

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 77 – THE BOOK OF REVELATION]

We now approach the end game of God's great project of creating man in His image.

- ◆ The subject of the end times has held the fascination of all Christians ever since Jesus told His disciples He would return some day.
- ◆ Mountains of material have been written about both the timing and the events surrounding Jesus' return and no wonder when the subject matter conjures up foreboding images of Armageddon, four hostile horsemen, terrifying beasts, a great harlot, false prophets, a fiery red dragon, a lake of fire and final judgment.
- ◆ As we approach this subject I have to admit to a certain amount of trepidation, not so much from the point of view of the terrifying images it conjures up, but rather from the responsibility to present the material in as accurately a way as humanly possible.
- ◆ But mixed with this trepidation, there is also a sense of anticipation.
- ◆ Anticipation because finally after many millennia of enforced separation between God and humanity because of our sin and rebellion, the two parties finally come face to face with one another.
- ◆ And humanity for its part is in for a huge pleasant surprise when they come face to face with His Creator.
- ◆ But that is getting ahead of the story.
- ◆ It's also a time of great anticipation from God's point of view as it at this point that God's great project of creating man in His image becomes a reality with the saying, "I will be their God, and they will be my holy people."
- ◆ The subject of the end time has many components, so we will slowly work our way through them in a systematic way.

The story of God's interaction with His creation comes down to one of allegiance.

- ◆ Let me share a Native American legend with you.
- ◆ *An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, selfishness, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."*
- ◆ Like the rest of us, this young Native American faced a choice as he began his own life as to, "Which wolf would he feed?"
- ◆ Right from the very beginning, the created beings God has brought into existence have faced a choice as to where their allegiance would lie.
- ◆ He created us with freewill with the capacity to choose.
- ◆ Sooner or later in the design of things however, our allegiance would be tested.
- ◆ Sometime before humanity came on the scene, the created angelic realm too was faced with a choice as to whom they would cast their allegiance.
- ◆ ***Revelation 12:3-4 Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. ⁴Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.***
- ◆ It appears a third of the angelic beings rebelled against God and threw their lot in with this red dragon who later on in this chapter is identified as Satan the devil (Revelation 12:7-9).
- ◆ Moving forward to the creation of Adam and Eve, we see that they too were confronted with a scenario that would question their allegiance where they had to choose between two trees (Genesis 2:16-17).
- ◆ And so it has been down through history. Abraham was called the father of the faithful because of his willingness to show his allegiance to God even in the face of a terrible test, the sacrifice of his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1-18).
- ◆ The children of Israel had to decide whom they would choose to be their God, the gods of the Egyptians or the God who had delivered them from Egypt (Exodus 32:1-5; Deuteronomy 30:19).
- ◆ Jesus' constant confrontations with the religious leaders came down to an issue of allegiance, to God or to the devil (John 8:31-47).

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 77 – THE BOOK OF REVELATION]

- ◆ And so this is the scenario that has gone on throughout history, a choice as to which wolf we pledge our allegiance and therefore to which one we feed.
- ◆ It is with this background that we now turn our attention to the book of Revelation, a book in which creatures other than wolves play a significant role.

Overview of the book of Revelation.

- ◆ As mentioned, this book has caught the imagination of Christians down through the centuries and has led to many various and speculative interpretations especially when applied to a chronology of events leading up to the end of the age.
- ◆ But is this the way the book is meant be interpreted? Or is there a more important message to be learned from the book, such as, to whom do we pledge our allegiance or our “faithfulness”?
- ◆ Is God more concerned that we construct one neat timetable for the end of the world or that Christians remain faithful to Him in a hostile world that challenges our allegiance to Him?
- ◆ The language used in Revelation is highly symbolic and metaphorical so we need to be careful we don't allow ourselves to interpret them according to our pre-conceived ideas or assumptions.
- ◆ However there are two assumptions we can take to the bank and those are, at the end of history, 1) Life, not destruction is going to prevail as God is the life giver and, 2) God in Christ will be there both as Judge and Savior.

As with all good Bible study, the approach we are going to take is to first look at the book in its historical and cultural context. That is, it is written to Christians living during the persecuting reign of Nero or Domitian (depending on the date of the authorship of the book) in the Roman Empire. Then we will see what lessons can be applied to Christians living down through subsequent centuries.

