

The Purpose of Strange Symbols

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, September 3, 2023
PASSAGES	Revelation 1:1; Revelation 2:18-29; Daniel 2:27-28; Isaiah 6:9; Isaiah 8:18; Isaiah 20:2-3; Ezekiel 12:2-3; Matthew 13:13-15
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:20:49 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

God has always spoken to his people in strange images, and he does it for a reason: they already have his word and have stopped hearing it. The shock is not decoration and it is not concealment — it is mercy, aimed at repentance, offered even when judgment is already on its way.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Revelation says God “made known” what must take place — and making something known is not the same as making it plain. Daniel watched God make something known to Nebuchadnezzar *through* a mystery.
- ◆ The King James renders the same verb “signified.” God is speaking in signs, and reading Revelation literally by default gets the book backwards.
- ◆ When an image is explained, the explanation is the literal thing. The waters are not code for nations; the nations are the substance and the waters are the picture.
- ◆ Matt counted only fourteen explained images in the whole book — and what they are about is churches, the prayers of the saints, endurance under trial, and a second death God does not want anyone to enter.
- ◆ Twice, mid-vision, John simply stops and writes: here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. That is the point the imagery serves.
- ◆ Israel had the Torah, the history and the institutions — and had gone blind to all of it. So God gave them a prophet who named his sons after a coming war and walked naked for three years.

- ◆ Jesus was not inventing the “eyes that do not see” line in the parables. He was standing in a long prophetic tradition and applying it to his own generation.
- ◆ We are not less susceptible than they were. The honest question is what God would have to do to get our attention.

► 1:20:49

This was week two of a series through Revelation, and Matt set out three jobs for the morning: recap last week in a different key, ask why God uses bizarre imagery and shocking signs to talk to his church, and then read a stretch of the book with both of those in hand.

Made known is not made plain

► 1:22:37

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.”

REVELATION 1:1 ↗

You could read “he made it known” as permission to treat the book as a play-by-play of the future sent backwards in time. Matt went to Daniel instead, where the same claim is made about a dream nobody could interpret:

“No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.”

DANIEL 2:27–28 ↗

► 1:24:18

God made it known — and Nebuchadnezzar still did not understand a word of it until Daniel made it plain. “Making it known is not the same thing as making it plain,” Matt said. The King James makes the point in a single word: God “sent and signified it” by his angel. The verb is the verb form of *sign*.

The image is the code; the explanation is the substance

► 1:24:57

Nobody stood on the bank of the Nile waiting for seven cows to climb out. Pharaoh's baker never wore three baskets on his head — but three days later he lost it. No literal statue of mixed metals was ever smashed by a literal mountain. In every case the picture did its work and then the interpretation arrived. "What God said it meant — that's what you need to take literally."

► 1:26:31

Matt had taken his own homework assignment and marked every place in Revelation where an image is explained. He found fourteen, across twenty-two chapters — and the subjects are telling: churches, the fullness of the Spirit, the prayers of the saints, those who endure great trials, witness, Jerusalem, kings, multitudes, nations, the righteous deeds of the saints, and a second death God does not want anyone to enter. Twice, in the middle of the strangest visions, John simply interrupts himself: here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints (Revelation 14:12).

► 1:28:31

The direction of the code matters. When the angel says the waters are peoples and multitudes and nations, every tribe and tongue is not shorthand for water — the water is the picture of them. When the bride's fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints, the deeds are the reality. "I don't need to speculate about what kind of Gap or Old Navy there is in the presence of the Lamb," Matt said. And when death and Hades are thrown into the lake of fire, the lake is the second death — not the other way around.

Why God talks like this

► 1:30:51

To answer that, Matt walked Israel's story fast. A nation that should never have existed, born from a couple too old for children. Slavery in Egypt turned into an occasion for God to make his name known across the earth. Then judges — each one, if you read carefully, less faithful and less able to save than the last, until Israel finished the book looking exactly like the nations it was sent to be a light to. Then kings: the first fired, David great and conspicuously sinful, Solomon wise and disloyal, and the wisest man's son somehow the most foolish of all. God raised up prophet after prophet, and the faithlessness kept deepening, until the message changed shape — it is late, judgment is coming, and I still want you back.

► 1:34:25

That is the room Isaiah is called into. He sees the King, says “Woe is me, for I am lost”, and is handed a commission that reads like a sentence:

“Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’”

ISAIAH 6:9 ↗

A prophet who named his sons after the news

► 1:35:52

So Isaiah does the bizarre, because anyone who will still listen has to be reached somehow. God tells him to write a name on a large tablet before the child exists and then name his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz — roughly, *hurry to the spoils*. He already had a boy named Shear-jashub, *a remnant shall return*, named before anyone had been deported anywhere. Isaiah’s own summary: “Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel.”

► 1:37:36

They were not short of information. They had the law, the history, the institutions. Matt reached for David, who did not need a prophet to inform him that adultery and murder were forbidden — he needed a story about a man with one lamb to make him angry at his own sin, and then four words: *you are the man*. He was seeing and not understanding, and God used an artfully told story to snap him awake.

► 1:38:50

“As my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Cush...”

