

REVELATION
for
EVERYONE

20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T.
WRIGHT

STUDY GUIDE BY MICHAEL L. KIRKINDOLL

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NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE
20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION WITH STUDY GUIDE

N. T. Wright

Matthew for Everyone, Part 1

Matthew for Everyone, Part 2

Mark for Everyone

Luke for Everyone

John for Everyone, Part 1

John for Everyone, Part 2

Acts for Everyone, Part 1

Acts for Everyone, Part 2

Romans for Everyone, Part 1

Romans for Everyone, Part 2

1 Corinthians for Everyone

2 Corinthians for Everyone

Galatians and Thessalonians for Everyone

Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon for Everyone

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus for Everyone

Hebrews for Everyone

James, Peter, John and Judah for Everyone

Revelation for Everyone

*For
Oliver and Rebecca
Celebrating God's new creation*

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It took me ten years, but I'm glad I did it. Writing a guide to the books of the New Testament felt at times like trying to climb all the Scottish mountains in quick succession. But the views from the tops were amazing, and discovering new pathways up and down was very rewarding as well. The real reward, though, has come in the messages I've received from around the world, telling me that the books have been helpful and encouraging, opening up new and unexpected vistas.

Perhaps I should say that this series wasn't designed to help with sermon preparation, though many preachers have confessed to me that they've used it that way. The books were meant, as their title suggests, for everyone, particularly for people who would never dream of picking up an academic commentary but who nevertheless want to dig a little deeper.

The New Testament seems intended to provoke all readers, at whatever stage, to fresh thought, understanding and practice. For that, we all need explanation, advice and encouragement. I'm glad these books seem to have had that effect, and I'm delighted that they are now available with study guides in these new editions.

N. T. Wright
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INTRODUCTION

On the very first occasion when someone stood up in public to tell people about Jesus, he made it very clear: this message is for *everyone*.

It was a great day – sometimes called the birthday of the church. The great wind of God’s spirit had swept through Jesus’ followers and filled them with a new joy and a sense of God’s presence and power. Their leader, Peter, who only a few weeks before had been crying like a baby because he’d lied and cursed and denied even knowing Jesus, found himself on his feet explaining to a huge crowd that something had happened which had changed the world for ever. What God had done for him, Peter, he was beginning to do for the whole world: new life, forgiveness, new hope and power were opening up like spring flowers after a long winter. A new age had begun in which the living God was going to do new things in the world – beginning then and there with the individuals who were listening to him. ‘This promise is for *you*’, he said, ‘and for your children, and for everyone who is far away’ (Acts 2.39). It wasn’t just for the person standing next to you. It was for everyone.

Within a remarkably short time this came true to such an extent that the young movement spread throughout much of the known world. And one way in which the *everyone* promise worked out was through the writings of the early Christian leaders. These short works – mostly letters and stories about Jesus – were widely circulated and eagerly read. They were never intended for either a religious or intellectual elite. From the very beginning they were meant for everyone.

That is as true today as it was then. Of course, it matters that some people give time and care to the historical evidence, the meaning of the original words (the early Christians wrote in Greek), and the exact and particular force of what different writers were saying about God, Jesus, the world and themselves. This series is based quite closely on that sort of work. But the point of it all is that the message can get out to everyone, especially to people who wouldn’t normally read a book with footnotes and Greek words in it. That’s the sort of person for whom these books are written. And that’s why there’s a glossary, in the back, of the key words that you can’t really get along without, with a simple description of what they mean. Whenever you see a word in

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bold type in the text, you can go to the back and remind yourself what's going on.

There are of course many translations of the New Testament available today. The one I offer here is designed for the same kind of reader: one who mightn't necessarily understand the more formal, sometimes even ponderous, tones of some of the standard ones. I have of course tried to keep as close to the original as I can. But my main aim has been to be sure that the words can speak not just to some people, but to everyone.

