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## START AT THE ENDING: THE BOOK OF REVELATION

### *Eat this Book*

Revelation 10:8-1

January 11, 2026

Billy Collins, former U.S. Poet Laureate, wrote a poem about his experience teaching undergraduate students. The title is *Introduction to Poetry*.

*I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.  
I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,  
or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.  
I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.  
But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.  
They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.*

It is a tragic alchemy we've mastered. We take this holy book—this untamed, living, breathing, sacred text—and we treat it like a suspect. We strap it to a chair and beat it with our agendas until it finally "confesses," parroting back to us what we wanted to hear.

We've taken Revelation—written as a ray of hope to people in despair—and made it a roadmap to destruction. We've traded an encounter with the living God for a decoder ring for the headlines. In a rush to find out what it means, we've strangled what it says.

Sometimes, the hose is turned on you. Perhaps you know the heavy weight of a Bible verse dropped on your chest like a stone when you were gasping for air. Maybe you've heard the Word of God used to bolt a door against you or turn you away from the table of grace.

God recast as a landlord looking to evict, not the parent running down the driveway to welcome you home.

If that's your story, I want you to hear this: the Word of God was never meant to be a weapon to break your heart. It is the bread that sustains your life.

Last week, Revelation unveiled the powers that want to capture our souls. This morning, John receives his commission. It's a strange scene, a stunning scene. He sees an angel. And I'm not talking about a Hallmark Christmas ornament angel. This is a cosmic giant, robed in the clouds, face shining like the sun. He stands with one foot on the land and one foot in the sea, his voice like the roar of a lion. This is the antidote to our tame, domesticated God. There will be no tying this God to a chair. The massive angel holds a tiny scroll, and John is given his direction.

*Take the scroll and eat it; it will be bitter to your stomach,  
but sweet as honey in your mouth.*

John takes the scroll. You'd do what this angel told you to do as well. He chews it. He swallows it. It is sweet in his mouth. In his gut, there is a slow burn as the command of the angel comes. *You must prophesy again.*

John is called to speak. But first, he must digest the word.

Six centuries earlier, Ezekiel stood there with his mouth gaping open. God handed him a scroll inscribed with words of lamentation; it tasted like dessert. The message is the same. *Ezekiel, John, you are not allowed to say a word until it becomes a part of you. You must not preach what you have not metabolized.*

Stanley Hauerwas, my teacher at Duke, used to say that the church is a language school. We are here to learn how to speak Christian.

It's not our native tongue. From the moment we're born, the world whispers its grammar in our ears. The grammar of the fist and the fence. Me first. Us and them. We don't study this language. We inhale it. It's the air we breathe. We're immersed in it.

And then the gospel comes along with its upside-down syntax. Another language entirely. In here, the rules of grammar are different. We speak a strange dialect, where the last are shoved to the front of the line. Where the picture of power is a God who refused to fight back on the world's terms. Where strength is revealed in open hands, not clenched jaws.

You don't learn that kind of language from a textbook; you learn it by immersion, sitting in these pews until the cadence of mercy matches the beating of your heart, until you don't just speak Christian, you *become* Christian.

That's what it means to eat the scroll. To take the words into your body until grace becomes your mother tongue, the only language you know how to speak.

I learned this the way any child does—by osmosis. I spent my childhood in the third row, heels swinging against the pew, counting the minutes until the final hymn was over. Week after week. Year after year. While my father preached and the saints prayed, I sat. And I did not know I was learning a language. I was a kid. I fidgeted. I daydreamed. I doodled. But all the while, something was happening that I didn't have a name for. The rhythms of worship were getting into me, becoming a part of me. The cadence of liturgy. The strange grammar of grace carved its channel into my soul.

I watched what these words did to him. They were like water over a stone. They shaped his preaching, yes, but also his patience. His parenting. His presence with people in emergency rooms and at gravesides. He didn't just memorize the word. He metabolized the word. It made him who he is.

Eighteen years ago this week, I made my own ordination vows. And when I did, my father handed me this copy of the *Book of Common Worship*. He'd written a note inside the cover. "Chris, sometimes we are called to speak words in special times in the lives of others. We can

be creative, and sometimes we are, but more often we turn to the ritual words of the church. May these words guide you as you equip the saints with hope, comfort, strength, and mystery. I'm so proud of you, Dad."

He wasn't giving me a manual. He was passing on the scroll. *Some days, son, the words will taste like honey. But some days, they are going to burn.*

He was right. That's the truth of the bittersweet scroll. It is a summons. The Word is honey when we talk about love, about God's love, about love in the abstract, but it turns to fire when it demands you love the one who has wronged you. The one who has broken your heart. The one who has harmed you. It's sweet to sing about justice in the sweet by and by, but bitter when it demands that we change the way we spend our days, our dollars, our devotion. The sweetness is God's promise. The bitterness is its weight on our shoulders.

Now my own sons sit where I used to sit. Daydreaming and doodling. Heels swinging against the pew. Counting the final minutes until the last verse of the hymn. And I cannot force-feed them this faith. None of us can. But we can keep bringing them to the table. We can keep giving witness to its power in our lives. We can learn to trust the slow, quiet chemistry of Christian formation. This faith we've been given, this faith we hold, it is not an argument you win. It's a life that captivates. It is the long obedience of showing up week after week, year after year, until the cadence of liturgy matches the beating of your heart.

And let's be clear, because Revelation is clear. The Empire has no time for the long game. No patience for it. It is a machine built on the illusion of manufactured urgency. It wants instant results. One pill to swallow. An enemy to vanquish with a single strike. Displays of dramatic power. While the scroll is this slow medicine. These words can enter a person and make them new. But it will not happen in soundbites. It happens over a lifetime. Please hear this: *we become what we consume.*

If we gather week after week hearing holy words, and then we walk out those doors speaking the same cruel language of the world, we deserve to be

dismissed by it. If we celebrate the kind of "strength" that crushes the weak or the kind of "winning" that discards the vulnerable, we are nothing more than the Empire with a thin coat of holy paint. If our lives fail to reflect the beauty of this Word, why would anyone trust our message?

But if we truly digest the Word, our lives begin to reflect our diet.

In a few moments, we'll come to this table. You'll hear those same strange, ancient words spoken to Ezekiel and John: *Take, and eat.* This is the Word made flesh, reshaping us from the inside. Not a snack, but a transplant. His life becoming our life. His way becoming our way.

The bread is sweet, but the way is often bitter. The words we are given will not let us stay silent. So, eat this book. Come to this table. Take this bread. Drink this cup. Until his is the only language you know how to speak.

And then, don't you dare leave here and speak that old tongue. Don't you dare eat the body of Christ and leave this place fluent in the language of violence. Because mark my words: if you spend your life beating the Word of God with a hose to make it say what you want, you will eventually do the same to your neighbor. You cannot feast on grace and breathe out fire.

So, when the world calls for vengeance, you speak mercy. When the world demands walls of hostility, you speak a table of grace. When they worship the power of the sword, you bow at the foot of the cross. Do not return to the grammar of the beast. Come to the table. Eat the word. Then go to the world and show them what the truth tastes like. Amen.