

# UPSIDE-DOWN A POCALYPSE

GROUNDING REVELATION  
*in the* GOSPEL *of* PEACE

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## CHAPTER 1

The overarching question this chapter asks is what presuppositions we bring to the text of Revelation as we begin to study it. Use the following questions to explore your own presuppositions and examine the Jesus-centered perspective the author will use for the remainder of this book.

1. Take a moment to reflect on the word *apocalypse*. What is your own current understanding of the word? What ideas, beliefs, images, or preconceptions do you bring with you to this text? From that understanding, how would you define *apocalypse*?
2. “An apocalypse by nature both expands and overturns our expectations. It takes a story we thought was done and tells us two new things. First, there is more to the story, and second, the more will change everything we thought we knew. . . . That’s what an apocalypse is for—showing us what we missed, and in that, subverting our beliefs about the world” (p. 18). How does this definition differ from your own? If you were going to use this definition of apocalypse, what other texts or stories, biblical or otherwise, could fit this description?
3. What do you believe is the role and authority of Scripture? What have you been taught, and how have your ideas about what Scripture is and how it is used changed over time?
4. What would it mean for you to read Scripture through the lens of Jesus? If it would change the way you read, what would that look like?
5. Do you find yourself tending toward normalizing or narrativizing Scripture?

## CHAPTER 2

This chapter gives us a brief overview of the historical and political context that influenced the genre-bending work John does in Revelation. As you consider the following questions, consider what it would have been like to live during those times and how that would influence your experience of the story of Revelation.

1. When have you encountered something in art, story, or another creative expression that helped you to gain a new perspective on something familiar to you?
2. How do you respond to the claim of Scripture’s perspicuity (that the Scriptures are clear and intelligible)? What has been your experience of reading Scripture, and why do you agree or disagree with its perspicuity?
3. What do you think drives the desire to read Scripture literally and within the context of our own experience? Why do we feel the need to see ourselves, our own cultural understanding and personal points of view, reflected in the ancient texts of Scripture?
4. Where do pessimism, fatalism, and negativity have a hold in your life? Where do you feel inclined toward these feelings? Why are these feelings or perspectives incompatible with divine love?
5. Where do you find yourself longing for hope? What might hope do for you in your personal development right now?

## CHAPTER 3

John is a product of his time and culture, drawing heavily not only on his historical and political context, but also on his religious roots. Using the book of Isaiah from the Hebrew Bible as his guide, John follows and utilizes the same three-cycle structure used by Isaiah the prophet.

1. How would you define *prophecy*? How does this chapter change your understanding of the word?
2. How have you viewed the Hebrew prophetic tradition? Would you define the Hebrew Prophets as hopeful? How would reading them through a hopeful lens change your interpretation of these texts?
3. “According to the prophet Isaiah, salvation is the call to repentance that illuminates the cost of our individual choices, involves us with restorative justice, and saves us from ruin” (p. 50). How does this description of salvation compare with how you define the word? To help you think through your understanding of salvation, consider how you tell your own story of coming to Christ.
4. Do you share John’s optimism? Do you believe our world as it is now can be rescued and all things made new?
5. “Isaiah imagines a day when God would save the world and destroy the evil among us. Jesus transforms that vision into a day when God would save the world by destroying the evil in us” (p. 58). Do you find the idea that God will destroy sin itself and not the entirety of a sinful person compelling or disconcerting? Does it fit with what you have been taught or believe?

## CHAPTER 4

This chapter covers the first cycle of Revelation, examining the redemptive work of Jesus through the lens and context of seven local communities. The letters to the seven churches should give us pause to think about our own communities and our own brokenness within community.

