

UNSTOPPABLE CHURCH

Then and Now
in 30 Minutes



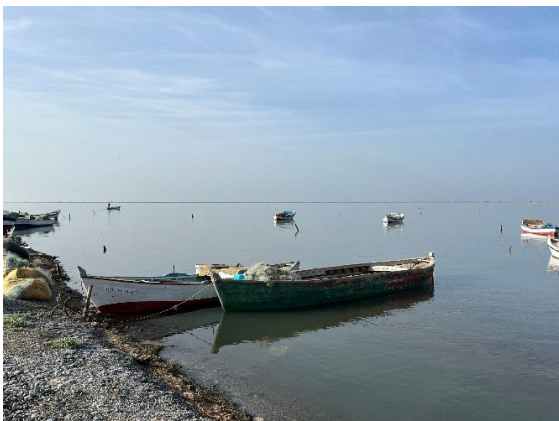
Episode 52 - Envisioned

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THE SETTING

For this final episode, we're on the Turkish coast looking across to the island of **Patmos**, 35 miles (56 km) away. For it was there that the Apostle John, exiled to the island's Roman penal colony, had his vision of Jesus (recorded in the book of Revelation), who appeared to him with answers to the questions it seems he had been asking: Why? Why all this persecution if Jesus is who he says he is? Revelation is Jesus' answer.

This is the where our journey in the footsteps of the unstoppable Church ends - in the same way the New Testament does - by looking forward to the future to envision us in the present.



Looking out from Miletus towards the island of Patmos



The House of the Virgin Mary in Ephesus to which some think John returned after release



[Revelation 19:11-22:21](#)



Unstoppable Church!

Despite all the opposition - from Jews, pagans, the culture, Rome - nothing could stop the Church's advance, just as Jesus had promised ([Acts 1:8](#)). In fact, the only things that could possibly stop it were things from within, not from without (see episodes 45-51). So, what kept the Church going? It was the vision that Christ was surely returning, and that when he did, all enemies would be conquered, all evil would be destroyed, and God's kingdom would fill the earth. And in light of that, they wanted to be both ready and to constantly seek to share the gospel so others too might be saved. What a difference to much modern eschatology (i.e. teaching on the End Times) which so often simply focuses on 'signs and times', rather than letting the truth of Christ's return envision and empower us for mission.

The purpose of Revelation

Revelation was given to strengthen this vision - to assure Christians experiencing the most horrific persecutions that Jesus was still on the throne, that those who had been martyred were safe with him in heaven, and that, despite the worst that the devil and his aides might do, Jesus was taking history towards a purposeful and beautiful conclusion. Sadly, that envisioning hope is often lost today, with many Christians terrified by Revelation, rather than encouraged by it. It has been turned into a 'signs and times' manual by many, completely ignoring its original audience, purpose and genre - the genre called 'apocalyptic', which used imagery and numbers in well-understood terms. So to get at its true meaning we have to think what this would have meant to them, not to think first of what it means to us.

The thrust of Revelation

We can't analyse a complex book like Revelation in detail here - though see the Appendix (below) if you want to dig a bit deeper, or listen to the overview of it in our UCB podcast series, Bible Books in 30 Minutes. At its simplest, the heart of Revelation is this: Jesus is there! From first chapter to last, walking among his churches (chs. 1-3) but also seated on his throne (chs. 4-11). And what he says is: 'Yes, I know, things look crazy - and they will get worse before they get better; but I'm going to 'lift the curtain' (the literal meaning of the Greek word 'revelation') to show you what's going on behind the scenes so that you can grasp that things are not as they seem to be, and that when I return, everything will be put right. So keep trusting; because I am still who you thought I am and I am still on my throne.'

Unstoppable Church today?

The Diocletian persecution passed - and the Church continued to thrive! And that's how it has been for the past two millennia. In fact, wherever Governments have tried to wipe out Christianity, it has simply grown even more. And although you might be discouraged to hear of shrinking churches in the West, just remember that churches in 'the Global South' are growing at a phenomenal pace.

Of course, that growth is still in the face of opposition, both physical or psychological. In 2022,

for example, 5621 Christians globally were murdered for their faith; 2110 church buildings were attacked or destroyed; 5259 Christians were abducted. While at a lower level of persecution (but none the less real for those involved), Western Christians are increasingly being dismissed from their jobs because of the views they hold. But let's remember the message of Revelation: Jesus is still on the throne and the Church will keep advancing. So trust him!