Let me add a note about the translation the reader will find here of the Greek word *Christos*. Most translations simply say 'Christ', but most modern English speakers assume that that word is simply a proper name (as though 'Jesus' were Jesus 'Christian' name and 'Christ' were his 'surname'). For all sorts of reasons, I disagree; so I have experimented not only with 'Messiah' (which is what the word literally means) but sometimes, too, with 'King'.

Many people today regard Revelation as the hardest book in the New Testament. (Many, if it comes to that, can't even get its name right: it's Revelation, singular, not 'Revelations', plural!) It is full of strange, lurid and sometimes bizarre and violent imagery. You might have thought that in a world of clever movies and DVDs, stuffed full of complex imaginative imagery, we would take to Revelation like ducks to water; but it doesn't always seem to work that way. As a result, many people who are quite at home in the gospels, Acts and Paul find themselves tiptoeing around Revelation with a sense that they don't really belong there. But they do! This book in fact offers one of the clearest and sharpest visions of God's ultimate purpose for the whole creation, and of the way in which the powerful forces of evil, at work in a thousand ways but not least in idolatrous and tyrannous political systems, can be and are being overthrown through the victory of Jesus the Messiah and the consequent costly victory of his followers. The world we live in today is no less complex and dangerous than the world of the late first century when this book was written, and we owe it to ourselves to get our heads and our hearts around John's glorious pictures as we attempt to be faithful witnesses to God's love in a world of violence, hatred and suspicion. So here it is: Revelation for everyone!



The Seven Churches of Asia

REVELATION 1.1–8

Look! He Is Coming!

¹Revelation of Jesus the Messiah! God gave it to him to show his servants what must soon take place. He signified it by sending a message through his angel to his servant John, ²who, by reporting all he saw, bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus the Messiah. ³God's blessing on the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and on those who hear them and keep what is written in it – for the time is near!

⁴John, to the seven churches in Asia: grace to you and peace from He Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come, and from the seven spirits that are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus the Messiah, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Glory to the one who loved us, and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and father – glory and power be to him for ever and ever. Amen.

⁷Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye shall see him; yes, even those who pierced him. All the tribes of the earth shall mourn because of him. Yes! Amen.

⁸'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come, the Almighty.

The house lights went down, and the excited buzz of audience chatter quickly subsided as well. Soon it was quite dark in the theatre. Then music began, softly and mysteriously at first, but soon building up, swelling and rising. Just as it reached its climax, the curtain was drawn up in an instant, and we all gasped not only at the blaze of sudden light but at what we saw.

The stage was brilliantly set so as to give the impression that we, the audience, were ourselves in a large room, one end of which was on display. Almost at once actors began to emerge from hiding places in the auditorium, so that their voices were coming from among us as they made their way up to the stage. And the stage itself, designed as a great room in a castle, was already half full of people, and animals too. There was an air of anticipation: clearly something important was about to happen . . .

I will leave you to guess what play it was. But the point for us now, at the start of Revelation, this most wonderful and puzzling of biblical books, is to get our heads round the idea of *revelation* itself. That's the word that has come to be used as the title for the book (not 'revelations', plural, please note). This is partly because the original word, 'Apocalypse', wasn't well known at the time of earlier translations into English. Now, of course, 'apocalypse', and its cousin 'apocalyptic', have become

well known in English. Perhaps too well known: they have come to refer, not so much to the sudden unveiling of previously hidden truth, but to ‘apocalyptic’ *events*, violent and disturbing events such as natural disasters (earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis) or major and horrific human actions. In that sense, September 11, 2001 was an ‘apocalyptic’ event.