1. How would you define *sanctification*? How has that word shown up in your life? Has it been more of an inward- or outward-focused process for you? How might you reevaluate how you view sanctification?
2. “Revelation opens with a fairly level-headed threat assessment. It’s a good reminder that we do not need to conjure up fantasies of persecution to identify with what we read” (p. 63). Do your own level-headed threat assessment of your life and your community. What things make you feel threatened as a person, as a follower of Jesus, as part of your community? Can you hear John saying to you, “Don’t be afraid”? Can you believe this for yourself and your community?
3. “For a book that wants to direct our attention to the way that Jesus has overthrown death and Hades, it understands that salvation begins when we pay attention to the needs of our neighbors” (p. 65). If John were writing a letter to you and your community, what would he point out? Do you resonate with any of the messages to the seven churches? Why?
4. “The self-sufficiency of Laodicea is an illusion. Wealth can make us think we deserve what flows to us. . . . The measure of our faith is not how well we are doing; it is how well we serve those near us” (p. 68). Where is wealth flowing passively toward you? What things do you base your security on (wealth, community, family, health, etc.)? How does the comfort that comes from that security make you blind to others who don’t share your privilege or who are harmed by the systems you benefit from?
5. “The destruction of evil has to start in localized expressions of good” (p. 68). Where are you involved in localized expressions of good? Name them. How do you see these acts as part of the destruction of evil that results in God’s self-giving being expressed in the world?
6. How vulnerable are you willing to be in the immediate communities that surround you? How does fear of vulnerability prevent you from growing in your love for others?

## CHAPTER 5

This chapter begins our examination of the second cycle of Revelation. John calls us to question who sits at the center of our world and what true power really looks like when considering power in the context of our social structures.

1. How have the ideas about what power is in our world shaped or affected the way you view God's power?
2. What is the true nature and scope of divine power? On page 86, the author invites us to a thought experiment. Take a moment to read and consider it before answering this question.
3. What power do you hold, and how does it affect the way you think power should be used politically? What would it look like for you to practice self-giving love in your politics—that is, when you exercise your own power and voice in the world?
4. The opposite of power is poverty. What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Does your definition fit with the author's?
5. What does it look like for people not to have what they need spiritually? What does that look like for you specifically? How are your spiritual needs being met? Or, if they aren't being met, how could they be?

## CHAPTER 6

As we dive further into the second cycle of Revelation, we come across the four riders of the apocalypse. Through these images, we consider what true peace is when juxtaposed with the social structures to which we have entrusted power in our own world.

1. How do you define peace? What is pseudo-peace by comparison?
2. What does predatory peace look like today? Where is violence in the name of peace exercised in our world?
3. How does the message of God's restoration of real peace to our world affect your politics and your way of being in the world?
4. How do you live in ways that contribute to real peace and work against the systems that bring pseudo-peace?
5. How does the idea that it is our own choices that bring violence to this world expand your understanding and imagination of what true peace is? How would that translate into the ways you love others?

## CHAPTER 7

We finally come to the big reveal of the second cycle of Revelation, continuing to explore what peace is and looks like in comparison to empire, society, and violence.

1. Do you find futurist readings of Revelation compelling? What draws people to this interpretive perspective?
2. How do you feel about the idea that the violence depicted in Revelation is human wrath and desire for vengeance, not God's? How does this disrupt any of your past understanding of this book?
3. How does the perspective that human vengeance drives the violence in this narrative change your perspective on God's role and work in the world? How does our need for a vengeful God to bring about justice shape our view of God?
4. Where have your politics been at odds with the peace of God? How have the ideas of empire created destructive fantasies for you? How do you replace those with the divine peace as seen in Revelation?
5. "God suffers with us—alongside us—numbered with the rebels who struggle for justice. For Jesus, salvation comes not in power or violence, certainly not through war and weaponry, but in standing alongside those who hurt. . . . Throughout history, peace has often been criminalized, and Jesus names this for us here" (p. 122). Where do you find examples of where peace has been criminalized in our own world today? How have you responded to these criminalized acts of peace? How might you expand your imagination of peace to include peaceful rebellion?

## CHAPTER 8

We now turn to the third and final cycle of Revelation, where we begin to examine Jesus' restoration on a cosmic level. As we engage with the images of this final section of Revelation, we must continue to ask ourselves, "What do these images tell us about our world?"

