

Revelation 2:8-11 - Godoy

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[0:00] Book of Revelation well. Okay, so a reader's guide. And then second, an exposition. We'll walk through our text.! It's a short text, but very rich. And then third and finally, some theological reflection.

! Three things you need to know about the book of Revelation to read it well.

So here we go. Hold on to your hats and your palm leaves, and let's do this reader's guide. Number one, in the book of Revelation, someone named John, I think John the disciple, but there is debate even about that, whether it's another John, someone named John sees strange things.

Okay, this might be the most obvious thing that I say this morning, but in this book, John sees images that stretch the limits of our imagination. For example, in chapter one, John sees this glorious vision of Jesus.

And the vision sounds like we can picture Jesus presented as a man, but then it says that he has a sword, a two-edged sword, coming out of his mouth.

[1:17] How do you even draw that? Maybe someone has tried in some action story Bible, I don't know. And there's plenty more. Chapter 13 describes a beast coming up out of the water with ten horns and seven heads and crowns on its horns and names written on its heads.

I've always wondered, like, which heads had the crowns and which... Chapter 9 pictures these locusts coming up from a bottomless pit. The locusts have human faces, women's hair, lion's teeth, scorpion's tails, and crowns of gold on their head, and they torment the people on earth.

Whoa. Whoa. Chapter 17 describes a richly dressed woman named Babylon the Great. And she's holding a golden cup of iniquities.

And she's drunk on the blood of the saints and the martyrs. Whoa. John sees dark and disturbing images. If you've read this book, you know this is not the sort of literature that we're used to.

That's because this book is apocalyptic prophecy. Let's unpack that for just a moment. What is apocalyptic? This is a word we use in everyday language.

[2:25] People these days are talking about the AI apocalypse, when artificial intelligence, you know, causes catastrophe and ends human civilization as we know it. Quick aside, AI is very powerful.

I work with it all the time. It's not the end of humanity. We can, you know, take off our tinfoil hats. It's going to be okay. The biblical word doesn't exactly mean catastrophe.

The first words in the Greek manuscript of this book are apocalypsis Jesu Christu, the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The author is naming the genre of the book right at the start, and the hearers knew what that meant, and it set their expectations.

If a movie begins by saying Star Wars, you have different expectations than if it says documentary about Hillegard von Bingen or something like that, right?

Now, apocalyptic literature was a well-established genre in first century Jewish culture. It was a very popular form of literature. It used word pictures like these strange images John used.

[3:29] It used mysterious references and numerology to signify people and events and to reveal hidden spiritual realities. That's what this genre did.

So when a first century Jewish author begins a book saying this is an apocalypse, as John does here, the reader gets some expectations. We expect to find out what's happening in heaven alongside the events happening on earth.

That's why John writes strange things. But here's where it gets interesting. This apocalypse of John is not the same as all the other Jewish apocalypses of the first century.

This book declares itself to be prophetic. John writes as a prophet, not predicting the future necessarily, though prophecy sometimes does that.

But I mean, John delivers the word of the Lord. John is a mouthpiece for God. One theologian says this well. John not only writes in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, but understands himself to be writing at the climax of that tradition.

[4:38] Revelation is the most Old Testament saturated book of the New Testament. John understands that all the oracles of the Old Testament are about to be fulfilled, and he is the appointed mouthpiece to declare that fulfillment for God's people.

This is super important. Most of the other Jewish apocalypses written in the first century were written precisely because it seemed like God wasn't speaking anymore, and the apocalypses were hopeless and pessimistic.

The book of Revelation is written because God in Christ is now speaking to his people again in these last days. And in Revelation, the church has hope that God is making all things new.

So, this genre is apocalyptic prophecy. And the reason I took a moment to make that point is that we can't read any part of the book, not even the letter to the church at Smyrna, without understanding what expectations to bring.

John sees strange things. It's a book of apocalyptic prophecy. Okay, reader's guide thing number two. The book of Revelation was a coherent letter to actual churches.

[5:50] Okay, sometimes we take the books of the New Testament and we put them into these neat little boxes. You know, the Gospels and Acts, they're like the histories. And then the epistles, the letters of Paul and some other writers.

And then Revelation, and we stick it in its own box because it's weird and we don't know what to do with it. Let me suggest the boxes aren't as neat as we might think. Flip back to the very start of the book, chapter 1, verse 4.

Where it says, John, to the seven churches that are in Asia, grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. If you've read the other letters of the New Testament, you know that's how letters start.

And then look down to verse 11. A voice says, write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches. And then he names the churches that he's supposed to send this to.

John is instructed to send this book out to a list of churches. And that refers not just to the first three chapters, but to the whole book. And then at the very end of the book, chapter 22, verse 21, John ends by writing, John is self-consciously styling this whole book in the form of an epistle, a letter.

