffier, more positive, alliterative, and, as he noted with a tip of the hat, also the title of a good book on Revelation by Michael Gorman, which is not the basis of what he is presenting. This week: what the weird imagery in the Bible is, and how you read it. Next week: why God uses weird imagery at all. Then the texts themselves.

Joseph, and dreams that came true without ever happening

► 1:28:23

Rather than reach for other sacred traditions or fancy theories of revelatory literature, Matt went to the Bible and watched how it handles its own strange pictures. Genesis first.

“Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.” His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to rule over us?”

GENESIS 37:6–8 ↗

That dream came true — except that it did not, at all. No sheaf ever stood up in a field. The literal imagery never happened; what the literal imagery meant happened literally. Same with the second dream, where the sun, the moon and eleven stars bow down and his father rebukes him for it. The sun and moon never bowed. The meaning landed anyway.

Prison, Pharaoh, and three branches

► 1:30:36

In prison the pattern repeats, and Joseph says the line the whole message hangs on:

“Do not interpretations belong to God?”

“This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh’s cup in his hand as formerly, when you were his cupbearer.”

GENESIS 40:12–13 ↗

Nobody ever pressed grapes into Pharaoh’s cup in a vineyard that appeared out of nowhere. You could study branches in an encyclopedia and never arrive at three days — this is God’s imagery and God’s explanation. The baker’s dream works the same and ends far worse: three baskets are three days, and there was never a morning when he walked around with baskets stacked on his head.

► 1:33:42

“The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, and the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind are also seven years of famine.”

GENESIS 41:26–27 ↗

Cows never came up out of the Nile. And we do not feel obligated to believe they did merely because it is in the Bible — even reading it as conservatively as we know how, we understand that when God uses imagery, it runs by his rules and not ours. “I wouldn’t stand on the bank of the Nile in some YouTube video trying to get clicks, like, I think I found the place the cows came out,” Matt said. Here is the pattern he wanted the room to see: the imagery is bizarre, and the interpretation is simple. You would not know what to do with the picture without God’s help. Once he explains it, a child can follow it.

The pattern holds outside Genesis

► 1:35:19

You might think this is just how Genesis works, so Matt kept going. Nebuchadnezzar dreams of an enormous tree and a watcher, a holy one, who comes down from heaven and orders it chopped down. Daniel’s interpretation is four words long.

“The tree you saw, which grew and became strong, so that its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth... it is you, O king, who have grown and become strong.”

DANIEL 4:20–22 ↗

There is no real tree in some other dimension where what happens to the tree happens to the king. “It’s actually a metaphor,” Matt said. “It’s not like the tree relates to Nebuchadnezzar. It *is* Nebuchadnezzar.”

► 1:37:24

Then Jeremiah — and a check-in with the room, half amused, half apologetic: “I’m about halfway. If you’re just losing heart, you’re like, I’ve already got it and I’m sick of hearing it.” This one is where God makes a pun — in Hebrew the word for almond sounds like the word for watching.

“And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” And I said, “I see an almond branch.” Then the Lord said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.””

JEREMIAH 1:11–12 ↗

No almond branch was involved. It is supposed to be funny, Matt said, and he could not think of a good English equivalent. A few verses later a boiling pot tips away from the north — and the substance of the disaster turns out not to be scalding water but armies setting thrones at the gates of Jerusalem. “Oh yeah, armies and stuff. We’ve seen that. We know what that is.”

Beasts, rams, goats — and why a decoder ring will fail you

► 1:38:55

Daniel 7 is the trippiest of them.

Four winds stir up the sea, four great beasts come out of it, and the first is a lion with eagle's wings whose wings are plucked off before it is stood upright on two feet and given the mind of a man. A phone went off mid-reading and Matt could not let it pass — “it's the Lord calling, and when the Lord calls you answer” — followed immediately by an apology to whoever had to sit through being pointed out. Then he stopped at the beast deliberately: when you read something like that, you are not getting anything out of it, and that is not a measure of your intelligence. Nor of your prayer life. People who had memorized the Torah were standing in front of Jesus and missed him. People who fasted and prayed far better than we ever have — “the fastingest, prayingest people” — were standing in front of him and missed him too.

“As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me...
‘These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever.’”

DANIEL 7:15–18 ↗

► 1:42:29

And these are ordinary human kings, not reptilian Illuminati kings. Which sets up the warning Matt most wanted to leave: earlier a tree was a king, now beasts are kings. In Revelation stars are angels of churches; in Joseph's dream stars were his brothers. So do not build a chart where this always equals that. Can stars mean brothers? Yes. Can stars mean angels? Yes. Does a king have to be a tree? No. God does whatever he wants.

► 1:43:57

In the next chapter Gabriel is told to make Daniel understand the vision — Daniel is frightened, falls on his face, and is told only that the vision is for the time of the end, which left Matt, reading it aloud, still lost. Then the explanation lands where it always lands.

“As for the ram that you saw with the two horns, these are the kings of Media and Persia. And the goat is the king of Greece. And the great horn between his eyes is the first king.”

DANIEL 8:20–21 ↗

So a king can be a tree, or an animal, or apparently part of an animal. Left to ourselves we would chase the connections: goat, greatest of all time, Greece is great, greased lightning, the goat came in like lightning — the conspiracy guy joining the dots on a wall. We do not need to do that. When God gives the interpretation, you take it and run with it; the imagery has served its purpose, and you can set it down.

