



BIBLE IN A YEAR 2020



Summary

This is a vision passed from Jesus to the church in a time of crisis about the end of life as we know it. The word “Apocalypse” comes from here – it’s the Greek word for revelation, but the fact that we associate it with stories of end times shows how strongly the message and imagery from this vision have resonated with our culture, even for people who have never read this directly.

Odd details stand out, and it’s full of drama, mystery and code. But it’s not as strange as it first appears if we recognise the echoes of the big story the whole Bible has been about: God has a plan to defeat evil with good and bring people back into relationship with him.

This is not just a set of events to watch out for when the world ends. It’s guidance for now, perhaps as we face the end of some things we have been used to and look for the “new normal” in our own lives, individually or as a society. In every “end time” we face, what kind of change do you think God wants to bring about? How much can we hope for hurt and injustice to be overcome? Where should we look for strength? And how ready are we for God to call, equip and use us in ways we can’t manage by ourselves?

Bern Leckie

Saturday May 2: Revelation 1-2

In trying times, here comes God's power

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

This book was written to a suffering church. Their crisis was maybe worse than we can imagine, as Jesus' followers were being blamed for everything wrong in the Roman Empire. The world's leaders made sure they were cruelly tortured and relentlessly persecuted as a result. For anyone who had joined Jesus' new way of life to feel good about a message of love, these were incredibly challenging times. Did they believe Jesus? Was it worth it?

I love that God's intervention here, though packed with warnings, drama and memorably weird detail, feels comforting to me because it recaps his big story, the one about where we and the world are heading. Spoiler alert - good beats evil. Jesus unmistakably calls us and everyone we know to join him on the good side in a new life, "freed from our sins" and ready for wonders we can scarcely imagine. And even if you can imagine a lot, get ready...

I used to read Revelation as if it were a timetable for the future. In some ways, it still is, as it points to an end time "every eye will see" which has not yet happened. But what was the point of telling suffering Christians about events thousands of years in the future? Is that the whole point of what the Spirit is doing here, to reassure that all will be well in a long time?

Two things strike me about the way Revelation opens. One is that it is strange and glorious. Whether we understand all the bits or not, I think everyone who reads or hears this can get that God's amazing power is bigger, brighter and more powerful than what currently troubles us. So while the battle still rages, we can know God's awesome presence now.

The other thing I notice is the immediacy of Jesus' call to the churches to repent – change their minds – where unhelpful teaching, examples and practice had crept in. It sounds to me like a lot of challenge for a suffering church! But they are not alone in facing this challenge. The whole point is that they have new life in the Spirit which overcomes massive challenge.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God has incredible power and a view on our past, present and future which we cannot fully share from our limited perspective. He also has a plan to defeat evil which involved Jesus first, defeating death on our behalf, so that we can also get involved without fear of death.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

Right now, I'm more struck by my need to spend time in awe than understanding it all. But I also want to be more ready to repent and lose the limited grasp I think I have on God's power when he really wants to grasp me and the rest of us with it instead.

Who am I going to share this with?

Our online house group enjoys prophetic pictures and visions, and there might be none bigger than this! We should consider together how God might be speaking freshly in it.

Wednesday May 6: Revelation 3-4

Swapping our plans for heaven's power

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

The sound of Jesus judging is sobering, isn't it? Yes, we are saved by faith, but "I know your deeds" is a reminder from Jesus about what faith is for. What are we doing with it? What are we letting God do with us?

It's one thing to plan what we would like to do but, as Mike Tyson once said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." These churches had probably taken a lot of punches, suffering for their beliefs, refusing to worship the Roman Emperor and being blamed by authorities for disrupting social order and attracting the wrath of gods. One author at the time wrote that Christians were seen as "the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited... if [there is] no rain, an earthquake, famine or pestilence, straightaway the cry is, 'Away with the Christians to the lions!'"

Jesus was not judging churches for their belief in his existence but for what happened in practice when their faith was tested. Where did they look for strength? How well did they assess their own situations and what God could do with them? It looks like they all needed to do better. Listening to the Spirit, re-evaluating riches, redefining what it means to do well in life and accepting correction from Jesus – these are all things we need. But do we only realise how much we need them in a crisis?

