

Welcome

For those who don't know, my wife and I live in intentional community with another family, and right now there are four kids in our house between ages 6-9. As you can imagine, the pandemic has been rough on their parents - trying to manage schooling at home plus working - many of you know the strain they're under.

In my ongoing quest to be a good housemate, I've taken to inviting the kids into our upstairs living space for a weekly movie. We started with *Into the Spider-verse*, and then moved onto the new *Sonic the Hedgehog* movie.

It's a terrific little movie, but it turned out to be pretty intense for the 6 year old. My wife and I have this big floor cushion that she's claimed as "hers" any time we have a movie party, and she started *Sonic* there. But early in the film, the evil Dr. Robotnick attacks Sonic, and during that scene, she got up and sat between her sister and cousin, burying herself in her blanket.

When I asked her if she was okay, she admitted, "I'm scared."

"What are you afraid of?" I asked her.

"I'm afraid Sonic is going to die."

I smiled and spoiled the movie for her. "Don't worry... Sonic doesn't die."

We kept watching, and as you might imagine, the film ends with a pretty intense action sequence where Sonic and his allies once again face off against the evil Dr.

I looked over to see how she was doing, and the 6 yo sat up and announced to the room, "Don't worry, everyone! Sonic doesn't die!" She had a big smile on her face and was genuinely enjoying the action. At the end of the film, all four of the kids were *very* angry to find out Sonic 2 was not out yet.

Sonic doesn't die.

Her problem was that she didn't know what kind of story she was in. Adults know that kids movies are comedies - they have happy endings. We know Sonic doesn't die.

But she didn't know that, so she was paralyzed by fear. It wasn't until I assured her we weren't watching *that* kind of movie she was able to relax and enjoy the film (even evangelizing her cousins and sibling that it was okay for them to enjoy it too).

Aristotle said there are two kinds of stories: Comedies and tragedies. Tragedies end with a funeral - Sonic dies. Comedies end with a wedding - Sonic doesn't die.

Friends, today we're going to talk about the nature of reality, and our response to the world. It's easy, isn't it, to be convinced we're living in a tragedy, that things are bad and getting worse, that reality ends with a funeral.

But the truth is that we're living in a comedy. That doesn't mean we're laughing all the time. It means our world doesn't end with Death, but with life. We're not living in a world where Sonic dies. We're living in a world created by the One who refuses to let the grave be the end.

Message

This Summer, we're doing a series called *How the Bible Works*. Last week, we began by exploring what the Bible is - a library of books written over more than a thousand years, by more than a dozen authors in three languages. The Bible is inspired - a book that is both fully a product of human authors and full of God's spiritual authority. Because the Bible is a divine library, we can trust Scripture fully to lead us into a relationship with Jesus.

But how does the Bible work, exactly? Well, because the Bible is also a human document, the kinds of books in the Bible matter. Much like wandering the shelves in a library, we need to pay attention to genre. We're going to explore how they work, and learn some tips for reading them. Our goal is twofold: first, we want to do the best job we can of learning what the Scriptures meant to the original readers. We want to know what the Spirit was saying *then*, through those ancient authors. All that so that, second, we can better listen for what the Spirit is saying to us today.

The goal of reading Scripture isn't to become experts on ancient literature. It's to know God. We read not to become informed, but to be transformed.

We began with one of the more straightforward genres - the Gospels, those ancient biographies of Jesus. Last week, we explored the genre of prophecy - a timely message about how we are accountable to use the power God has given us both to remain faithful to God and to care for the most vulnerable among us.

Today, we're going to look at arguably the most difficult genre - apocalypse. I know... if it's hardest, why don't we save it for last?

Good question - but apocalypse actually is closely related to prophecy - some of our earliest examples of apocalyptic literature come from prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel.

When we hear the word 'Apocalypse', we immediately think 'End of the World'. That's not totally our fault - the book of Revelation has a ton of pretty, uh... apocalyptic... imagery in it.

But remember how prophecy wasn't actually about telling the future? Same with apocalypse - it's not actually about the end of the world.

An apocalypse is a story that shows us a hidden truth about the world.

One of the things that makes apocalyptic literature so intimidating is that it's so strange. We literally only have one whole book in the Bible - Revelation - that is apocalypse. There are bits in some other books - even the Gospels, but as a whole, we have way more history and letters and even prophecy.

Another hurdle is that we just don't write apocalypses any more. Try to imagine you're an archaeologist living 1,000 years from now, and the only TV you have access to are newscasts and sitcoms. You've got CNN and Fox and lots of local news. You've got Seinfeld and Friends and the Office. All this gives you a pretty good window into life in early 21st century America.

And then you find Season 4 of Game of Thrones.

I mean....what? You'd be super confused, right? (I know, I know, a lot of us are still confused by GoT).

Apocalypse is the same. We have one in the Bible (and some change). But there are *dozens* of these things. Jews and Christians looooooved apocalyptic literature - it was super popular for like 500 years. We've got an Apocalypse of Adam, one of Abraham. 1 and 2 Enoch in the Catholic Apocrypha are apocalypses, as is the book of Jubilees.

So all that to say: Revelation is a weird book, but it's mainly weird because we don't know that much about apocalypses. In the ancient world, everyone knew what they were, and how they worked.

The last hurdle is that apocalyptic literature always involves heavily symbolic language. Nearly none of an apocalypse is meant to be read literally. And if that sounds weird to you, consider this:

[Political Cartoon] Again, imagine you're that archaeologist 1,000 years from now and you find this cartoon. You might look at it and think, "Wow, did those ignorant savages really think birds smoked and wrote newspapers?"

