

[IN GOD'S IMAGE 78 – REVELATION 1-7 - EVIL POWERS EXPOSED]

Last time we made a tentative step into the book of Revelation as we 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 Christians ever since Jesus told His disciples He would return some day.
- ◆ From a human perspective this fascination usually stems from 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.
- ◆ But from God's point of view it must be a time of great anticipation as it is 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."

Last time we talked about how the story of God's interaction with His creation comes down to one of allegiance.

- ◆ We shared the legend of a Native American grandfather speaking with his grandson about the two competing wolves that reside in each of us, one representing evil, and the other good.
- ◆ The story ends with the grandfather answering his grandson's question as to "Which wolf will win?" with the response, "The one you feed."
- ◆ From the very beginning, the 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.
- ◆ One's allegiance is the major theme of the book of Revelation.

But there are a couple of sub themes running throughout the dialogue.

- ◆ There are evil powers at work that infiltrate and infest all levels of human society, and the book of Revelation systematically exposes these malevolent powers, along with their destruction.
- ◆ However the book does not end with destruction, but with a final vision of hope.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ It is with this background that we turned 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

- ◆ The approach we are taking is to look at the book in its historical and cultural context. That is, it is written to Christians living during the reign of Nero, or Domitian (depending on the date of the authorship of the book) in the context of the all-conquering Roman Empire.
- ◆ Second, as the first few verses of the book explain, this is a revelation from Jesus Christ himself.
- ◆ Revelation is from the Greek word apocalypse that means unveiling or in a religious context, "a vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities."
- ◆ We then looked at other apocalyptic writers, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel and especially Daniel as he identified the four terrifying wild beasts each representing the historical empires of Babylon, Medes and Persians, Greece and Rome (Daniel 7).
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ So in the face of tyrannical rule, there is introduced a message of hope, the same message given at the end of Revelation.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ The stage is set for a decision concerning one's allegiance. To which kingdom will John's readers commit their loyalty?
- ◆ Will it be to the terrifying ten-headed beast representing imperial Rome or to the kingdom of God?

And so it is not surprising then to read to whom this Revelation is written.

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- ◆ **Revelation 1:4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia.**
 - ◆ Life for Christians living under the rule of this terrifying beast, the Roman Empire had its challenges.
 - ◆ First of all as monotheists, they refused to acknowledge the pagan pantheon of gods worshiped by the Greeks and Romans.
 - ◆ Second, they refused to participate in the state organised cult of emperor worship.
 - ◆ The Romans didn't so much mind them having their own god, it's just they didn't recognise everyone else's gods as was common practice at the time. As far as they were concerned, the more gods the better!
 - ◆ So to these seven churches, Jesus gives this "disclosure of events," (a heavenly perspective on earthly realities) to encourage Christians to be faithful in the face of these challenges.
 - ◆ When we look at these messages to the seven churches situated in modern-day Turkey we can identify three groups.
 - ◆ There are churches suffering persecution at the hands of the empire (Smyrna, Revelation 2:8-10).
 - ◆ In the same way Hitler singled out the Jews as the cause of Germany's troubles, Nero for instance, found an easy target in the Christians especially when he needed a scapegoat with the burning of Rome.
 - ◆ But persecution varied from city to city depending on the temperament of the Roman governor or prefect.
 - ◆ Then there are those who were feeling relatively comfortable with life under Roman rule (Laodicea, Revelation 3:14-18).
 - ◆ The Laodiceans had become complacent, life was good and they were too comfortable, and had found a way to blend in and assimilate with the culture around them.
 - ◆ Then there was the third group, those in the middle trying to remain true to their convictions in a evil world (Philadelphia, Revelation 3:7-10).
 - ◆ In each case there is the admonition to hold on to what you have and in some cases to repent of your ways, but this is followed up with the promise of future glory.
 - ◆ Notice this part of the message to the church at Smyrna.
 - ◆ **Revelation 2:10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.**
 - ◆ We see this theme of allegiance coming through in each of these messages to the churches.
 - ◆ Persevere and be faithful to my kingdom and you will receive your reward.
 - ◆ But the message of Revelation was not just for these churches in Asia Minor, it is a message that resonates for Christians down through the centuries, as we too have to live by our Christian convictions in an evil world dominated by malignant beastly powers.
 - ◆ Christians are warned to keep their eyes on the bigger picture in the face of society's pressure to conform.
 - ◆ In the end, it is God's kingdom that will endure while competing kingdoms will be destroyed.
 - ◆ So the message to the seven churches is to cast your allegiance in with the winning team and you will not be disappointed as your Savior is waiting there to reward you.
- In Revelation 4 we are given an insight into the heavenly throne room of God.**
- ◆ This heavenly scene is again meant to contrast the splendour associated with the heavenly throne room with that of the throne room of the Roman Caesar.
 - ◆ In the centre is the vision of God, then the four mysterious creatures who lead the worship, then the 24 elders who cast their crowns before God signifying there is only one god worthy of their allegiance and that is not the tyrannical Roman emperor who stands in opposition to God.
 - ◆ **Revelation 4:9-11 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ¹¹ "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."**
 - ◆ The honor and glory sought by Rome's leaders was in recognition for their own great victories and accomplishments.