This is all really uncomfortable stuff, but what I love is how Jesus' call to repentance is followed by the beginning of a glorious vision. For anyone thinking this new life in Christ is too hard, or wondering about the point of it all, God's revelation of what must change in the world starts with the view from heaven. God has the ultimate authority.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

No matter how much trouble we think we are in, we are loved and guided (even disciplined) by a heavenly father, and heaven has a lot of powerful stuff going on. Life might be hard for us but, through Jesus, we are connected with the creator of everything.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I'm struck by Jesus' words to the church in Laodicea whose people thought they were rich and had everything they needed. I admit I find it easy to take comfort in my own plans and material resources I think can help keep us going in a crisis. But who am I kidding? I need Jesus' life, values and "gold refined in the fire" more than any other assets. So I will spend less time this week seeking useful looking stuff on Amazon, and more time seeking Jesus, his wisdom, healing and empowerment to be part of what God is doing to change the world.

Who am I going to share this with?

My family and people I pray with this week.

Saturday May 9: Revelation 5-7

Worthy is the Lamb

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Between the world we know and the future we want, God needs to grab our attention. Things are going to change! We already know that change can be scary. I like how this book of revelation from heaven prepares believers for massive change.

Times where life as we knew it comes to an end, let's call them "end times", will always leave us wondering whether anyone or anything is in control.

As unsettling as it is, this passage reassures me that heaven's awesome power is an unstoppable force for change, ultimately for good. But it is locked away until released by a mysterious creature – a lamb, worthy and offered in sacrifice somehow to save people.

Sunday School question – who is the lamb? Hands up! Yes! It's Jesus! (The right answer is always Jesus.) But what is it about God and lambs? And why did one have to be perfect?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

Sacrificial lambs come up a lot in stories like the Passover and as precious offerings people were expected to make to God. We can see them as foreshadows of Jesus, but what else is special about them? Sheep are [surprisingly social](#). They remember faces and bond relationally. Some say that sheep can be called by name to respond to a shepherd.

A fun thing I learned you can do with radio presenters is get them to adopt turkeys in the run up to Christmas. The idea is to enjoy how people get to know the animals and how their feelings about eating them for dinner tend to change over time. If a presenter names their turkey, you can pretty much guarantee they won't be able to go through with the sacrifice.

Someone who offered a sheep to God had probably named it, but it may have been at the end of its life. Someone who offered a lamb was presenting something precious and full of potential. At Passover, people are expected to spend four days with the sacrificial lamb and grow to love it too. It is not meant to be a cheap, quick sacrifice, but a painful one. Offering a perfect, worthy lamb, would be a hugely painful, meaningful sacrifice - a show of love.

When Abel (in Genesis 3) made a pleasing sacrifice to God with the firstborn of his lambs, this showed the strength of his love for with God, something God wants to restore with us. This is the point: God is not hungry, but he wants us to love like this. He loved us first, shown by Jesus' sacrifice. His blood carries the purifying power of love. And thanks to his restoration to life, this lamb becomes a shepherd to us, our source of love.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I need to accept Jesus' love, comfort and guidance as I deal with the stress of challenge and change as we look for a "new normal" in our life and work routines at the moment.

Who am I going to share this with?

As well as family, I'm looking for chances to share in work and school relationships about what is guiding my thoughts and decisions about the future. I want people to know: Jesus.

Wednesday May 13: Revelation 8-10

Shock and awe

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

Some Bible readings are practical little ideas. Others show more of the big picture of how things fit together. Today's is beyond epic. The US Army might have thought it invented the term "shock and awe", but God was centuries ahead of them, and this reading shows that he will also have the last word.

Jesus has been opening seals with increasing consequence, and I love that after all the anticipation leading up to the last one, there is no big bang, but "silence in heaven for about half an hour" - I'm guessing the prophet would have sensed this amount of time in his vision and felt pretty stunned by it. It clearly wasn't the end of what God was doing, and it would have been an extreme contrast with the almighty bangs which were coming...

I find it hard to get the scale of what happens along with the trumpet blasts - there seems to be nothing beyond its scope. God's power and authority extend over everything physical, alive and inanimate, and they affect people on land and sea - there is nowhere to hide from God.

Why is God doing this? The very final judgment and the end of evil is coming, which will mean the end of many more who don't recognise and respect who God is and what it means to live a good life. I notice that the prophet records people's lack of repentance even when it seems God can do no more to get their attention and settle the "is there a God?" debate once and for all. Yet even for people who believe, there is still mystery about God - we can't get our heads around him.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is relevant even to people who don't believe in him or choose to ignore him - we will all certainly end up paying attention as God accomplishes his renewal of heaven and earth. God also wants us to know about this ahead of time - maybe then we can take the lesson from what God is going to do before we get caught up in the consequences.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I need to remember that God may well be a still, small voice some of the time, but he is by no means a small, manageable accessory in my life. Sometimes I fall into the trap of trying to fit God into what I want. I am reminded here of my need to fit into what he wants, and seek that more, listening and being ready to repent where necessary.