But that isn’t quite the sense that ‘revelation’ or ‘apocalypse’ has in this book. John, its author – sometimes called ‘John the Seer’ or ‘John the Divine’, sometimes (probably wrongly) identified with the John who wrote the gospel and epistles – is picking up a way of writing well known in the Jewish world of the time. This way of writing was designed to correspond to, and make available, the visions and ‘revelations’ seen by holy, prayerful people who were wrestling with the question of the divine purpose. Like the theatre audience, they and the rest of God’s people felt themselves in the dark. As they studied their ancient scriptures and said their prayers, they believed that the music was building up to something, but nobody was quite sure what. But then, like someone all by themselves in the theatre for the first performance, the ‘seer’ – the word reflects the reality, ‘one who sees’ something that other people do not – finds that the curtain is suddenly pulled up. Suddenly the ‘seer’ is witnessing a scene, is in fact invited to be part of a scene, within God’s ongoing drama.

‘Revelation’ – the idea, and this book – are based on the ancient Jewish belief that God’s sphere of being and operation (‘**heaven**’) and our sphere (‘earth’) are not after all separated by a great gulf. They meet and merge and meld into one another in all kinds of ways. For ancient Jews, the place where this happened supremely was the **Temple** in Jerusalem; this is not unimportant as the action proceeds. Most humans seem blind to this, only seeing the earthly side of the story. Some are aware that there is more to **life**, but are not quite sure what it’s all about. Ancient Jews struggled to see both sides of the story, though it was often too much of an effort.

The early Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth had become, in person, the place where heaven and earth met. Looking at him, and contemplating his death and **resurrection** in particular, they believed they could see right into God’s own world. They could then understand things about his purpose which nobody had imagined before.

But it didn’t stop there. As the early Christian movement grew, and developed momentum, further questions emerged. What was God doing now? What were his plans for the little churches dotted around the Mediterranean world? Where was it all going?

In particular, why was God allowing followers of Jesus to suffer persecution? What line should they take when faced with the fastest

growing ‘religion’ of the time, namely the worship of Caesar, the Roman emperor? Should they resist?

There may have been several groups of Christians in ancient Turkey, where John seems to have been based. They would have been mostly poor, meeting in one another’s homes. By contrast, people were building grand and expensive temples for Caesar and his family in various cities, eager to show Rome how loyal they were. What would Jesus himself say about this? Did it mean that, after all, the Christians were wasting their time, following a crucified Jew rather than the one who was rather obviously the ‘lord of the world’?

Revelation is written to say ‘no’ to that question – and to say much more besides. At its centre is a fresh ‘revelation of Jesus the **Messiah**’ (verse 1). John, with his head and his heart full of Israel’s scriptures, discovered on one particular occasion, as he was praying, that the curtain was pulled back. He found himself face to face with Jesus himself.

We will come to that in the next passage. But in this passage, the introduction-to-the-introduction of his book, we already learn five important things about what sort of book this is and how we ought to read it. (It goes without saying that we ought to read it with careful prayer and thought, being ready for God to lift the curtain so that we, too, can glimpse more than we had imagined.)

First, this book is a four-stage *revelation*. It is about something God has revealed to Jesus himself (verse 1), and which Jesus is then passing on, via an angel, to ‘his servants’, through one particular servant, John. God – Jesus – angel – John – churches. These lines get blurred as the book goes on, but the framework remains basic.

Second, the book takes the form of an extended *letter*. There are particular letters in chapters 2 and 3 to the seven churches in western Turkey, but the book as a whole is a letter from John to all the churches, telling them what he has seen.

Third, the book is a *prophecy* (verse 3). Like many prophets in ancient Israel, John draws freely on earlier biblical traditions. These were in themselves revelations of God and his purposes. Again and again, they come up fresh, in new forms.

Fourth, the book functions as a *witness* (verse 2). Here we meet a familiar problem. The words for ‘witness’ and ‘testimony’ are basically the same, but it’s hard to settle on one of these English words to the exclusion of the other, and I have used both. We should, though, remember two things whenever we see either word.

- (a) They regularly carry a sense that God is ultimately conducting a great heavenly lawcourt. In that lawcourt, the ‘witness’ borne

by Jesus and his followers is a key to the ultimate judgment and verdict.

