

Dec 24-30

Week 52

We have come to the final week in our reading plan. This week we will continue in Act 3, scene 4, by first reading 1–3 John. These letters were written to combat false teachers and to encourage certain basics as central to true Christian living.

On day 2 we will move into the book of Revelation. This remarkable book is at once beautiful, powerful, and wonderfully intimidating—perhaps the most difficult book in the Bible to read. It will help greatly if you have a good study Bible in hand as you read. Remember that apocalyptic literature is based in symbolism, and the symbols of the book draw heavily from the Old Testament.

Revelation repeatedly returns to the heavenly throne room. One scholar suggested that Revelation is dramatized as a heavenly courtroom scene in which the rebellious nations of the world are on trial and found wanting, and God's people are vindicated. Watch for the gospel and a celebration of Christ as keys to the unfolding of the book. Christ will defeat the wicked forces of the world by his sacrificial death and will bring those forces to judgment in the end. His people will be vindicated and welcomed into God's presence.

On day 6 we move into Act 3, scene 5, the reversal of the fall (see Genesis 3) and the re-creation of the heavens and the earth—a wonderful resolution to the Bible's grand story.

Day 1**Read 1 John; 2 John; 3 John****Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 46**

Tradition tells us that the apostle John wrote 1–3 John. With his distinct writing style John confronted false teachers in the community and pointed to the basics of true Christian belief and practice.

As you read 1 John, watch for comments about false teaching. For instance, John emphasized that Jesus had really come in the flesh, addressing a wrong teaching that said Jesus was not really human. The false teachers also seemed to proclaim that they don't sin, and yet they also neglected to meet the needs of other believers, for whom they should have been expressing love. As you read, watch for the essentials to which John pointed as basic to Christian life and belief. He used words like remain, walk, light, confess, love, and know, and he constantly pointed to the Father, Son, and Spirit. Also watch for contrasts in this book between light and darkness, life and death, truth and lies, loving and hating.

Second John also took up the theme of false teachers. Notice repeated words in this book.

Third John, the shortest book in the Bible, was addressed to an elder of the church named Gaius, urging him to show hospitality to the itinerant minister Demetrius, the letter carrier.

How will you live the truths of 1–3 John this week?

Day 2

Read Revelation 1-5

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 47

Revelation 1–5 lays the foundation for the book by setting forth a prologue (see 1:1-8); interaction among John, Christ, and a network of churches in ancient Asia (see 1:9–3:22); and twin visions of the heavenly throne room (4:1–5:14).

As you read, remember that much of the language in Revelation is symbolic, representing real truths but doing so with word pictures. For instance, in 1:16 Jesus has a sharp sword protruding from his mouth. This is a symbol for the powerful Word of God as a word of judgment. Notice Jesus’s centrality to this whole section of Revelation, as he will be in the whole book.

The descriptions of the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 are to be instructive for all churches of all time (see 2:23).

Chapter 4 shows us that God is at the center of Revelation, and chapter 5 shows us that Christ is at the center of the purposes of God. Pay particular attention to why the Lamb was praised in chapter 5. The opening of the scroll was the opening of God’s purposes for his people and judgment on his enemies.

Praise the Lamb today for the gospel.

Day 3

Read Revelation 6-10

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 48

The scroll in Revelation 5 has seven seals, and the vision of the seals will lead to the blowing of seven trumpets, then to seven bowls.

The vision of the seals (see 6:1–8:5) provides scenes of judgment (the first four seals); the cry of the martyrs for justice (seal five); the cry of the wicked to be hidden from God’s face (seal six); and the seventh seal, which after an interlude of silence leads to the seven trumpets. The seven seals thus lay a foundation for the detailed judgment of the wicked and vindication of the righteous that follow.

In Revelation 8:6–9:21 the trumpets blow a warning about God’s judgment. The plagues of Egypt (see Ex 7–10) and Joel’s locust plague (see Jl 1:6; 2:1-5) provide the backdrop for these images.

Revelation 10 focuses again on John’s role in delivering the prophecy. The gospel story, that sin devastates and Christ saves, is depicted on a cosmic scale.

Praise God for his righteousness, even in judgment.

Day 4

Read Revelation 11-13

Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 49

We read more about the conflict between world forces that oppose the church and Christ's followers.

Revelation 11 depicts the prophetic role of the church as it stands for the Word of God in the world. Moses and Elijah provide the imagery here.

Revelation 12–13 stands at the heart of the book. Chapter 12 gives a picture of the gospel; Christ has already defeated Satan and provided salvation for his people, but Satan attempts to hurt Christ's people. The beasts of Revelation 13 have their backdrop in Daniel 7. For the churches in Asia during John's time, the beast likely represented the Roman emperor, and the beast from the earth may have symbolized the priesthood of his cult. On a grander scale, however, the beasts represent the political forces of all time that oppose Christ and the church. The Scriptures indicate that this opposition will increase at the end of the age before Christ returns.

Pray today for our Christian brothers and sisters facing persecution around the world.

Day 5**Read Revelation 14-18****Act 3 - Scene 4 - Reading 50**

Revelation 14 introduces the remaining visions in the book, anticipating the fall of Babylon (the systems of evil in the end time), the harvesting of God's people, and the winepress of God's judgment.

