

**“We believe in the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come”**

Lent 2021 St Thomas' Brampton

Session 4: Resurrection fulfilment

What can we learn from the book of Revelation?

Welcome to our fourth and final study session of our Lent course.

We begin with a summary of sessions 1-3, before we think about what glimpse of resurrection fulfilment from the book of Revelation.

Session 1

Old Testament times Israelite thinking /expectation about resurrection /afterlife influenced by beliefs from surrounding cultures and religions. Dominant hope was for Israel's vindication and restoration to former glory.

By c1st Jewish thinking beginning to grasp new idea of life after death – with no idea how this could happen.

Resurrection was religious AND political matter in c1st Judaism and one reason why the majority of those who witnessed /heard reports of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection did not believe what the disciples were claiming about Jesus of Nazareth.

Group pressure/ cultural and religious conventions can stand in the way of / limit faith

Session 2

The first Christians were convinced that they had seen the risen Jesus in physical form. They had other categories of language that they could have used to describe what they had seen (e.g. an angel or a ghost), but they didn't. They used the language of embodiment... resurrection.

The first Christians were also completely transformed. So much so they didn't just go and follow the next messiah figure that came along, they stuck with Jesus. Peter the denier became a proclaimer of the gospel. Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle.

Session 3

The resurrection of Jesus is one of the prime bedrocks of our Faith. Removed, we shrink back to nothingness.

The resurrection of Jesus is a foreshadowing of our own resurrection experience ie. transformed and glorious bodies.

The resurrection is the encouragement for, and the empowering of, our discipleship now.

Before we go on, take a moment to remember back through these sessions. Look back at any notes you may have made, recall what you said or thought.

Has your thinking about Jesus' resurrection /its implications changed in any way(s)?

Now let's look ahead. So, deep breath, and turn to the Book of Revelation, because this is where we are given a glimpse of resurrection fulfilment.

Very quickly, off the top of your head, if you are to any extent familiar with this last book of our Bible, **how would you describe it in a couple of sentences to someone who has never read it?**

If we were sitting together in a large group at this point, we would certainly discover a wide variety of responses to that question! The book of Revelation – exhilarating, baffling, scary... choose your own adjective – in the form of letters to 7 churches, describes visions of a world beyond planet earth. It is a difficult book to make sense of ...and we could spend a lot of time trying!

But all we are aiming to do in this session is see what its core message has to tell us about the fulfilment of Jesus' resurrection and what this might mean for all who believe, that – to paraphrase John 14:2-3 – there is plenty of room in God's house and Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a place for each of us.

A bit of background...and a few words about the book and how to read it

There were a lot of Johns around at the time this was written, c90-95AD, and we can't say with certainty which one wrote Revelation. The author, writing from his exile on Patmos (1:9) refers to himself as "God's servant" (1:1) but was given the name 'John' c160AD by the early Christian writer Justin Martyr.

It was composed at a time when believers' immediate post-ascension expectation of Jesus' return to our human world was beginning to waver, towards the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian. Domitian (probably never known as Dom to his friends) was an unpleasant character, famous for his persecution of Christians and traditionally it was thought that Revelation was written in response to his actions. But while there are a few specific descriptions of then current or recent acts of persecution, (John's banishment 1:9, Antipas's execution 2:13 and the expectation of arrest of some Christians in Smyrna 2:10), it is now thought that the references running through the book are to more general persecutions in their past as well as their present - and in the expectation of more to come.

But whatever the trigger for Revelation, Christians, persecuted or not, needed encouragement to stick with their faith as they waited for Christ's return.

Read 1:4b-8

What does John write here? Do you find it an encouragement to you today?

So the book opens with the message that God is in control. No matter how bad things get, Jesus is Lord of history, earth and heaven, he will return to judge and there is a glorious future for every believer.

What kind of a book is Revelation?

Revelation is unique in the New Testament. While the gospels and the book of Acts are mostly descriptive narrative and the epistles are letters 'unpacking' Jesus' teaching and giving instruction about how to live as a follower of Jesus, Revelation takes us into a different world of prophetic, visionary language, symbolism and imagery describing extraordinary visions – things the author sees and hears about a reality beyond our human world.