- ◆ Looked at in its historical context, the book creates a contrast between the rule of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of men.
- ◆ Second, as the first few verses of the book explain, this is a revelation from Jesus Christ himself.
- ◆ ***Revelation 1:1-2 The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.***
- ◆ The word revelation or apocalypse from the Greek literally means "an uncovering" or “unveiling.” a disclosure of knowledge or revelation.
- ◆ In religious contexts it is usually a disclosure of something hidden, "a vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities."
- ◆ I like this definition for two reasons. First, it is completely opposite to the confusing speculations commentators have made of the book down through the centuries.
- ◆ Instead of making things clearer, these speculations in most cases have only further clouded the issue.
- ◆ The second reason I like this definition is because as this definition says, it gives us a heavenly perspective of earthly realities.
- ◆ In other words, this is the big picture of all that is taking place on this earth viewed from God's heavenly perspective coming directly from Jesus Christ Himself, the great “Unveiler.”
- ◆ You will remember He was the one responsible for the tearing apart of the veil at His crucifixion giving humanity direct access to God's throne room.
- ◆ This not only allows people of faith access to God, but also an insight into what is going on behind the scenes in the flow of history.
- ◆ We are aware of God's purpose in creating humanity; we are aware of the time of the new creation operating behind the scenes of the old decaying creation; and most importantly, we are aware of the one who stands at the centre of salvation history, that is Jesus Christ Himself.
- ◆ And to me that is an exciting revelation.
- ◆ The history we read about in textbooks is not the real history of humanity. Rather it is what God is doing behind the scenes to restore the relationship between God and His creation we have read about in this series.
- ◆ It is also a foretaste of what Jesus Christ will unveil to all humanity when they stand before Him in the general resurrection at the end of the age.

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 77 – THE BOOK OF REVELATION]

- ◆ The mystery of our existence and the working of God behind the history of the world will be revealed to all mankind.
- ◆ At that time we will get the blow by blow account from Jesus Christ himself, but until then, we have to be satisfied with the big picture account revealed by the angel sent by Jesus Christ to reveal to John, **“what must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1).**
- ◆ It should also be a caution to over-enthusiastic interpreters not to ride the wild horse of speculation too hard as Jesus alone has the title, “Unveiler.”
- ◆ History is littered with false predictions as to who the latest version of the beast is?

Like I said, the major theme of the book is one of allegiance.

- ◆ But there are a number of sub themes running throughout the dialogue.
- ◆ Following in the apocalyptic tradition of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, we can identify two contrasting mysteries revealed in the book of Revelation: 1) the sources of evil along with their destruction, and 2) a final vision of hope.
- ◆ The prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel depict the world as a place of struggle.
 - A struggle between the kingdom of God and kingdom of darkness.
 - The power of life against the power of death.
 - The power of sin against the power of grace.
- ◆ From a human perspective it appears like the forces of evil are winning the battle but in the end the forces of good prevail.
- ◆ Jesus’ insight to John then is to reveal to him and his readers what is going on behind the scenes that makes the world the way it is.
- ◆ There are evil powers at work that infiltrate and infest all levels of society, and the book of Revelation systematically exposes these malevolent powers.
- ◆ But in each case of these apocalyptic writers, the prophecy ends with a remarkable message of hope.
- ◆ **Isaiah 2:4 He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.**
- ◆ Daniel after interpreting King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream about the great statue representing the various empires who struggle for dominance down through time finishes with this vision.
- ◆ **Daniel 2:44-45 “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”⁴⁵ This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands—a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.**
- ◆ So in the face of tyrannical rule, there is introduced a message of hope, the same message given at the end of Revelation.

However, the book of Daniel reveals one of the keys to understanding the book of Revelation and that is, Daniel portrays the flow of these historical empires with wild beasts (Daniel 7).

- ◆ Each of these beasts is representative of an empire, and he characterises the nature of those empires with a particular animal.
- ◆ Babylon with a lion, Medes and Persians with a bear, Greece with a leopard and Rome as a great terrifying ten horned beast with iron teeth and bronze claws.
- ◆ Each of these beastly kingdoms in turn will be overthrown by a succeeding beastly power.
- ◆ However, at the end of time, God will overthrow all of these beastly kingdoms and replace them with His kingdom that operates in a totally different fashion to that of a wild beast.
- ◆ In similar fashion, this too is how the book of Revelation ends. The kingdoms of this world are overthrown and we read about a new heavens and a new earth, one without tears or crying or death (Revelation 21:1-4).
- ◆ It was during the reign of this terrifying fourth beast with teeth of iron and claws of bronze that John is given this revelation from the angel sent by Jesus Christ.
- ◆ So the stage is set for a decision concerning one’s allegiance. To which kingdom will John’s readers commit their allegiance?

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 77 – THE BOOK OF REVELATION]

- ◆ Will it be to the terrifying ten-headed beast representing imperial Rome or to the kingdom of God?
- ◆ Or to frame it in terms of the Native American legend we read at the beginning, “Which wolf will they feed?”