In Revelation 15:1–16:21 we read about the seven bowls of God's judgment on Babylon. The bowls echo the plagues proclaimed in the seven trumpets but without the limitation to one-third, and the first five bowls are based on the plagues against Egypt in the exodus. The sixth bowl calls forth the drying of the riverbed of the Euphrates River, bringing to mind the crossing of the Red Sea. But here the river is dried to make way for the kings of the east in preparation for the final battle. The seventh and final bowl echoes the plague of hail in Exodus but also heralds and initiates the judgment of Babylon.

In Revelation 17–18 we see the fall of Babylon. Notice in the final chapters of the book the contrast between the great, wicked city Babylon and the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Identify world powers and systems that do not follow God. How has God warned them that judgment is coming?

Scene 5

Christ's Second Coming and Reign: God's Future for the Kingdom

This scene is a glimpse into the future. It shows what all those who have accepted salvation through a renewed relationship with God in Jesus Christ can anticipate with joy. This stage of God's story lies ahead, but we can be absolutely sure that these prophecies will be fulfilled. After all, this is the endpoint to which God has directed all history.

Jesus and the apostles had announced his return beforehand, but Revelation 19–22 is the passage that actually describes his coming. He is compared to a general on a white horse leading his army to victory. Yet these chapters also describe the joy of his resurrected people, for they will be “the wife of the Lamb” (21:9), and will be united with their King throughout eternity in the Holy City, new Jerusalem.

Day 6

Read Revelation 19-22

Act 3 - Scene 5 - Reading 1

Christ's second coming and reign constitute the glorious end of the story of the Bible, which God will write on our future. Notice the convergence of earlier themes as God re-creates the heavens and the earth and again walks with people (see Genesis 1-2).

In Revelation 19 the judgment against Babylon and its downfall are celebrated, and the marriage of the Lamb (Jesus) to his bride (the church) has come.

In chapters 19-20 Jesus defeats the beast and the kings of the earth. Satan is crushed, and the final judgment takes place.

Revelation 21:1-22:11 focuses on the new creation and the new Jerusalem. In a restored Eden the fall is reversed. This passage is grounded in Ezekiel's vision of the heavenly temple in Ezekiel 40:1-43:12. The dwelling place of God is again with his people.

The epilogue in Revelation 22:12-21 cries out for the coming of Jesus. "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (22:20).

What will you do to live your life in light of Jesus's return?

Day 7**Summary of God's Story**

This week's readings, all from the writings of the apostle John, provide a fitting capstone for our experience of reading through the Bible chronologically. John's three brief letters have given us wise and loving counsel about loving God and obeying his commands, while the book of Revelation has moved us into the final scene of "God's story in three acts." We've concluded our readings on a triumphant note. What could be more glorious than this account of God's future for the kingdom? Christ's second coming and reign are the finale to which the entire Bible story has been leading. Let's review where we've been.

In Act 1 we observed three brief scenes, narrated in Genesis chapters 1–11, that involved the whole human race: creation, fall, and flood. God was the primary mover; humanity was the beneficiary of his good creative activity; sin and Satan marred what God did. Act 1 ended by showing ongoing human sin and brokenness, but with glimmers of God's mercy appearing from time to time.

The narrative of Act 2 began with Genesis 12 and ended with Malachi. We observed nine scenes that told the story of God's covenant people, Israel. God is still the primary actor. Every act, every scene, is his story. God acted graciously to call a redeemed people for himself. He began with the covenant with Abraham and continued with the great redemptive event under Moses, the exodus. The covenant people grew to a great nation, and God promised King David an everlasting dynasty. Under Solomon, the covenant people were ruled by David's son and worshiped the Lord at the temple in the Holy City. After this, the kingdom was divided and God's prophets arose to call the covenant people back to himself. Finally, God disciplined his people through the captivity. Afterwards, the Lord delivered his people again. The temple and Jerusalem were rebuilt, but there was no Davidic dynasty. God's promises of a Messiah went unfulfilled for centuries, but his promise of a new covenant provided hope. The curtain on Act 2 fell with a sense of wistful waiting.

Act 3 was the story of the New Testament, told in five scenes. The curtain went up with God the Creator working to provide perfect salvation by sending his own Son. Jesus was born as God incarnate. His ministry and proclamation of God's reign (or kingdom) thrilled the multitudes. His death and resurrection served as the climax for the entire biblical story. We also saw Satan as God's antagonist defeated in Jesus's death, with his final demise at Jesus's second coming. Critical in Act 3 was Jesus's establishing the new covenant and then calling into being the new covenant people, his church. Those who responded to the good news by faith gathered into local congregations for worship and fellowship. Paul

especially took the message to Gentiles. Each generation continued to spread the message of the kingdom.

We are still living in Act 3, scene 4 today. The last scene hasn't occurred yet, but its coming is assured. Christ will return as he promised. God's story will finally be complete. As the final curtain falls in Revelation 22, Jesus the Son of David is ruling in the Holy City forever. The covenant people, those he redeemed, are with him for eternity. All the conflicts raised throughout Acts 1, 2, and 3 have been resolved; all God's promises have been fulfilled. Here is the most satisfying of all conclusions possible for the greatest of all stories, for it is not just a human story, it is God's story.

Prayer/Meditation

Father, Son, and Spirit, I come to you in humble worship. You are the God revealed throughout all the Scriptures. Thank you for giving me this Word so that I may know you and love you and serve you forever. You are the One who will bring your story to an end, and then all things will be complete. I long for the time to come when all your servants will see your face and dwell in your presence for eternity. Until then, Lord, keep me by your grace. Amen.