► 1:45:00

Even Zechariah, notoriously hard to read, plays by the same rules. A scroll flies through the air and God says it is his judgment going out over the whole earth — which does not mean somebody will one day invent a paper airplane that never lands. A woman sits in a basket carried off by angels with wings — swan wings, as Matt described them — and the woman is wickedness. “I would never have gotten that,” he admitted. “I think in a million years.” Ask him what a woman in a basket carried by swan-winged angels is supposed to look like and the honest answer is, no idea. But we know what wickedness is, and we know what judgment is.

What all of that taught us

► 1:46:00

Three things. Bizarre imagery happens regularly in the Bible; it is all over the place, and there is nothing to be frightened of. It conveys plain truths that need no further unpacking once the interpretation is given — three days, seven years, four kings, Greece. The grape clusters do their job and then they are done; all that is left is, in three days you go back to your old job. The goat charges across the vision and freaks you out, and then it is just Greece, and we know what Greece is, we know what kings are, we know what judgment is, we know what wickedness is. And the imagery is normally beyond interpretation without God’s help, which is why the posture that fits is humility rather than confidence that we are smarter or more prayerful than the next person. “Usually the imagery is beyond interpretation,” Matt said. “I need God’s help. And once he gives it, though, I can camp on it. It’s plain. I know what God wants now — he’s made himself known, he’s made himself clear.”

So open Revelation and check

► 1:48:36

Here is the question Matt put to the room: having watched how revelatory imagery works everywhere else in Scripture, is there any reason to read this one book backwards? If the book itself says so, fine — he was not interested in imposing rules on Scripture. He just wanted to look.

“As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

REVELATION 1:20 ↗

Not a deviation but a continuation. Four chapters later the elders fall down holding harps and golden bowls of incense, “which are the prayers of the saints” — strange picture, simple tag attached. “It seems like God is doing the same stuff,” Matt said, apologizing for the whiplash of dropping into the middle of stories nobody had context for.

► 1:50:20

“The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.”

REVELATION 17:15 ↗

That one is a reference to God’s kingdom set against the kingdom of darkness, and the prize, from God’s perspective, is every tribe and tongue and people. You could represent every tribe and tongue and people however you wanted — if you are God, and you want to picture them as many waters, there is nothing wrong with that. Matt was honest about the limit: in Revelation, less than half the imagery is explained, and whatever God did he did on purpose. But that does not mean none of it is, and wherever it is explained, the pattern is the same. Which led to the week’s assignment, offered as an experiment rather than a requirement — it is kind of a chore, he said; you might like it, you might not, you do not have to do it — read the book, or as much of it as you can, and underline every place the imagery is explained for you. Then look at what God chose to point out, because if he stopped to say that this is that, the thing must matter.

What the book is actually for

► 1:51:32

“The message of the Book of Revelation, from my perspective, is not one of let me comfort you by giving you a sneak peek of the future play-by-play,” Matt said. “Instead it’s a call to be and remain steadfastly loyal to Jesus despite your circumstances, and the engine that drives all of it is a greater and greater glimpse of him.” Your circumstances may never seem to justify that loyalty. But circumstances looking or feeling one way does not make them that way. He is the King of kings and the Lord of glory, and whatever he thinks about anything is how things actually are. What sits at the core of reality itself

is the Lamb who was slain. And the ground of the loyalty is not the payoff: “not because I can encourage you with a better way of living, but because of who he is.”

► 1:53:28

The obstacle between us and that message is that many of us will have to learn, or relearn, how to read this book — outside the lens of pop culture, outside an insulated mystical school where everything revolves around the group and its leader, and outside the habit of reading the news with Revelation open beside it and getting very literal about which public figure is which. “This book is our book,” Matt said. “It’s the inheritance of God’s children. It belongs to all of us, and he wants to speak to all of us through this book, even if it intimidates you or scares you.” That is the whole reason for the series, and he put the point of it where he had put it at the start: we need to be reminded why we should remain steadfastly loyal to him and to his standards — “not because things might turn a little bit better just around the corner next election cycle or next this or next that, because he is at the core of reality itself.” Then he prayed that God would help us grip a revelation of him — “and we fail at that, so I ask that you would show us out of your mercy what you’re like” — and sent the room out to the ministry teams waiting to pray, or out the door in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Isaiah 58:6–9](#)
- [Genesis 37:6–8](#)
- [Genesis 37:9–10](#)
- [Genesis 40:8](#)
- [Genesis 40:12–13](#)
- [Genesis 40:16–19](#)
- [Genesis 41:26–27](#)
- [Daniel 4:10–14](#)
- [Daniel 4:20–22](#)
- [Jeremiah 1:11–12](#)
- [Jeremiah 1:13–15](#)
- [Daniel 7:2–4](#)
- [Daniel 7:15–18](#)
- [Daniel 8:15–17](#)
- [Daniel 8:20–21](#)
- [Zechariah 5:1–4](#)
- [Zechariah 5:5–11](#)
- [Revelation 1:20](#)
- [Revelation 5:8](#)
- [Revelation 17:15](#)
- [Revelation 5:6](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Where do you catch yourself pursuing righteousness by pointing at what other people get wrong? What would repenting of that actually look like?
2. What has kept you from reading Revelation until now — the mystical crowd, the end-times-chart crowd, or just the strangeness of the book itself?
3. Joseph's dreams came true without a single sheaf ever bowing. How does that change what you expect a prophetic image to be doing?
4. Matt said neither intelligence nor intense prayer cracks apocalyptic imagery open. Which of those two do you quietly rely on, and what would humility look like instead?
5. Loyalty to Jesus "despite circumstances" is the call of the book. Which circumstance in your life is arguing against that loyalty right now, and what will you do about it this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IXccptltP0&t=4667s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.