ISAIAH 20:2–3 ↗

Three years. “I think you’d have to have a dramatic call to ministry before you get that word,” Matt said — and then imagined the household: dinner’s ready, Dad, you’re still naked, go tell your brother Hurry-to-the-Spoils. It is funny until you notice what it cost, and why. God is not being obscure; he is shouting. Listen to the ache in Isaiah 42:18–20: who is blind but my servant, who is deaf but my messenger.

Ezekiel packs a bag nobody needs

► 1:41:22

“Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not... prepare for yourself an exile’s baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight.”

EZEKIEL 12:2-3 ↗

► 1:42:23

Then he is told to dig through the wall and carry the baggage out at dusk with his face covered — most likely, Matt suggested, a few feet from a wide-open gate. Picture the street: people going to work, selling their goods, staring at a man clawing a hole through a wall he could have walked around. God tells him exactly what to expect them to ask — “What are you doing?” — which is, of course, the whole point. Ezekiel also laid siege to a brick with toy siege works, put up signposts marking the road for Babylon’s sword, ate his bread with trembling, and argued God down from human fuel to cow dung for his cooking fire. Even that warning of judgment was an invitation.

Jesus is standing in this tradition

► 1:45:44

“This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand... For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.”

MATTHEW 13:13-15 ↗

► 1:46:53

Jesus is not introducing the idea; he is quoting Isaiah and applying it. The religious leaders knew perfectly well when a parable was about them and still could not turn. And it was not only them — when he warned about the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod, his own disciples concluded they had forgotten the bread. *Having eyes, do you not see?*

Reading the letter to Thyatira

► 1:48:47

“I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.”

REVELATION 2:18–29 ↗

► 1:51:11

Start with what is plain. The letter ends “he who has an ear, let him hear” — the same call going out to people asleep inside a status quo of unbelief. And the letters are written to actual congregations, because that is one of the few things the book explains for us: the lampstands are the churches.

► 1:51:52

Jezebel is harder, and Matt refused to be dogmatic. A name, a movement, a person — what Jesus describes is a *teaching*, something claiming the prophetic mantle while functioning as a seduction into immorality and idolatry. Anyone in that room would have heard the echo: a queen who came into Israel on a king’s coattails, who grew more powerful the more she persecuted God’s people, and who painted her eyes and fixed her hair as judgment came up the road.

► 1:54:58

Hold that beside the vision later in the book — a woman dolled up, riding a monster, drunk on the blood of the saints — and then an angel hurling a great stone into the sea: Babylon has fallen. If you were in Thyatira, Matt said, you would remember what Christ had written to your church. Wickedness works by persuasion and intimidation; you might feel outnumbered, unimpressed by God’s timetable, quietly drawn to things you would be ashamed to name. The vision shows you the thing as Christ sees it: not merely ugly but monstrous, and already under sentence. “I do know this,” he said — “here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.”

The shock is the mercy

► 1:57:49

Which leaves the uncomfortable question Matt asked out loud and then admitted he half did not want answered: what would Jesus say to us, and how strange would it have to get before we paid attention?

“I’m not less susceptible to temptation than my ancestors in the faith,” he said. We are not less influenceable by movements that call themselves prophetic and teach rebellion.

► 1:59:37

And we have no more strength than they did. They failed after the plagues, after the sea parted, after manna every morning, after fire fell from the sky, after every king they hoped in. What runs underneath that whole record is a longing: for a king who would stay faithful, for a priest who would not die and leave. That is what Christ is — which means our failures are not the end of the story.

► 2:00:43

So when God shouts at us in dreams and signs and unbearable images, it is not because he is eager for judgment. “There is only one faith that gives life, and it’s in his broken body. Anything else is death.” He could have said, in Matt’s words, *I’m just going to nuke them from orbit and start over*. Instead he raised up a naked prophet. The strangeness is the measure of how much he wanted them back — and the prayer he closed with was that God would do the same for us: speak shockingly if you must, only help us see you.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Revelation 1:1
- Daniel 2:27–28
- Genesis 41:1–7
- Genesis 40:16–19
- Daniel 2:31–35
- Revelation 13:10
- Revelation 14:12
- Revelation 17:15
- Revelation 19:8
- Revelation 20:14
- Isaiah 6:5
- Isaiah 6:9
- Isaiah 8:1–3
- Isaiah 8:18–20
- 2 Samuel 12:1–7
- Isaiah 20:2–3
- Isaiah 42:18–20
- Ezekiel 12:2–3
- Ezekiel 12:5–6
- Ezekiel 12:9–11
- Ezekiel 4:1–3
- Ezekiel 21:19–20
- Ezekiel 12:17–20
- Ezekiel 4:12–15
- Matthew 13:13–15
- Mark 8:15–18
- Revelation 2:18–29
- Revelation 1:20
- 2 Kings 9:30–33
- Revelation 17:1–6
- Revelation 18:21

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Where have you been reading Revelation literally by default, and what changes if you start from “these are signs” and only take literally what the book itself explains?
2. Matt found only fourteen explained images, and they cluster around endurance, prayer, witness and the churches. What does that tell you about what the book is for?
3. Israel had the Torah, the history and the institutions and still could not see. Where do you have the information and lack the sight?
4. David needed a story before he could recognize his own sin. What would someone have to say to you sideways, because saying it directly has not worked?
5. If Christ named the thing in our life he named in Thyatira — something appealing, intimidating, and already under sentence — what is it, and what do 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=rbEAFzPCTiE&t=4849s>

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.