- (b) They regularly carry the sense which the Greek original word, ‘martyr’, has given to the English language. Those who bear this ‘testimony’ may well be called to suffer, or even to die, for what they have said.

Fifth, and far and away the most important: everything that is to come flows from the central figure, Jesus himself, and ultimately from God the father, ‘He Who Is and Who Was and Who Is To Come’ (verses 4, 8). Even in this short opening John manages to unveil a good deal of what he believes about God and Jesus, and about the divine plan. God is the Almighty, the beginning and the end (verse 8: Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and this title occurs at the beginning and the end of John’s book (see 22.13)). Other ‘lords’ and rulers will claim similar titles, but there is only one God to whom they belong.

And Jesus is the one who, through his death and resurrection, has accomplished God’s purpose. His love for his people, his liberation of them by his self-**sacrifice**, his purpose for them (not just to rescue them, but to put them to important work in his service) – all these are stated here briefly in verse 6. And, not least, Jesus is the one who will soon return to complete the task, to set up his rule on earth as in heaven.

Nobody in the first century knew exactly when Jesus would return. We still await that moment today. But Christian living, and indeed belief in this one God, only makes sense on the assumption that he will indeed come to set everything right at last.

We settle in our seats, put other concerns out of our minds, and wait for the curtain to rise.

REVELATION 1.9–20

Jesus Revealed

⁹I, John, your brother and your partner in the suffering, the kingdom, and the patient endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet. ¹¹‘Write down what you see in a book,’ it said, ‘and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.’

¹²So I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. As I turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the middle of the lampstands ‘one like a son of man,’ wearing a full-length robe and with a golden

belt across his chest. ¹⁴His head and his hair were white, white like wool, white like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like exquisite brass, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶He was holding seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth. The sight of him was like the sun when it shines with full power. ¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though I was dead.

He touched me with his right hand. ‘Don’t be afraid’, he said. ‘I am the first and the last ¹⁸and the living one. I was dead, and look! I am alive for ever and ever. I have the keys of death and Hades. ¹⁹Now write what you see, both the things that already are, and also the things that are going to happen subsequently. ²⁰The secret meaning of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, by the way, and the seven golden lampstands, is this. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches themselves.’

Some years ago there was an eclipse of the sun. These things happen rarely enough, and to witness it is a great experience. But staring at the sun, as it slips behind the moon and then emerges the other side, is dangerous. If you look through binoculars, or a telescope, the sun’s power on your eye can do permanent damage. It can even cause blindness.

On this particular occasion, there were public warnings broadcast on radio and television, and printed in the newspapers, to the effect that people should be careful. Only look, they said, through special dark glasses. Eventually one person, who obviously had very little understanding of natural phenomena, got cross about all this. Surely, they thought, this was a ‘health and safety’ issue. A letter was sent to the London *Times*: if this event was so dangerous, why was the government allowing it in the first place?

Fortunately, even the most totalitarian of governments has not yet been able to control what the sun and the moon get up to. But the danger of full-power sunlight is worth contemplating as we hear John speaking about his vision of Jesus. As I write this, the sun has just emerged through watery clouds; even so, I can’t look at it for more than a second before having to turn away. So when John, with the brightness of a Mediterranean sky in his mind, speaks of Jesus in this way (verse 16), we should learn to think of this Jesus with a new kind of reverence.

For some, Jesus is just a faraway figure of first-century fantasy. For others, including some of today’s enthusiastic Christians, Jesus is the one with whom we can establish a personal relationship of loving intimacy. John would agree with the second of these, but he would warn against imagining that Jesus is therefore a cosy figure, one who merely

makes us feel happy inside. To see Jesus as he is would drive us not to snuggle up to him, but to fall at his feet as though we were dead.

