

# 6

## BRING ON A BETTER WORLD

Revelation is a letter to seven churches from a guy called John and it's been read in lots of different ways throughout history. We want to take a look and see what we can learn from understanding what was going on when it was written during the Roman Empire, and what message John was sending to the churches he was writing to.

JOHN WRITES REVELATION TO REVEAL HOW DESTRUCTIVE AND OPPRESSIVE THE ROMAN EMPIRE REALLY IS. HE WANTED HIS READERS TO SEE WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF GOD'S KINGDOM WERE TO TAKE THE PLACE OF THE EMPIRE. WHAT EMPIRES ARE WE PART OF TODAY?



### YOU WILL NEED:

Bibles, pens, paper, film posters/DVD covers.



### GET STARTED: Isn't Revelation a bit weird?

John wrote the book of Revelation in a particular genre: the apocalypse genre. Just like certain styles of fiction have their time in the spotlight: sci-fi, comics or fantasy; in the days of the early church, a lot of people wrote in the style of apocalypse. But instead of just talking in plain language, John uses lots of symbols, which is why sometimes it makes for difficult reading!



### ACTIVITY:

*What do you think of when you hear the word apocalypse?*

Ask everyone to write an apocalyptic ending to their favourite film and share their new plots with the group. You may wish to show the group a few film posters for inspiration.

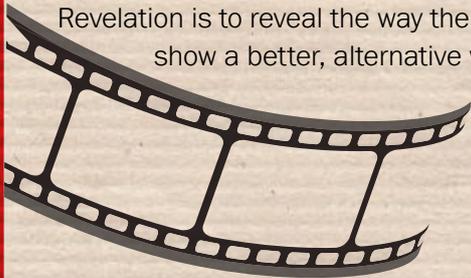


## DISCUSS:

The word apocalypse doesn't just mean the end of the world, it means so much more than that. The original meaning of the word 'apocalypse' is an 'unveiling' or a 'revelation' – a new way of seeing the present. Apocalypse invites us to re-imagine the world; it shows us the end of the world as we know it and asks us to imagine a new and better world.

As an apocalyptic piece of writing, the role of Revelation is to reveal the way the world is, and to show a better, alternative way of living.

Now re-think your apocalyptic film plot!



## WHAT DID THE ROMAN EMPIRE LOOK LIKE?

John writes about 'the beast' as an analogy of what the Roman Empire was like. The empire was a place of slavery, exploitation, genocide and sweatshops, and the churches were part of it. The Christians that John appealed to had got sucked into the empire – they'd started buying the things that made people poor, taking part in the things that exploited other people and ignoring the things Jesus taught. They'd got so sucked in that they didn't realise just how bad the empire really was, it had become normal. John wanted to write a letter that revealed the Roman Empire for its true nature, he wanted to show them how unjust it was and persuade them to stop taking part.

In John's point of view there was no choice – you couldn't be a Christian and be part of the empire, it was one or the other. Which one was it going to be?



## DISCUSS:

If John was writing to us today, what questions would he be asking us to challenge the way that we live? What symbols would he be using or criticising?

What has become normal in our society that isn't the way God would want it to be?

What sort of things do we get sucked into that are actually exploiting people around the world?

Is it even possible to live in today's world without taking part in these things?

Can you be a Christian and eat food that's been grown by people who get paid next to nothing for it?

Can you be a Christian and use technology that contains minerals that fuel conflicts?

Can you be a Christian and wear clothes made by children?

It feels like it would be impossible to live without taking part in the empire, but in John's opinion we have no choice if we really want to live God's way.

## POWER CORRUPTS?

Back in the second session – on the laws set out in the Old Testament – we looked at how God created some new rules for his people. Rules about how to use money in a way that was fair. Rules about distributing land equally, repaying debt and looking after the poor. By the time John was writing, these things had been forgotten.