[7:09] Not just what we think of as the first seven letters at the beginning of the book, but the whole book. So, Holy Covenant Church, imagine for a moment that we are the little church in first century Smyrna.

And we've just received this book and we're sitting down to hear it read aloud, which in English would take an hour. I think we should do that sometime. And this little section that names our church is like one minute long, but the whole book is written to us and for us.

That's precisely how this book presents itself. So here's my point. We don't want to deconstruct this book and take it apart and separate the apocalyptic weird stuff from chapters four through the end from the letters to the churches in one through three.

Because the whole book was written for real churches, written to them, but kept for us, for our encouragement and warning. Okay.

And that leads to reader's guide thing number three. The purpose of this book, which is to urge the church to faithfulness today because of God's glorious rule over all history.

[8:22] To help make this point, I am now going to give you a 90-second summary of the whole book of Revelation. Okay. Here we go. Buckle up. The book of Revelation in 90 seconds.

First, in chapter one, John receives an apocalyptic vision of the Lord Jesus exalted in resurrection. I can say that. Resurrection power.

And then Jesus directs John to write messages to seven churches in Asia, and he does. Then in chapter four, John's vision is lifted to the throne room of heaven where he witnesses the triune God

directing, ordaining, creating, all the events of the world.

A heavenly scroll is unsealed. Horsemen are sent out. Angelic trumpets are sounded. And with each heavenly deed, the course of human history is driven along.

God directs time. Then in chapter 12, John witnesses cosmic conflict between the powers of evil and the people of God. A dragon makes war on a woman and her child.

[9:29] Beasts arise, and God's people are persecuted. But amidst the strife, God announces judgment, plagues, bowls of wrath, and more.

And then in chapter 17 through 18, the church's enemy, Babylon, is brought down and defeated.

And in the climactic moments of history, chapters 19 and 20, the warrior Messiah appears as judge and victor and king, and he rules for a thousand years.

Satan is destroyed. The wicked are judged. And in the closing scene of salvation history, chapters 21 and 2, heaven and earth meet. All things are made new.

And at last, the heavenly song comes true. The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. And he shall reign forever and ever.

And John writes, Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. That may have been 90 seconds. It might have been a little more. But there you go. An incredible, sweeping story of God's sovereignty over history.

[10:34] But what's the purpose? What's the message of John's vision for the churches? Listen, Revelation is not just about predicting the future.

Especially not for us, reading it two millennia after it was written, when some of these things have already taken place. Now, to be clear, Revelation does predict the future. Like we say in the Creed, Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

The book of Revelation certainly looks ahead to that day. But the purpose of this book is to tell the churches that because Christ is coming again, because God directs the course of history from beginning to end, that changes everything today.

Because God is sovereign and will one day set all things right, we worship him with hope today.

Because death is conquered and a crown awaits, we do not fear suffering now.

That's the message of this book. Be faithful today. Because God is sovereign from eternity past, present, and future. Alright.

[11:43] I said a lot in that brief reader's guide, so let me sum it up.

John sees strange things, because this is apocalyptic prophecy. This book was a coherent letter to actual churches.

And the message of the book, faithfulness for the church today. Now if that's the message of the book, what's the message to our little church at Smyrna?

We're ready to take a look at our passage, Revelation 2, starting at verse 8. Let's turn to an exposition of this text. Jesus is speaking to John and he says, verse 8, Now this is the second of the seven letters that John writes down at Jesus' instruction.

Each of the seven letters begins somewhat like this, with an instruction to write to the angel of one of the churches. Some scholars think the angel refers to the bishop of that church.

Others think that it just means it's an apocalyptic way of saying, write to this church in this place.

That's what I think it means. We don't know exactly when the church at Smyrna was founded.

[12:56] Most of what we know about the Smyrna church is what we can infer from this text right here, at least before the end of the first century.

What we can say is that the church at Smyrna was a small, downtrodden church, a poor church, in a very wealthy, very proud city.

The city of Smyrna had a good harbor for trade and military ships. It had important temples and stadiums and wide roads and lots of money and lots of influence.

I was in New York for work this past week on Thursday. And you know how big cities have this sort of self-serving propaganda thing. Anyone from New York here?

Just before I... Good. Yeah. New York, you know, the big apple, the financial center of the country, the city that never sleeps, songs by Frank Sinatra, you know, if I can make it here, I can make it anywhere.

New York. New York. Smyrna was kind of like that. They had a little tagline they printed on their coins, first in Asia, in beauty and size.

[14:10] And they circulated those coins around the city. But Smyrna was not just rich and proud, it was also deeply wrapped up in Roman civic

religion. Smyrna zealously worshipped the Roman emperors.

In fact, in the mid-50s, the city of Smyrna won the right to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. It's like winning the right to host the World Cup of emperor worship.

