

## Epilogue | Revelation 22:6-21

Can you believe it? We did it! *Give yourself a pat on the back!* We've finally come to the *end* of the *Book of Revelation*. If you've ever read a really good book you didn't want to end, then like me you love turning the page on the last chapter and discovering an *epilogue*. (For non-readers, *epilogues* are like *post-credits movie scenes*, like at the end of all the Marvel Comic movies, or *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, where, after the credits, Ferris comes out, breaks the fourth wall, and says, "You're still here? The movie's over. go home!" Since you're still here, today we're going to tackle the final verses of Revelation, presented as 3 *post-credits scenes*—an *epilogue*.

The *first* scene tells the bizarre story of John worshipping the *angel* (which is just the untranslated Greek word, *messenger*) who's been touring him through his visions. Overwhelmed by all he's seen, John falls at the feet of the angelic messenger, who immediately urges him to stop and instead to **"worship God."** (22:9) It's reminiscent of another story in which John and two other disciples were led up a high mountain by *Jesus*, who appears alongside two of the Bible's most famous messengers, *Moses & Elijah*, and begins to glow with the glory of God. Overwhelmed by what they see, the disciples suggest building 3 tabernacles—*worship tents*—one for *each* of them. But just then, God's voice thunders from heaven and, as if pointing at Jesus, says, **"This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"** (Mark 9:7) In other words, don't confuse the *messengers* for the *Messiah*. John's story of misdirected worship appears to offer a similar clarification. But as strange as this scene is, even *stranger* is the fact that this is actually the *second* time this story appears. We—I—skipped it the first time, in chapter 19, knowing we'd circle back to it later. The *first* instance of *John worshipping the angel* in Revelation 19:10 offers additional detail that may help explain why John emphasizes this story the way he does.

**I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “*Don’t do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!*”**

Notice the language here: a *fellow servant*, *brothers and sisters* and *the testimony of Jesus*. Curiously, this is almost the exact wording John uses to introduce *himself* in chapter 1:

**I, John, your brother and companion... was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (Revelation 1:9)**

It’s like John is drawing a parallel between the *angel* and *himself*; or, more accurately, between the misguided honour and attention he pays this messenger, and a possibly similar dynamic that may have existed between *him* and the original readers of *his* message. By this time, John was the last surviving member of Jesus’ 12 disciples, having been Jesus’ closest friend. John clearly plays a parental role within the 7 churches to whom he’s writing, not to mention he’s basically a living-martyr, exiled on the prison-island of Patmos for following Jesus. You can imagine the church of his day treating John with legendary status, a kind of celebrity-pastor. And now—*having been taken into heaven to bring back a message from the risen and exalted Jesus*—John uses this story to hold up a mirror to his readers, reminding them not to exalt *him*—*the mere messenger*—but to exclusively worship the God revealed in *Jesus*.

We live in a weird time when Christian celebrities are a thing. You can follow celebrity-pastors on Instagram, read best-selling Christian authors, subscribe to virtual prayer times with Hollywood actors, listen to award-winning Christian podcasters, and even get front-row seats to stadium worship concerts, with merch tables and backstage passes to meet today’s biggest names in worship music. And, while I can’t comment on the *hearts* of any of these so-called Christian-celebrities, it does strike me that the very concept of the Christian celebrity must say something about *our hearts*, about *our* propensity to elevate *messengers* above the *message*; or, *more importantly*, the one whom the message is about. On a much smaller scale, while we

don't have any *celebrities* around here, it's not uncommon for us to have our favourite worship leader, pastor, preacher, or Life Group leader, which can unintentionally cause us to elevate certain people within our community (*he says while speaking from a monster screen high above a stage*) to a status none of us deserve but *Jesus*. John shares his failure to remain exclusively *Jesus*-focused as a reminder that we're all just servants; the only *big name* around here is *Jesus*.

Still, I think we do this, not just with *celebrities* or *each other*, but with certain *things*—*ministries, titles, churches*, or even *The Bible*. The Bible is an inspired and invaluable tool, but it too is merely a *messenger* with a *message* pointing to *Jesus*. Yet, sometimes we can elevate it to being almost on the same level as *God*. True Christianity, though, isn't *Bible*-centred; it's *Jesus*-centred. We don't follow *a book, belief system or moral code*; we follow a person—*Jesus*, the one true clear and compelling revelation of God. As siblings and companions in the faith, fellow servants who hold to the testimony of *Jesus*, we don't follow celebrities, spiritual gurus, or mega-church trends; we follow *Jesus*. We won't be taken in by talent and charisma; we're taken with *Jesus*. We don't worship status or success; we worship *Jesus*. Not wanting anyone to become a disciple of *Southridge* or any other name but *Jesus*. John's failure is a reminder to give our undivided worship, allegiance, and devotion to *Jesus* alone. To worship God. Period.

