

EDMANUEL

Autumn 2021: *The Book of Revelation*

The book of Revelation has a long history of confusion and mystery surrounding it. For today's believer, far-removed from the time and place where this book was written, it can seem like there's too much happening here to even begin to comprehend its message. But with a little bit of background information, some of the mysteries of Revelation come into focus, and the book can become a source of great life and hope for the community that follows Jesus.

Of critical importance to our reading of Revelation is the understanding of its genre. As we all know, not all literature is the same kind of thing. For example, there is a Japanese Haiku, and an American Short Story. We read Harry Potter novels and we read biographies of great men and women. And in all of these cases, we know that we're reading different *kinds* of literature. Each kind has its own set of rules and structure, and if we get the different kinds of writing confused we can find ourselves baffled by what appear to be great mysteries and inconsistencies. What if we tried to read a Harry Potter novel with the assumption that what we were reading was a literal history of Great Britain? What if we read the poetry of Emily Dickinson with the intention of trying to find in it a blueprint for how to build a house or a car?

These examples seem like nonsense to us, but only because we're very familiar with the kinds of literature that have been mentioned, and we know intuitively that each kind has its own rules and its own purpose. But the same is true of the book of Revelation. This is a work of theological poetry that was written in a particular literary genre, a genre that most modern readers are not familiar with. That genre is called *apocalyptic*. In the world of the ancient near east, two thousand years ago, apocalyptic was a well-known style of writing. The word "apocalypse" means something like "revealing" or "unveiling." In this style of writing, usually taking the form of a set of visions mediated by an angelic being, another world is revealed before the eyes of the reader using fantastic, theatrical images. Or maybe you could say that what is revealed is the deeper truth that lies behind and beneath the mundane world around us.

Apocalyptic literature uses dramatic imagery to convey the message that the world is more than meets the eye. In the case of the book of Revelation, John's great visions are designed to show the reader that *God alone is sovereign* in the end. Although the forces of evil may seem to prevail, God always has the last word. Likewise, those who follow this God and *refuse to sell their souls* to the values and gods of this world will one day stand in victory. Although God's kind of power may look weak right now ("like a lamb that has been slaughtered"), at the end of the story it is this humble king who rules the whole universe.

The images of Revelation are meant to be *felt* more than analyzed. John of Patmos isn't writing a history book, he is writing a picture book. Each scene is a powerful story that sweeps us off our feet into a greater awe and reverence for the God who alone holds the keys to life and death, who calls us to follow our leader on the paradoxically downward path toward resurrection and life.

In our worship services this Fall we will be exploring the book of Revelation through image, music, and word - because that is how it is meant to be experienced. We're not trying to find a map of the "end times," as some have tried to do with this book. Instead, what we're doing is inviting God's Spirit to use this text to draw us into a posture of even greater worship of the one living God, and the slain but risen Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.