Now, if you walked around New York in a Red Sox jersey during the baseball postseason, and you walked around certain neighborhoods, you might get beat up.

If you walked around a city like ancient Smyrna, claiming to worship a crucified and resurrected Jewish man from Galilee, and you said, he is the king of all kings and Caesars, you might get more than beat up.

It's to those Christians living in a situation like that that Christ directs this whole letter and especially this little message. And here's what he writes.

[15:20] The words of the first and the last who died and came to life. Now remember, John is a prophet. He's a mouthpiece for the Lord.

So he's going to speak the word of the Lord, just like Isaiah and Jeremiah and all the prophets of the Old Testament. But unlike those prophets, John doesn't only say, hear the word of the Lord, because in these last days, God is speaking by his son, the resurrected Lord Jesus.

And the opening of this letter underscores that point. Look up just a little bit to chapter 1, verse 17, where John has this apocalyptic vision of Jesus.

And Jesus speaks to him and says, fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one. I died and behold, I am alive forevermore and I have the keys of death and Hades.

John is told to tell the church at Smyrna that the message for them comes from the one who conquered death. Christ died. He descended to the dead, as we say in the Apostles' Creed.

[16:26] As humans do when they die. But then he didn't just escape death by the skin of his teeth, but he conquered death and Hades and took the keys with him.

And it is this Jesus who speaks to this downtrodden church at Smyrna. And what does he have to tell them? Well, first, he knows their situation.

Verse 9, I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich. And the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Jesus knows that this church is in crisis. Christians are not merely getting beat up on the street corner for their worship of Christ. It's likely they've been driven underground, excluded from the marketplace, unable to buy and sell unless they worship the emperor.

And if that's not enough, it seems the local Jewish community has taken advantage of the chance to attack these people because they think they're blasphemers. We know from later sources that the Jewish community in Smyrna were acting like an unofficial secret police, helping the authorities find the Christians and persecute them.

[17:39] And in that way, doing the work of the devil himself. We're reminded of Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees in John chapter 8. They claim to be the descendants of Abraham, the Pharisees do, but because of their hostility to the Messiah, Jesus says they are instead children of the devil.

In the same way here, these people prove to be a synagogue of Satan. Now we need to be clear, this is not some early form of anti-Jewish rhetoric. John is not writing down a universal ethnic claim. No, this is how apocalyptic prophecy reveals reality. It acknowledges the situation that people experience and then pulls back the curtain to reveal spiritual realities.

Whatever bad thing these people are doing to the Christians, it's actually the work of the devil.

However poor these Christians might be, they're actually rich spiritually.

And in unveiling these spiritual realities, Christ puts a new frame around the picture of their troubles and so they need not fear. Verse 10, do not fear what you are about to suffer.

[18:52] Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested and for 10 days you will have tribulation. This is the core message for this church.

Suffering is coming. Something beyond their present suffering. Some will be thrown into prison. A Roman prison to be sure. We're not talking about an overnight stay in a county jail.

In the first century, prison was basically death row. Some of these people would be killed. Although we don't know much about the church at Smyrna in this decade of John's writing, we do know

something about this church a generation later.

The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was a man named Polycarp. Have you heard of Polycarp? Polycarp was the bishop of the church at Smyrna in the early years of the second century, just a couple decades after this letter.

It is said that Polycarp knew John the apostle personally. In about 155 AD, Polycarp was burned at the stake in Smyrna by the Roman authorities.

[20:02] And in the extensive account of his public execution, we are told that Polycarp was actually the 12th person to be killed for the sake of Jesus in Smyrna. The city of Smyrna was early in its hostility to the local church and it could be that this message foretells the first murderous attacks on these early Christians.

But notice, just as Job's calamities were actually the work of the devil and as Paul's thorn in the flesh was a messenger from Satan, so too this Roman persecution will be the devil's work. And more than that, notice that the sovereign will of God circumscribes all these attacks of the devil. He limits them. He ordains them.

that's the meaning of the ten days. The time is limited. Jesus knows when it begins and he knows when it ends. And because God ordains this suffering, it has a purpose.

Did you catch it? That you may be tested. That you may be tested. not by the devil, not by the Romans, but tested by God himself.

[21:16] Six weeks ago, I quoted from St. Ambrose and I liked it so much, I'll use that same quote to make this point again. The devil tempts that he may ruin. God tests that he may crown.

And it is to that crown that John's prophecy now turns. The end of verse 10. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.

In the face of suffering, these Christians at Smyrna would be tempted to forsake their Lord. In the first century, the Roman authorities would demand that Christians swear allegiance to the Roman emperor.

The Romans called Christians atheists because they didn't worship the Roman gods or the Roman emperor. And so they demanded that the Christians swear off their so-called atheism.