This vision of Jesus (verses 12–16) introduces us to several things about the way John writes. Like someone reporting a strange dream, the things he says are hard to imagine all together. It's more like looking at a surrealist painting, or a set of shifting computer-generated images. It's not a simple sketch. For a start, when John hears a voice like a trumpet (verse 10), he tells us that 'I turned to see the voice'. There is a sense in which this is just right: the Jesus whom he then sees is indeed The Voice, the living **Word** of the father, the one through whom God spoke and still speaks. And the words which Jesus himself speaks turn into a visible sword coming out of his mouth (verse 16), echoing Isaiah's prophecy both about the coming king (11.4) and about the suffering servant (49.2). A great deal of this book is about ideas-made-visible, on the one hand, and scripture-made-real on the other. It is, in fact, the sort of thing someone soaked in scripture might see in a dream, after pondering and praying for many days.

In particular, this vision of Jesus draws together the vision of two characters in one of the most famous biblical visions, that of Daniel 7. (Along with the books of Exodus, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah, Daniel is one of John's favourites.) There, as the suffering of God's people reaches its height, 'the Ancient of Days' takes his seat in **heaven**, and 'one like a **son of man**' (in other words, a human figure, representing God's people and, in a measure, all the human race) is presented before him, and enthroned alongside him. Now, in John's vision, these two pictures seem to have merged. When we are looking at Jesus, he is saying, we are looking straight through him at the father himself.

Hold the picture in your mind, detail by detail. Let those eyes of flame search you in and out. Imagine standing beside a huge waterfall, its noise like sustained thunder, and imagine that noise as a human voice, echoing round the hills and round your head. And then imagine his hand reaching out to touch you . . .

Yes, fear is the natural reaction. But here, as so often, Jesus says, 'Don't be afraid.' It's all right. Yes, you are suffering, and your people are suffering (verse 9). Yes, the times are strange and hard, with harsh and severe rulers running the world and imposing their will on city after city. But the seven churches – seven is the number of perfection, and the churches listed in verse 11 thus stand for all churches in the world, all places and all times – need to know that Jesus himself is standing in their midst, and that the 'angels' who represent and look after each of them are held in his right hand.

And the Jesus in question has, as his credentials, the fact that he 'was dead', and is 'alive for ever' (verse 18). Like someone whispering to us

that they know the secret way out of the dungeon where we have been imprisoned, he says, 'I've got the keys! The keys of death and Hades – I have them right here! There's nothing more you need worry about.'

To grasp all this requires **faith**. To live by it will take courage. But it is that faith, and that courage, which this book is written to evoke.

Already we are learning quite a bit about the way John writes, and the way he means his readers to understand what he says. Like anyone describing a dream or a vision, he must know that what he says is impressionistic. It appeals not to logic, but to the imagination – which has been starved rotten in some parts of our culture, and overstimulated in others. Now we are being asked to imagine: what would it look like if the curtain between heaven and earth were suddenly pulled up, revealing the Jesus who had been there all along but whom we had managed either to ignore or to cut down to our own size? This is the answer: a Jesus who is mind-blowing, dramatically powerful but also gentle and caring; a Jesus in and through whom we see his father, God the creator; a Jesus who has spoken, and still speaks, words which explain what is going on in the present, and warn of what will happen in the future (verse 19).

John, we discover here (verse 9), is on the island called Patmos, about 35 miles off the coast of south-western Turkey. He is there 'because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus'; this probably means that the authorities have put him there, in exile, as a punishment for his fearless teaching, and to try to stop his work having any further effect. The result has been the exact opposite. Exile has given him time to pray, to reflect, and now to receive the most explosive vision of God's power and love. He is still, he says, a partner with the churches 'in the suffering, the **kingdom**, and the patient endurance in Jesus': an odd combination, we might think. How can the 'kingdom' – which means the sovereign rule – sit together with suffering and patient endurance? That is part of the whole point of the book. Jesus himself won the victory through his suffering, and so must his people.