Who am I going to share this with?

This seems like a tough one for discussion beyond groups of believers. I don't want to use this like one of Job's rubbish friends to try and explain their suffering in a time of crisis. But I do want to consider it with others who are at least open to believing in the power of an awesome God who can completely reframe what we understand and expect right now.

Saturday May 16: Revelation 11-13

The world will not change quietly

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I find it hard to know what to do with some of these details about end times. I think God may have provided some of them as signposts that show this is not simply a revelation about dealing with change in general. People will be able to recognise from history that God has been involved in world events and changes of leadership, some of which opposes him.

God has a plan to deal with evil, bringing rebellious humanity back into loving relationship with him, free from corruption through the power of Jesus. But it involves a huge fight.

Newsflash: this is not so much a scrap between us and God, but there is a powerful spiritual opposition to God's plan to redeem the world. This takes some strange physical shapes in the Revelation vision, but its title "the accuser of our brothers and sisters" feels familiar - it wants to undermine our relationship with God and our confidence in him, and we know that this is an active force today. The warning from Revelation is that this is not just a sense we have, but something real and damaging, causing war on earth and in heaven, powerful enough to gain influence over God's people and make life difficult.

So one purpose of this prophecy is to warn us to expect opposition, and resolve to be patient, enduring and faithful against it. This means that faith can't just be an idea for us, but we have to put it into practice, growing a relationship with God, and making choices which show where our hearts are.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God sees much more happening around us than we are aware of, and he is fully engaged in the battle against evil. He fights the spiritual root causes of suffering in our world.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I need to recognise spiritual opposition to God more readily, the way God does, and take it more seriously without feeling overwhelmed by it.

Sometimes it pops up in little ways which feel almost shamefully trivial to share here. As I've been writing this, we've had constant niggling battles with technical difficulties at home which have frayed my temper and tested every resolution I've made to trust God more. I'm not going to moan the devil was messing with my wi-fi or worrying me as freakish rain pours above my head (and computer). It's more important that I have needed to learn to deal with anger and fear temporarily blocking the expression of spiritual fruit like joy and peace.

This is a spiritual battle I feel personally – which will define me? I choose to recognise this battle and reject a feeling of accusation that I'm not qualified to share about God's good things because I'm still learning to live by them. Let me declare here that it's God's power growing love, patience, kindness and self-control as his fruit in me, not my own making.

Who am I going to share this with?

I'll discuss spiritual battles, spiritual fruit and why we need it in our open house group.

Wednesday May 20: Revelation 14-16

God works with massive scale and force

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

I love it when the Old and New Testament books we are reading fit together. Numbers and Revelation are both about God establishing his Kingdom with his people, but with some significant differences. In Numbers, God is planting a seed to grow and multiply, eventually to show the world what God is like, and it starts in a desert space where God can form up his people without much interference. In Revelation, this seed has become a mature vine, the world has been shown what God is like, and people have taken sides for and against. For God's Kingdom to finish being established, it has to overcome entrenched opposition, and God is about to break out the heavy weapons.

We get a sense of scale of what God is doing - and it's not small. We've already seen countless multitudes of saved people from all nations, and now we've got a special choir made up of 12 (a complete number) times 12 (a complete number) times 1000 (a "make this much bigger" number) = "a ridiculously huge and wondrous number", or 144,000 if you want to be literal about it. If we want to read these numbers like the people this was first written for, we have to bring a feel for what they mean, not just imagine a town the size of Peterborough...

The force of what God does next I think we can write up as "totally overwhelming", and more than a little humiliating for opponents of God to be defeated by festering sores and blood swapped for water. God's bowls of wrath are a full spectrum response to opposition. The encouragement for us is that God is going to fight like this to establish the Kingdom life we believe in. Weirdly, demonic spirits are still just about influential enough to gather leaders who oppose God to the place called "Armageddon" to make a stand. But would you want to be in their position if this prophecy is true?

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God rules. As it says in Ecclesiastes, there is a time for everything - a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance. This happens to be the time for God to kick yo ass if you've chosen to prefer someone else, worship something else, or get in the way of God transforming our world forever for the better.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

I really have no idea how to prepare for this other than to be on the right side. In Jesus, by his grace, I already am. However, I need to remember these prophecies if I want to avoid faith seeming weak, powerless, irrelevant or in any way ordinary. I want to be filled afresh with enthusiasm to praise and point people towards an amazing future with God.