In the epilogue's *second* scene, *Jesus* once again speaks up, just as he did in chapters 2-3 in the letters to the 7 churches of Revelation, promising an eternal reward for what he called, *conquering*—a word we learned in the fall was code for *following in the self-sacrificing way of Jesus*. Here, he reaffirms those promises, summarizing them as regaining access the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. When Adam & Eve chose to eat from the tree that leads to *death*, rather than the Tree of *Life*, humans had to be quarantined from Eden for their own good, expelled so they wouldn't be able to eat from the Tree of Life and be forced to live forever in their sin. But

right then and there, God promised to one day *destroy* sin; to make a way for us to return to Eden and finally take a bite out of God's free offer of eternal life. It's a *promise* made possible only because of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross; a *promise* given to all who, in John's words, "**wash their robes,**" (22:14) in his mercy; a *promise* Jesus says he, "**will give to each person according to what they have done.**" (22:12). To be clear, Jesus isn't contradicting the Bible's message of *grace*—*God's unearned favour and blessing*; he's reminding us that, while we aren't saved *by* our good works, we *are* saved *for* a life of good works. As Paul wrote:

**For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not *by works*, so that no one can boast. For we are *God's handiwork*, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Eph 2:8-10)**

*Good works* can never earn *grace*, but *grace* is always designed to produce *good works*.

Jesus gives his *name* as a pledge to fulfill these promises: "**The Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End,**" (Rev 22:13). It's a name used repeatedly in Revelation; a name with deep roots in the Bible's first sentence. Like Revelation and much of the Bible, Genesis 1 is designed around the number *seven*. Its opening line—**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth**—is exactly 7 words in Hebrew. It looks like [THIS](#). Notice, the centre-word—*et*—isn't *translated*. That's because it's not a *word*; it's a grammatical device used to connect verbs to nouns. *Don't worry; there won't be a quiz!* But what's interesting is that this little two-letter word at the centre of the Bible's very first sentence is made up of the Hebrew letters *Aleph* and *Tau*—the *first* and *last* letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Bible nerds have long seen significance in the idea that, from its first line, the Bible signals a mysterious connection between its story's *beginning* and *ending*. By calling himself the *Alpha & Omega* (the *first* and *last* letters of the *Greek* alphabet), Jesus is tapping into this idea, pulling together the Bible's *first* and *final* chapters in *himself*. More than just brilliant literary design, it's profound theology.

Jesus, the central, invisible Word of God from the beginning, revealed in time as the centre, circumference, and sum of all things, overseeing the human project from *start* to *finish*—the *first* and *last*, who *was*, and *is*, and *is to come*, the reward promised to all who trust in him.

But Jesus also speaks of those who haven't yet claimed this promise for themselves:

**Outside are the dogs—those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Revelation 21:15)**

Jesus describes these not-yet-followers of his as not just your *everyday* sinners, but as those who actively and willfully oppose God—who, in their inhumanity have become almost un-human—distorted images, collectively described by Jesus as, *dogs*. Now, I'm not a *dog*-person. And *Israel* too had a complex relationship with *dogs*. As *scavengers* and *predators*, dogs were religiously *unclean* animals—it's clearly an insult here, but one with an interesting backstory. Israel's most formative, founding story is the *Exodus*—how, through Moses and a series of ten *plagues*, God persuaded Pharaoh to, "**Let my people go!**" As they fled Egypt under cover of darkness, the author records a curious detail. God promises, "**not a dog will bark at any person or animal.**" (Ex 11:7) The *dog* was literally Israel's *best friend*; aiding and abetting their escape. As a reward for their silence, Exodus later records God telling Israel that, if they come across a carcass torn apart by wild animals, they shouldn't eat it (*smart!*) but should instead, "**throw it to the dogs.**" (Ex 22:31) *Throwing food to dogs* became a common Jewish euphemism for showing kindness to *non-Jewish* people, some of whom, *like the dogs*, had assisted them in their exodus from Egypt, many even joining them. As a result, *gentiles* and *dogs* became synonymous terms. In fact, '*throwing food to dogs*' even shows up in *Jesus'* vocabulary. When a Gentile woman asked Jesus to set her daughter free from a demon who was harshly oppressing and enslaving her, Jesus was initially hesitant, explaining that his first priority was to the children of Israel.

***“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” “Yes, it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” (Matthew 15:26-27)***

For her faith, Jesus grants her request. Strange as it appears to us, this is a story of Jesus including outsiders, making space for those who put their trust in Israel’s God, just like many of the Egyptians and even the dogs did back in Exodus. And so, to these *dogs—those who remain on the outside God’s future kingdom*—Jesus issues a clear invitation, an offer to join a new mass-exodus out of sin, and be welcomed into God’s eternal kingdom. John writes,

**The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life. (22:17)**

This wide-open, free invitation is taken from the writings of Isaiah, who wrote:

**Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live... Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. (Isaiah 55:1-7, *selected*)**

This is the invitation to all who’ve chosen to remain enslaved to sin, resistant to God’s love, numb to the Spirit’s voice, hesitant to follow Jesus. It’s a wide-open welcome: *come one; come all!* Don’t waste your life looking for satisfaction where there’s none to be found. God is better and closer than you think, eager to extend *full* and *free* forgiveness and fill your life with goodness and delight. If you’re heisting for any reason— *shame, guilt, fear, doubt*—this is your invitation—right here; right now. You don’t need to earn your way in, or work your way up to it. Just *come*. Come, say yes to Jesus, and get a brand-new start—*it’s like being born all over again*. So, if you’re sensing this might be your moment, don’t wait—the Spirit and the Bride say, *come*.