1. How do you define evil? Does your definition differ from the author's? How?
2. The myths and stories that sit at the foundation of our faith shape our identities. Think about the myth of Leto in contrast with the story John is telling in the third cycle of Revelation. How do these stories differ in what they say about the world we live in? How does our belief in the story of Jesus shape our identity differently than if we believed in a story like the myth of Leto (see pp. 132–33)?
3. "As human beings we are inherently defined by our need for an enemy. It's how we define ourselves, it's how we police the boundaries for our social groups" (p. 135). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? How does this take shape in your life? Whom have you defined yourself against? If it is difficult to think about your "enemy," consider the term "other" as well—who are the "others" you define yourself in opposition to?
4. "The only strategy that evil has left is to get you to forget the way of peace" (p. 136). When we stray into the territory of complicit apathy with the systems of oppression in our world, how do we remind ourselves to live and walk in the way of peace? How do we remove ourselves from these systems and work against them?

## CHAPTER 9

As we explore the metaphorical monsters of the third cycle, we are reminded that the spiritual battle is over and that Christ is already victorious. We must now consider what is left to do, which is living out the truth that the spiritual battle is won in our everyday experience of the world.

1. What do you imagine the "good life" to be? If your dreams were all to come true, what would your life be like?
2. Let's exercise our imaginations for a moment and try to remove the parts of our dream life that depend on systems of oppression (empire, economies that oppress, hierarchy, patriarchy). What are you left with to build on? What would a "good life" look like that is good for everyone?
3. How have the religious systems you have participated in shaped your beliefs about who your enemy is? Who is kept on the outside by the beliefs these systems have given you?
4. "To be shaped . . . by Revelation is not to stop where John stops" (p. 153). How do we read Scripture with a critical lens, reading for where the human authors fall short of the divine message they are trying to convey?
5. Think of a place where evil has taken hold in your context. What can you do to work against that?

## CHAPTER 10

This chapter wraps up the discussion on the end of evil as the coming of God's kingdom sweeps away everything that is against the divine self-giving love demonstrated by Jesus. Although we are talking about the cosmic and the ultimate removal of evil from the world, continue to hold space for where you imagine yourself fitting into this cosmic redemption.

1. What do you think it says about our culture that we have separate language for doing what is right spiritually/religiously and doing what is right in the world? How do the ideas of righteousness and justice sit in your own mind? Do you separate these two concepts, or are they linked in your mind? If they are different, what is it that sets them apart from each other?
2. How can you take your view of salvation beyond the personal? How might you expand your imagination to include the redemption of society, nations, creation, and the cosmos?
3. What has your experience been of the kingdom of God resembling a mustard seed? How has the kingdom looked more like "a scruffy mustard bush notorious for creeping across boundaries and showing up where you don't want it" (p. 172)?
4. What is your experience with doom and hellfire preaching, where sinners themselves are thrown into a lake of fire for not repenting? How does this chapter help you reimagine that message? What do you imagine will be burned away in your life if it is not your whole person?

## CHAPTER 11

Revelation ends with a picture of heaven on earth, and we conclude our exploration of this text with the picture of how love ultimately wins as creation is pulled back into step with the Creator.

1. What images of heaven have you been taught or given, and how have these images shaped your own understanding of what heaven is? How does letting go of the idea of heaven as a place change your relationship to God and your understanding of salvation?
2. What broken identities do you need to let go of?
3. How do the images in Revelation reshape your idea of heaven? How might these ideas of heaven shape how you live in the world now?
4. What hope do you find in the following quote? "[Revelation] reminds us that as hard as the work is, our efforts to transform the world are not wasted. They are part of an inevitable kingdom started by Jesus that is slowly seeding the world with peace" (p. 187).
5. Now that we have explored the three cycles of Revelation and learned the book's context, how has your understanding of the text and its message changed?