When Polycarp was martyred by the Roman authorities, the procouncil urged him on pain of death. He said, swear and I will set you free. Curse Christ.

[22:19] And Polycarp declared, 86 years have I served him and he never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my king and my savior?

What a response. Imagine that kind of test. What would you do? What would any of us do? I suppose it all depends what we truly believe about eternity.

If life is the most precious thing we have, there's no cause higher than to preserve our own life whatever the cost. But we await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

And it is the rewards of immortality that relativize the suffering and even death of this life. the crown that John writes of is not the diadema the crown of a king but the stephanos the laurel wreath that crowned the victor of the games.

Whatever tribulations and sufferings this church might experience at the hand of the Romans are short term sufferings like a runner pursuing a prize. I'm reminded of Paul writing to the Romans I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

[23:40] For the church at Smyrna as for people in all times and all places it is only when we set our eyes on immortality that we truly see our present situation for what it is.

And so John's message ends with a final exhortation he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

The second death was a Jewish way of speaking about the destiny that awaited the unrighteous. If a crown of life was for those who held faithful a lasting death was for those who would fall away.

Each of the seven letters ends something like this. The churches must hear the churches must conquer overcome and the one who conquers remains faithful in suffering is tested and found worthy of receiving the prize of life.

Well, we're wrapping up our Lent series and over these weeks we've talked plainly about some pretty hard things. Temptation, grief, loss, doubt, and weakness, and suffering, and death.

[24:55] We've seen from Genesis to Revelation that the Bible speaks without flinching about some of these really hard things. And the Bible doesn't answer every question, it doesn't resolve every tension.

If it did, it wouldn't be believable. Instead, the Christian faith offers us gospel, mysteries, that when we embrace them we discover little hints that the whole puzzle of a human experience might fit together more than we thought.

And so what I want to do in the last few minutes here is connect three of the lessons that we've learned during this Lent season and today in our sermon and connect them with these precious mysteries of the gospel that we rehearse every year during Holy Week.

So theological reflections from Lent and Holy Week, three things. Number one, creatures and creations sometimes do evil things but what creatures mean for evil God means for good.

We saw this several times in our series. Think of the temptation of Christ six weeks ago or the Roman persecution at Smyrna this week. The devil means to harm God's faithful servant and sometimes he's given liberty to do that but in the Christian understanding not even the most evil deeds are outside and beyond the will and purpose of our father.

[26:23] You could call that a contradiction. I think it is a beautiful gospel mystery and it fits the questions of our world better than anything we could have come up with.

During Holy Week we rehearse this gospel once again. The crowds who sang the praises of Christ with palm branches and songs on Palm Sunday in the next breath cry out crucify and call for the blood of our Lord.

They didn't understand that even their murderous intent was the will of God. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians none of the rulers of this age understood for if they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

But as it is God has prepared a plan before all ages that no man could have ever imagined a plan for our glory. what creatures mean for evil God means for good.

We heard that these past six weeks. Let's ponder that gospel mystery this Holy Week. Reflection number two God doesn't always answer our sufferings instead he entered our suffering.

[27:36] Remember Paul's thorn in the flesh last week a messenger of pain to remind Paul that the gospel is best proclaimed not by bragging heroes but by weak disciples because that's the narrative fabric of the gospel that the Lord of all creation emptied himself ate with sinners and outcasts and died a criminal's death.

Remember the Smyrna church reminded that they're not alone in their suffering and death because Christ who suffered and died knows their suffering. We won't understand all of the time all of the suffering and pain and injustice but on Good Friday we rehearse the gospel mystery that God himself took on the horror of human suffering that God the mighty maker died for man the creature's sin as we will sing this Friday.

In the gospel God speaks into suffering not with an argument but with a person the person of our crucified and risen Savior. Let us ponder the mystery of Christ's suffering this holy week and then third and finally suffering and death is reframed by immortality.

Christ's immortality and ours with him. Remember Abraham's test five weeks ago. He considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead says the author of Hebrews.

A test reframed by immortality. That was the message for the church in Smyrna this morning. Do not fear. A crown of life awaits.

[29:17] Paul wrote if the dead are not raised let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. In other words if you don't believe in immortality at least be consistent. But in fact he says Christ has been raised from the dead and that changes everything now.

This Good Friday we will gather here to read the gospel once again. As our service ends at dusk we will snuff out the last candles, dim the lights, silently walk out the doors, quietly shake hands in the parking lot and go our way.

And then on Holy Saturday we will wait. Like a parable for all of the Christian life we wait for resurrection. Resurrection Sunday Christ the first fruits that we celebrate on Easter. But one day at his coming all who belong to him will be raised with him. And that coming day of glory shines a light on everything else. So church let us remain steadfast under trial as we await the crown of life. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.