In the *third* and *final* scene, Jesus’ invitation is followed by a final warning from John.

**I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll. (Revelation 22:18-19)**

This warning is dense with *Eden* imagery, contrasting plagues (or *curses*) with access to the *Tree of Life*, because it's a reminder of what went wrong in the garden in the first place.

**Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" (Genesis 3:1-3)**

The thing is, they were *both* wrong. Both the serpent and the woman *misquote* God—the *serpent* omitting God's generous invitation to freely, "***eat from any tree in the garden,***" (Gen 2:16) only prohibiting the one that would kill them, and *Eve* adding the extra detail about *not even touching it*, which God never said. Both were guilty of either *adding* or *taking away* from God's words. As Revelation concludes, John wants to remind us that twisting God's words is a sure step toward disaster, curses, and plagues, toward being cut off from God's garden-ideal. God's wise counsel is for our own good—meant to *add* life, not *take away* from it. But when we pick and choose, listen *selectively*, bend God's words to fit our selfish desires rather than aligning ourselves around God's will, we risk being *deceived* and *destroyed*.

We began in September, saying that most people either *over-emphasize* Revelation, or *avoid it altogether*. The first group are guilty of *adding* not only *emphasis*, but often *elements* that simply aren't there. There are a number of topics we didn't touch on in this Revelation series—*conversations about hell, the rapture, and what happens 5 seconds after you die*—not because we want to *avoid* these topics, but because Revelation simply doesn't address them.

Conversely, ignoring and avoiding Revelation (*or other hard passages and uncomfortable truths*) can *take away* from our capacity to hear the full counsel of God. God's instruction is only always for our good, with the aim of *adding* life and blessing to our days; never *taking it away*. But the story of Eve and the Serpent reveals something universal about the human condition: we are so easily-deceived into thinking God doesn't *know* or *want* what's best for us; that we have to take matters into our own hands. So, we rearrange God's words to better suit our ways, *adding* in our beliefs, biases and baggage, and *subtracting* the bits we don't like or agree with.

This year, as we explored Revelation's core themes and message—even *the bits we found uncomfortable and challenging*—we simply couldn't unpack every single word or detail. There's still plenty of meat on these bones—enough for a lifetime of further discovery. To help, we've provided an extensive list of resources—*books, articles, podcasts, commentaries*—to support ongoing personal growth. But as we listen, learn, read, and study—not just *Revelation*, but the *whole Bible*—John urges us to continually check ourselves, careful not to *add* or *take away* from what God has to say to us, to not just hear what we *want* to hear and, in doing so, miss out on what God knows we *need* to hear.

I don't know how this year-long journey through Revelation was for you. Personally, it pushed me, surprised me, challenged my assumptions, and inspired me to see Jesus *like never before*. But what will have made this whole journey worth it will be if, in seeing Jesus like never before, we will now go on to love, worship, and follow Jesus *like never before*. Following the self-sacrificing way of Jesus. Living increasingly out of *faith*, not *fear*. Resisting Empire and bringing heaven down to earth. Letting *how the story ends* inspire how we live our stories here and now. Because, as the credits roll on *Revelation*, instead of breaking the fourth wall to tell us *the movie's over; go home*, Jesus appears one last time to assure us, ***"Yes, I am coming soon."*** to

which John replies, “**Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**” (Rev 22:20) A promise and a prayer for Jesus to be fully *revealed*. In chapter one, John promised to reveal what was coming soon. Here, at the end, we learn that what’s *coming soon* is not a *what*, but a *who*— the one who *was, is, and is still to come*—the fulfillment of every hope, the amen to every prayer, the reward for our faith and followership, the answer to the question of *life, the universe, and everything. Amen.*

One *last-last* thing: you may recall that, back in the fall, we learned that *Revelation* was written not only as a work of *prophetic* and *apocalyptic* literature; it was also written as a *letter*—a *personal* message to *real* people, like *us*. As John wraps things up, he uses a classic New-Testament *letter sign-off* and, in the process, pens the Bible’s very last words.

**The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen. (Revelation 22:21)**

As the band comes forward to lead us, there’s nothing more for me to add here, other than to point out that, when it comes to *Revelation—and the whole Bible*—the last word is *grace*; an invitation for all to enjoy the unearned blessing and favour of God because of *Jesus*. It’s what the whole story of scripture is about: a God who loves us more than we deserve, who found us before we even knew we were lost, who did for us on the cross what we could never have done for ourselves, reversing a curse we couldn’t break to provide a blessing we couldn’t earn, making a way where there was no way and, raised by a power we can’t muster, to offer us a life far beyond anything we could ever create for ourselves. That’s *grace*—God’s last word; our final hope; the Bible’s ultimate *revelation*. Greater than *sin*, greater than *Satan*, greater than *Empire*, greater even than *death*. And *grace* is how the story ends. Amen? *Come, Lord Jesus.*