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- ◆ In contrast the glory and honor given to God is for His willingness to sacrifice for the salvation and redemption of His rebellious children.
 - ◆ Again the message is one of loyalty and not to compromise or become complacent with earthly powers.
- In Revelation 5, we are introduced to a new word picture, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.***
- ◆ ***Revelation 5:5-6 Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."***
 - ◆ John turns around to see who this conquering lion is and what does he see.
 - ◆ ***V.6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.***
 - ◆ Earlier we saw in the book of Daniel the kingdoms of the world represented by wild beasts.
 - ◆ Now in contrast we see the kingdom of God also represented by a beast, but one that has a totally different nature to these world-ruling empires.
 - ◆ John is using these word pictures to expose the true nature of these rulers.
 - ◆ In contrast to the wild beasts that seek to devour and kill, the choice of the lamb is used to reveal Jesus' true character of sacrificial love, even a willingness to die for others.
 - ◆ Although He is as mighty as a lion, with limitless power, this power is exercised through what he suffers for the sake of others.
 - ◆ It is this quality of sacrifice for the sake of others that makes Him worthy of worship.
 - ◆ ***Revelation 5:9 And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation."***
 - ◆ This is in contrast to the worship demanded of Rome's citizens in response to the despotic power exercised by the all-conquering Roman Caesar.
 - ◆ The one is motivated by fear, the other by love.
 - ◆ Glory through domination of others was the modus operandi of Imperial Rome or what Augustine called "Libido Dominandi" or the "lust for power."
 - ◆ So again the question is asked, to which power will you give your allegiance? To the power of conquering love, or to the power bent on domination, subjugation and destruction?
 - ◆ We also need to take note of this phrase, "***persons from every tribe and language and people and nation***", as it is repeated over and over throughout the book.
- In Revelation 6 we are introduced to the opening of the seven seals.***
- ◆ The scene shifts from the heavenly vision to an earthly one.
 - ◆ The first four seals represented by four terrible horsemen are released.
 - ◆ These horsemen represent the methods employed by these beastly powers to subdue and conquer "***persons from every tribe and language and people and nation***."
 - ◆ This is in contrast to the method employed by the slain lamb, which "***with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation***."
 - ◆ The first two horsemen one holding a bow, the other a sword of the Pax Romana or "Roman Peace" ride forth with teeth of iron and claws of bronze.
 - ◆ Interestingly, It was under this apparent rule of "peace" that the "Lamb of peace" was slain.
 - ◆ Following conquering armies come the carpetbaggers ready to exploit the subdued populations and the third horseman carrying a pair of scales represents this.
 - ◆ This pattern has been repeated over and over down through the centuries where subdued populations are exploited for their natural resources and for their slave labour.
 - ◆ We don't have to look too far past the last century to see this pattern of behaviour repeated, e.g. Colonial powers, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union taking advantage of occupied countries.
 - ◆ It's possible the Laodicean church was caught up in this exploitative behaviour (Revelation 3:14-18).
- So far we have been introduced to three sources of evil, the despotic Roman Emperor (Rulers), his conquering armies, and grasping businessmen.***

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- ◆ But there is another evil force alluded to here with the fourth horseman, and he will be identified in more detail later, but this is an evil force which appears to have the ability to manipulate nature itself.
 - ◆ **Revelation 6:7-8** *When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!"⁸ I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.*
 - ◆ Jesus in his earthly ministry had to deal with demonic forces that had the power to inflict disease and possess beasts (Mark 5:1-13).
 - ◆ The Fifth Seal is addressed to the victims of persecution and injustice that invariably follows conquest.
 - ◆ The conquering powers appoint new administrators like Pilate to tax and impose their culture, including pagan worship practices on the subdued population ("Render unto Caesar," Matthew 22:21).
 - ◆ This was the fate of the Smyrna congregation as we read (Revelation 2:8-10), but also the Jews under Nazi Germany, and recently Christians and other minority groups at the hands of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.
 - ◆ So now to our list of evil powers are added corrupt government agencies and false religious institutions.
 - ◆ The Sixth Seal comes in the form of a divine warning to these evil forces.
 - ◆ God is not going to stand by and let this repetitive evil process continue forever.
 - ◆ John reminds them that eventually the world will face a higher standard imposed by God. God will hold the rich and powerful accountable for their exploitive behavior.
 - ◆ At that time, they will sing a different tune.
 - ◆ **Revelation 6:16** *They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!"¹⁷ For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?"*
 - ◆ Empires established through conquest and violence will themselves be destroyed by these same forces.
 - ◆ But eventually after humanity has had its fill of evil, God as prophesied by the prophet Daniel (Daniel 2:44-45) and now here, will use His divine power to bring it all to an end.
 - ◆ But it would be a mistake not to see the warning message this section of scripture has for Christians living down through the ages not to get caught up in these evil practices.
 - ◆ Our allegiance is to the Lamb and what He represents rather than the evil beast and what he represents.
- But now before the seventh and final seal is opened, the scene returns to the heavenly throne room.**
- ◆ John sees a countless multitude from every nation standing in a posture of hope and celebration
 - ◆ **Revelation 7:9-10** *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."*
 - ◆ What we have seen here in these first seven chapters is a scene that moves in cycles.
 - ◆ They start with foreboding images of war, beasts and terrifying horsemen, but instead of death and destruction, the scene ends with multiple millions and possibly billions singing praises to God and the Lamb.
 - ◆ So just before God steps in to bring about the annihilation of the wicked, there is a pause.
 - ◆ **Revelation 8:1** *When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.*
 - ◆ It's as if God is hoping people will come to their senses and He won't have to use force to bring them to their senses.
 - ◆ This pattern of foreboding, a pause, and then hope is repeated throughout the book.
 - ◆ However, if the wicked don't respond, then sudden destruction is brought upon them.