Of course, for most of us, we recognize this immediately as a political cartoon. It doesn't take a lot of work for us to recognize this one criticizing the 2013 gutting of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as an act of voter suppression that sets US policy back to the days of Jim Crow segregation. There's a *lot* happening in this cartoon - truly worth a thousand words, and none of it is "wait, birds can smoke?"

We look at a political cartoon and instantly understand its symbolic language. Even if we don't fully understand the picture right away, we understand the *genre*.

Think of apocalyptic literature something like political cartoons. Reading them literally is the wrong way to read them. Rather, they use provocative and powerful imagery to point at deeper truths.

[Scripture Slide 1] Like what? Turn with me to Revelation 14. This is one of my favorite passages in the whole Bible. But it's a strange passage at first glance. So I want to read it with you, and then work through how we go about reading it as a piece of apocalyptic literature. Since this is the book of Revelation, you'd be right to think this passage is about judgment (that's *not* always the case in Revelation, but it is here).

Then I saw a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was someone like the Son of Man. He had a gold crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand.

Then another angel came from the Temple and shouted to the one sitting on the cloud, "Swing the sickle, for the time of harvest has come; the crop on earth is ripe." So the one sitting on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the whole earth was harvested.

After that, another angel came from the Temple in heaven, and he also had a sharp sickle. Then another angel, who had power to destroy with fire, came from the altar. He shouted to the angel with the sharp sickle, "Swing your sickle now to gather the clusters of grapes from the vines of the earth, for they are ripe for judgment." So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and loaded the grapes into the great winepress of God's wrath. The grapes were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress in a stream about 180 miles long and as high as a horse's bridle. -- Revelation 14:14-20

Okay, we're going to focus on the angels harvesting, and then on that winepress stuff. First, the one like the Son of Man is a picture of a famous passage from the book of Daniel (sort of like the Crow was a picture of Jim Crow). In this case, it's Daniel 7:

As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed. -- Daniel 7:13-14

If you're thinking, "Wow, that sounds a lot like Jesus," then you're right on. In fact, the early church pretty quickly associated Jesus with this 'someone like the Son of Man' from Daniel. So we have Jesus harvesting in Revelation. What is he harvesting? Well, you harvest wheat with a sickle.

The next angle doesn't harvest wheat though. It harvests *grapes*. Now, that's weird because you can't harvest grapes with a sickle. You have to pick grapes. If you use a sickle, you'll lose a bunch of your grapes. So again this isn't literal - it's a cartoon, an illustration.

So we have Jesus harvesting wheat and an angel harvesting grapes. Wheat and grapes. Bread and wine.

This is an image of communion, where Jesus is both the harvester and the harvested. And it's that grape harvest that gets really interesting - the grapes are placed in the "winepress of the wrath of God" outside the city. That's a picture of the crucifixion, as we can see in the letter to the Hebrews:

Under the old system, the high priest brought the blood of animals into the Holy Place as a sacrifice for sin, and the bodies of the animals were burned outside the camp. So also Jesus suffered and died outside the city gates to make his people holy by means of his own blood. So let us go out to him, outside the camp, and bear the disgrace he bore. For this world is not our permanent home; we are looking forward to a home yet to come. -- Hebrews 13:11-14

So Jesus is crucified and his blood covers 180 miles? That's weird, right? Except, you're saying, "Wait, the ancient Hebrews didn't use miles." And you'd be right. The original Greek reads 1,600 stadia (which is equivalent to 180 miles). But remember - this is a cartoon, a picture. The numbers are symbolic, too. The number 4 represents the Earth (like the 4 corners of the earth) and the number 10 represents wholeness. 1600 is $4 \times 4 \times 10 \times 10$ - you multiply numbers by themselves for emphasis. So Jesus' blood doesn't cover 180 mil. In this word picture, it covers *the whole earth*.

Now, if you're thinking, "Wow, that is a lot of work - to know Daniel, Hebrews and all that number stuff," well, you're right. Like I said, Apocalypse is one of the hardest genres to learn to read - not unlike learning to be able to read political cartoons from other cultures and countries.

But look at what has emerged from this picture: God's judgment looks like Jesus *not* judging us, but giving himself in our place. If the cross is a picture of God's wrath (which is a whole different conversation), then God gives Godself in our place. And his sacrifice isn't for a select few, but for the whole world.

This is a powerful picture of what kind of God we serve, what kind of God we meet in the Scriptures. We'll circle back to this in a moment, but first, how do we read Apocalypse for spiritual formation?

1. It's probably not literal. Remember, this is like a political cartoon.
2. What symbols can I identify? (Use internet resources, study bible)
3. It's a story - pay attention to narrative flow
4. What is the deeper reality this picture is pointing to?
5. How is it similar to today?

Again, these questions can be hard. They can take time to figure out. That's okay - we just finished up a Bible study on the book of Revelation last month, and anyone who attended will tell you that what initially seemed scary and daunting actually became a lot of fun.

Because what emerges from apocalypse is this powerful picture of who God is - God is the one who saves us from ourselves. When we want to know the character of our king, it's not selfish, self-focused,

or self-aggrandizing. Our king is the one who will die in our place, die to save us from ourselves. And that is truly good news, my friends.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We are Jesus' body gathered up and broken for the world. Jesus pours out his blood to save us from ourselves.

[Crucifixion Icon] Examen: Icon Reflection

Assignment + Blessing

Sacred reading of Revelation 14.