Who am I going to share this with?

Out of context, this seems at least a bit odd to us, let alone people who don't yet believe in God. However, I'll look for appropriate opportunities to talk about God's plans for us and the world - especially as I know lots of people who believe the world can and should be better.

Saturday May 23: Revelation 17-19

Strongholds against God will fall

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

While there is mystery in the details here, and we could debate how much has happened in history versus how much is to come, there is a very clear outcome for suffering believers to bear in mind. However much it seems like some are thriving as they oppose God, the final and unmistakable victory will belong to him.

I love that this is a cause for celebration for anyone aware of the destructive power of corruption and "impure spirits", although a source of massive upset for anyone whose sense of value was rooted entirely in money and materials. This reminds me that we are worth far more than any economic model can show, and that reminds me to see myself and others the way God sees us as we evaluate what to do next in our own time of crisis.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God is not an idea of ours. He is powerful beyond our understanding, his commitment to change the world for the better is more solid than anything else we have experienced, and his love for us is bigger than we can grasp. He is not leading a debate about how to live slightly better lives, but a revolution against the root causes of evil, and warns us through prophecy that we can expect the biggest, most solid looking things around us to change as a result.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

The old economy is passing away. The new economy, the one that matters, rooted in God's values, needs me to think less about my trading stuff and more about faith, hope and love which come from God.

Where am I directing my worship? God made the world and saw that it was good, but if I'm putting more worth in God's things rather than God himself, I am going to come very unstuck in this process. The angel who spoke to John made it very clear - worship God!

I don't know if I can - or should - kill off all my interests in work, trade and material stuff which will pass away. After all, God is a worker and we can only trade things he made and still owns. But I do need to invest more into worship and loving relationships.

I also recognise that Christian faith is not a tweak to make the world a bit better, it's a guarantee of life in Christ which starts now, robust enough to survive the total upheaval of every other thing we might rely on. I need to be more confident about sharing that.

Who am I going to share this with?

People I plan with. I'm especially thinking about my school community where people share a love of investment in people. I want to get better at sharing my values and hope there, even as we are physically separated, and invite some to worship and pray with me.

Wednesday May 27: Revelation 20-22

Let God define our new normal

Every day we're reading or listening to part of the Bible together and sharing thoughts with you. Today it's Bern Leckie:

What did I like about today's reading?

This is all kinds of epic. We're reaching the end of the end times, the ultimate destination, which I'm excited turns out to be really good and not so much an end of everything as the beginning of something better than we can really imagine right now.

Trying to imagine life without evil and death is mind-bending - it's something part of us has always longed for, but it's also so different from our experience of life so far. Every detail of the New Jerusalem sounds amazing. Taking it literally, 12000 stadia is about 1400 miles, the distance from Bristol to Bucharest on the ground and over five times the altitude of the International Space Station in height. I might just read this as "one very big city.") And did you know the pearly gates are "each made of a single pearl"? Even the bits we thought we knew here are surprising, aren't they?

The idea of being able to depend on God for everything, including light, seems a very important part of this prophecy, and for the suffering church which first received it, this was a comfort and an encouragement - not just about life to come, but about who God is now. We have a lot to look forward to, but the time to worship and trust God is today.

What did it show me about Father God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

God thinks big. His vision to restore us to life with him is vivid and exciting, not just because of the rich resources God wants to bring to the building project, but because the life described here is dynamic, fruitful and bright. It will not be obtained without struggle, but Jesus has paid for our part in both the life itself and the battle to secure it. We should be under no illusion that the ideal world is a product of human effort and ingenuity alone. God is "the Beginning and the End" and we need to follow his invitation to work with him if we want this most promising future.

What am I going to do differently as a result?

We seem to be at a rare point in history where so much has been changed and needs to be reimagined and rebooted, finding the "new normal" is not just a dream or vision, it's a vital part of everyone's to-do list.

So now more than ever, I want to live with the end in mind. Not my set of goals and ideas, but this direction from God. I want this to reshape my thinking, values and actions, and I want God to use me and the rest of us who believe to reshape the world, his way.

Keeping this end in mind, I have realised I need more of a sense of awe and wonder at God's work in the world today. My ideas need to be transformed as my mind is renewed by God. Instead of bringing my idea of God down to my level, assuming he is like me or only capable of doing things I can understand, I will spend more time in worship, conscious of my need for the Spirit's guidance and expecting to be changed so that God can work through me.

Who am I going to share this with?

Initially people at church in worship. Beyond that, I want God to be better known – let's see!