But while it is unique in our New Testament, we find similar literature in the Old Testament. **Can you think where to find some examples?**

Revelation is rooted in the Old Testament world of prophesy. It belongs to the ancient genre of *apocalyptic writing*, writing that unveils secrets God reveals about heaven and earth, past, present and future. (See **Rev 1:1**) Award yourself a gold star if you said Daniel in response to the above question (this is the clearest example) and a silver star if you named other prophets – and there is more apocalyptic writing in books of the Christian Apocrypha and in other Jewish literature. If you find this genre difficult you are not alone. One major reason is that it contains clues (in the form of symbols) that original readers would have understood, but that we do not. And as no writer wanted to risk a charge of sedition, writing was often coded. To take one example, "Babylon" stands for Rome – itself a shorthand for political power opposed to God.

... And how should we read it?

It might be better to think first how NOT to read it!

It's possible to read Revelation as fantasy or as mysticism (or both!) or as a factual description of what will happen at the end of human time (with a timeline and checklist of precise details and a lot of room for speculation about the exact meaning of allusions and numbers.)

While this might be fun and/or fascinating (to some!), none of these are particularly helpful ways to read it!

Instead, let's try to understand the descriptions as visions from God, coming to us through the writer's imagination, at a particular point on human history, underlining that God is in charge of human history.

So the question 'What is this whole picture trying to tell us?' may be more helpful than 'What does the number 144,000 actually mean?'

And rather than get side-tracked by trying to decipher and interpret individual symbols ... or even scared at the prospect of heaven, (I write as someone who can't even cope with Dr Who, and who finds the thought of being in the vicinity of creatures full of eyes (4:6) terrifying, whatever they are singing), let's try instead to

grasp the overall message of the book, that John intended to be one of encouragement to persevere in faith and of inspiration.

So now with some background and sense of the book as a whole, let's focus on our aim for this session: **What is it trying to tell us about the fulfilment of Jesus' resurrection and what this might mean for us?**

At the beginning of the book of Acts (Acts 1:6-12), Luke describes (perhaps with less detail than we'd like!) Jesus' ascension. Jesus has been crucified, died and buried and the resurrection has happened. Changed but still recognisable, no longer limited by human time or space, Jesus has appeared to countless people and now departs from our human world. The resurrection is complete!
...Or is it?

We have already looked at 1:4b-8, where John nails the colours of his belief to the mast, now let's think about his visions of heaven...

Read chapter 4

Where is Jesus?
What is going on?

In a pattern that is repeated throughout the book, John has shifted the scene from what is happening in the human world to what is happening in heaven, setting the struggles of this life against the reality of eternity.

What words/ phrases/ images from this chapter stand out for you?
What overall impression do they (and this chapter) leave you with?

Read 5: 6-12

What is going on here?
Again, what overall impression are you left with? (If it helps, imagine standing to one side, looking on at this scene. How do you feel? What are your thoughts?)

Read Rev 5:13 What do you make of the first part of this verse?

Now remind yourself of **Romans 8:18-23**. Paul writes this as the worship of heaven resounds and Jesus, 'in glory' is worshipped with unceasing praise.

But, as Paul writes and as God makes clear through John's subsequent and more detailed visions, things have yet to take place...

Resurrection fulfilment, like the Kingdom of God, is both now – and not yet

So Revelation continues to bounce us backwards and forwards in "time" and place as we move inexorably into the dark heart of the book, to read visions of the final overthrow of the evil one.

Beasts, dragons, serpents, plagues, bowls of God's wrath, violent earthquakes, one

hundred pound hailstones falling on people's heads – we find all that and more in the final chapters of Revelation.

I'm guessing we have rarely if ever read this book in one sitting (and I'm not suggesting you do so now!) But if you do this at some time in the future, notice how the momentum swings between the triumph of good and vanquishing of evil, and the regrouping of dark forces for the next round of the battle. Evil is not easily defeated.

Let's look at 2 passages.

Read **Rev 12:1-5a**

The drama of the final stages of battle begins with one of the most difficult of all the baffling passages in apocalyptic writing. While there are echoes of other biblical passages (**such as?**), the imagery here seems a lot closer to the world of astrology (moon, stars, signs in the heavens) or to stories from Greek or Egyptian mythology (mother god and threatened child), well known in John's time.

What do you make of this passage? What does it tell you?