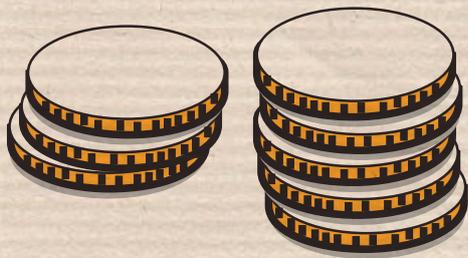
Rome started exporting the food grown by the farmers – selling it to other countries and richer communities – and as a result, the farmers often ended up without enough to eat.

Sound familiar? Today 70 per cent of the world's poor live in rural areas and get most of their income from agriculture.

Rome became the centre of the empire, and because it imported goods from the provinces surrounding it, controlled food supplies and used violence to maintain its newfound consumption and luxury, the city prospered. But it was only the rich who benefited, and the gap between the rich and the poor got bigger.

The Roman Empire started something called latifundia that made basic staple foods of the poor more expensive in order to make luxury items for the rich cheaper. John mentions this in Revelation 6:6 when he talks about 'a quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the oil and the wine!' – wheat and barley were the staple foods in John's time.

While food prices were going up for the poor, the prices of luxury items like oil and wine were going down.



## GO DEEPER

Modern international trade rules are still stacked in favour of the rich at the expense of the poor. Visit the Traidcraft ([traidcraft.co.uk](http://traidcraft.co.uk)) or Trade Justice Movement ([tjm.org.uk](http://tjm.org.uk)) website to find out more about what's wrong with modern trade.

Neither latifundia nor international trade rules happen by accident. John is critical of this practice in the Roman Empire, and he'd be critical of it today.



## READ: Revelation 13 – the mark of the beast

We often hear jokes about the mark of the beast – 666. It's used to describe the devil or to describe things about hell.

But it's more commonly thought amongst theologians that John is really describing money and the market place.<sup>1</sup> The Roman Empire brought in a new money system. Before, people had traded their goods with each other – food in return for clothes, grain in return for oil. But now in order to trade goods you had to use coins, coins that held the mark of the Roman Empire on them. Without these coins you were unable to buy or sell. Suddenly the poor who relied on swapping their produce with other people, were unable to take part in the trade system.



## DISCUSS: In or out?

The new monetary system meant that the poor were immediately excluded from the workings of the rest of society. Think about what it means to be a part of a community, and what it means to feel excluded.

- What action can we take to include people?
- Who has the power today? And whose voices do we not get to hear?

<sup>1</sup> For more info, we suggest reading *Jesus for President* by Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw; and to go even deeper, *Unveiling Empire* by Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther or *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham



## ACTIVITY: Blind jigsaw



*Give the group a difficult jigsaw to complete quickly. Don't give them the box, or let them see what the picture is that they are aiming for.*

How difficult is it to complete the picture when you don't have a vision of what you are aiming for? We could take John's message about the New Jerusalem as a vision for a better world. John was trying to inspire his readers to imagine how their world could be, and what they could do to make it happen in the here and now.

The journey you've been on through the Bible shows a God who again and again calls on us to live in a way that is better, to live in a way that doesn't oppress the poor. Revelation is the final call for us to stop getting involved in the systems that are exploiting people and that are on the side of the rich.



## PRAY:

Reflect on the journey you've been on through the Bible. What have you learned or been surprised by? Pray that you will continue to be challenged by God's word and that you will continue to live out the story of justice.



## PLEDGE:

In God we find the promise of a better world, the promise that in him the things of this earth that are broken will come to an end, and in their place will come a better world. We don't need to wait for the world to end before we can begin to see the old broken ways being mended, revealing in their place a new and better world. Jesus offers us the hope of wholeness of life for everyone, here and now. What will you do as the hands and feet of Jesus on earth, to help bring about this change?

We'd love for you to stay involved with the Christian Aid Collective as we journey together to re-imagine a better world into existence.

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