1. How strong is your own conviction that Jesus will return one day? How does that envision you to live differently?
2. Are you absolutely convinced that when you die you will go to heaven and why? The details of Christ's return are often debated and argued over today, even to the point of writing off other Christians who see things differently. How could we get back to seeing his return as envisioning motivation and thus becoming 'unstoppable Church' once again?



There are many ways of analysing Revelation and what follows is just one of them. Not surprisingly in a book where the number '7' features so heavily, the book falls into 7 major sections:

1. **Jesus, the Lord of all** (1:1-8) A prologue which makes clear what this letter is and who lies behind it.
2. **Jesus, the Son of Man** (1:9-3:22) Jesus still stands among his churches and loves them, despite everything.
3. **Jesus, the Lamb on the throne** (4:1-11:18). Jesus is firmly seated on his throne (ch.4) and from that throne, he unlocks the scroll of history by breaking its seven seals, through which he shows John, not what will happen in 'the End Times', but rather what is going on in the world, both then, and in between, and still today, in fact, until the day he returns. But through it all, his true people (represented by that number 144,000) are kept safe. John is then shown the same sweep through human history through the seven trumpets which serve as God's wake-up call to humanity in light of all that is going on. Yet humanity continues in the same old way. Trumpets alone won't bring about repentance. What is needed is a voice to explain what is going on; and that's where the 'two witnesses' (again, symbolic) come in. But still the world won't repent; so the seventh trumpet is blown, announcing God's enthronement as Judge of the whole earth prior to his establishing his new creation. This is the start of Christ's return! But just when we think we're almost there, another 'window' opens (a bit like on a computer) and it takes us back to the beginning again, as John looks and sees the one who will bring all this about.
4. **Jesus, the Cosmic Warrior** (11:19-15:4) John has a vision of the turning point of history, the incarnation. A woman (Mary) gives birth to a child (Jesus) and the dragon (Satan) tries to kill him. But the dragon is defeated by Christ (at the cross). However, the dragon won't give in; and because Christ has defeated him, he now turns to persecute his followers instead. There follow seven visions of battle as the dragon enlists human partners to help him in this battle: the beast out of the sea (13v1-10), representing political power; and the beast out of the earth (13v11-18), representing religious power. But once again, God's people are kept secure, all "144,000" of them. His kingdom keeps advancing, as he sends out angels to bring in the harvest.

5. **Jesus, the Just Judge** (15:5-19:10) John now sees God's judgment, not from the world's perspective, as we saw with the seven trumpets, but from God's perspective, expressed in 7 bowls of wrath. Here is yet another sweep through history. In other words, we don't have 7 seals, followed by 7 trumpets, followed by 7 bowls, making 21 events in all. These are 3 parallel sweeps through human history; and this is pretty clear from the fact that the content of the 6 trumpets and the 6 bowls is exactly the same. But unlike with the seals and the trumpets, the bowls will not stop just before the end. This time it will climax in the Final Judgment, including Armageddon and the final destruction of 'Babylon' (the whole world system) who will be utterly replaced by the bride of Christ.

· **Jesus, the Conquering King** (19:11-22:5) John now sees Jesus riding into battle - though interestingly, that battle never takes place! Why? Because the final battle has already taken place, 2000 years ago at the cross. So, when God's enemies gather to fight, fire simply comes down from heaven and consumes them. This happens at the end of what is often called "the millennium" (though note that this term is not one used in Scripture). Christians differ over whether this is a literal or metaphorical thousand years; but at the end of it, Satan is finally defeated and thrown into the lake of burning sulphur. The Last Judgment then follows (20v7-15), when every single person who has ever lived will appear before God to receive their just desserts, and God's new creation will come into being as heaven comes down to earth and transforms it. The Bible's story started in a beautiful garden; it now ends in a beautiful city, with God once again at the heart of everything and the Tree of Life (lost in Eden) available to us once more.

6. **Jesus, the Coming One** (22:6-22:21)

This is why it's worth pressing on, is what John has been shown! Because Jesus is coming back "soon"! And when he does, all evil will be destroyed, all opponents will be judged, all Satanic forces will be burnt up - and we will be with Christ for ever! This is the message that John is told to share with the churches: that things are not what they seem, no matter how bad they look! For Jesus remains on the throne - and we win in the end!



For a behind-the-scenes glimpse into what was involved to create this podcast series listen to Mike and David recounting their experiences!

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