Remembering the overarching aim of Revelation was to encourage his readers to keep going in the face of the trials and tribulations of their earthly lives, **how might this passage do that? Does it have the same effect for you?**

Now let's look at **Revelation chapter 13**

From the sea (an evil place in Jewish thinking) comes a terrible beast. Look quickly at **Daniel 7 :1-8**. John's beast seems to combine the characteristics of Daniel's four – but for both Daniel and John, these creatures represent the rulers and empires that stand in open contempt of, and opposition to, God. For Daniel this was the mighty Assyrian Empire and for John that of the Romans and their emperors. .

And as every age has its own equivalent, **what is it for us?**

But however mighty or unassailable empires, governments, walls – or even an individual – might seem, and however bloody the battles, John's visions speak of an unshakeable certainty that ultimately God will prevail and ultimately evil will be destroyed.

Let your eyes wander through **chapter 18**, a vision of the fall of Babylon – symbolic of all that was evil in the world.

Does the language and form of this chapter remind you of parts of the Old Testament? What are they?

Gold star time again if you made the link between this chapter and passages from the doom laden prophecies of, for example, Isaiah (**Is 13-14**), Jeremiah (**Jer 50-51**) or Ezekiel (**Ez 26-28**). Revelation 18 now describes the final act of destruction of the civilisations that thrive on exploitation and whose actions come from valuing material wealth above all else.

Notice how judgement falls first on the *place* (v 2), then on the *leaders* (v9), then on the *wealthy* (v11), then the *workers* (v17). There might be a sequence but status is of no account. All who oppose God will fail and fall.

In contrast, those who remain faithful to God, who don't live by the standards of the ungodly world around them and stand up against ungodly practices (and who often suffer for so doing), will be spared.

What standards do we live by?

What ungodly practices are we aware of? Are we part of them? Do we stand up against them? Or look the other way?

Now read **1 Corinthians 3:11-15**

(Paul's thought here actually runs from verse 5-23 but read 11-15)

If our resurrection depends on our faith in Jesus' resurrection, what impact does our behaviour in this world have on our resurrection life?

(I would be delighted to hear your responses to any of these questions – but particularly that one!)

However, for Paul, as for John, there is no doubt about the final victory of God over the evil, even though evil in all its forms remains part of the "now and not" yet period of human time in our human world. And the final stages of battle are fought to an ever louder accompaniment of the worship of heaven.

And as the post resurrection, pre ascension body of Jesus was changed yet still recognisable, a new heaven and new earth is similarly described. (Paul write about this in the second half of **1 Corinthians 15**, look at least at verse **42-44**)

Read **Rev 21:1-2, 11, 18-21**.

What impression do these verses leave with you?

And the final questions:

What do you think Revelation as a whole is trying to tell us about resurrection fulfilment for Jesus?

What does Revelation suggest it will mean for us?

... And what will it mean for Creation?

We have no indication how much human time it took for John to receive and record these visions, but I can certainly image an exhausted flinging down of his biro as he writes the final 'Amen'.

What effect does *reading* Revelation have on you ?

Now take that awareness to God in worship...

...tell God how you are feeling right now...

Praise God... Play music ... sing ... or be silent and simply sit with God.

However we have understood the content of Revelation, even if our joy is tempered because we live in the “now and not yet” period of resurrection and our lives are touched by the ongoing challenges, let’s ask God for the strength to be steadfast in faith, giving thanks that evil is swallowed up in victory and for our resurrection life now and the promise of resurrection life to come.

Reflect on the fact that God has revealed something of the reality beyond our human world and left us with reassurance and encouragement – “*See, I am coming soon ... the Alpha and Omega, the first and last, the beginning and the end.*” (22:12)

... and praise God for that reassurance.

Heaven, according to Revelation, is a noisy place! Count (perhaps later!) the number of references to singing, loud voices and instruments being played.

... **How do you feel about that? !!**

Look briefly at

What words can you pick out

Overcoming all that is evil is described very deliberately with the language of hatred and in terms of battle ... but it ends with the language of triumph, cleansing and rejoicing.

Read Romans

Look quickly at the opening to the messages being addressed to each of the 7 churches (2:2, 9, 13, 19 & 3:1,8,15) **What is God saying to the people of these churches?**

What might be the impact on them (and on us) of this reminder of being known to God?