

“Revelation—The Return of the King”

Today we have the final installment of this 3 part series on the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. In this series we’ve been trying to understand how we make sense of the book of Revelation for our lives today. Part of what we’ve learned in this series may be that what we’ve been taught, or heard other people say about the book of Revelation, is not necessarily the only way to understand this book. In fact, for most of church history Christians have not understood the book of Revelation the way it’s popularly understood today. Some people look at Revelation and see it as predictive prophecy, foretelling all the events of the end times--all of it is in the future. But we’ve learned that for most of Christian history people understood the events in the book of Revelation as things happening in John’s day. And then only pointing towards, at the end of the book, the things that would happen at the end of time. Today we’re going to start by looking at the possible scenarios of the second coming of Christ and the end of time that we see in Revelation. And then we’ll ask the question, “So what?” What does all of this really mean for our lives today.

So let’s jump in by going backwards for a minute. We’ve learned in this study that in many ways Revelation is describing events taking place in the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was the beast in the book of Revelation, the antichrist represented the emperors who took on the titles that were only to be used for God and Jesus Christ. They were demanding that people were to offer sacrifices to the emperors. We see all of this reflected in the book of Revelation. What John does in Revelation is that he paints a picture, he unveils, just how ugly that empire really is. He points out some of the atrocities that were taking place against God’s people.

Then John paints a picture of God’s empire, God’s people, God’s kingdom, and John invites us to choose which path we’ll take. Will we take the path of destruction, or will we take the path that leads to life? And he challenges us to not compromise our faith. To not be willing to call the emperor by certain names reserved for Jesus, to not offer sacrifices to him. John challenges us to do the things that Jesus calls us to do and stand apart from our culture when we need to and not be so consumed with fitting in to our cultural norms.

John is telling us that if we do that there is a cost involved. Because of your faith you might lose your job, or other people might look down on you, and some might even have to die for their faith. That’s what John is telling the people of his day. But he says, “In the end, Rome, and the Roman Empire will be destroyed; in the end evil will be destroyed and God will be the victor and God’s kingdom will reign forever and you will be there with him if only you persevere.

Now when we turn to chapter 18 in Revelation we reach the climax of all the evil on earth. What happens to evil is that it begins to be destroyed, starting with the city of Rome. Last week we learned that Babylon in the book of Revelation was a code name for the city of Rome. Revelation 18 starting with verse 2 says, **“He called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury” (Revelation, 18:2-3, NRSV).**

The 18th chapter of Revelation paints the picture of the fall of Rome. And Rome did fall. In fact within 70 years of John’s Revelation the Roman Empire begins to collapse, it’s fractured and then put back together by a strong emperor, then it’s fractured again. Eventually Rome is weakened to the point that it is vulnerable to attack and it is sacked. It will be sacked and pillaged over and over and over again. Until eventually Rome falls and the empire falls. John could see in his day that an empire like Rome is unsustainable; that evil cannot continue to do what it’s doing without it crashing down at some point. John foretells that. He sees that one day Rome will fall and it falls.

And all these events that John saw in his day are repeated throughout history, over and over and over when there are empires that do things that are wrong, that are evil, when God’s people are persecuted. They become corrupt and fall from dominance.

And that has to make you think about us. You know of course that we're in some ways the lone empire--the last superpower. But how long will that last? Will we be the dominant world empire until the end of time?

The book of Revelation is reminding us that empires don't last forever. Power doesn't last forever. Yes, we have the greatest opportunity to do the greatest good but if we forget that, empires have a way of imploding. That's part of the warning of the book of Revelation--that any empire that becomes detached from God and exchanges evil for good, will come crashing down.

In Revelation chapter 19 we find that evil is finally and ultimately destroyed in the battle of Armageddon. "Armageddon" today is synonymous with destruction. Armageddon is a word used by Hollywood to talk about cataclysmic events here on earth—an asteroid or World War 3.

In John's day Armageddon was a literal place. It was the mount of Megiddo. Megiddo was an ancient city that goes back thousands and thousands of years. It was a city along the Jezreel Valley that sat along the major trade routes that linked Africa to Europe and Asia. Because of its location this was a place that epoch battles were fought. In fact 34 major battles have taken place in this valley by Megiddo. There have been times when blood literally flowed through this valley. Napoleon is said to have called this the world's most natural battle field and it became that time and time again.

So when John writes about Armageddon, he's talking about a literal place, but it symbolized something more. It symbolized a time when all the forces of good and evil would battle and God would defeat the forces evil. Revelation 19:11-16 says, **"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS"** (Revelation 19:11-16, NIV).

This is a powerful picture of the return of Christ, the second coming of Jesus, when the king returns and he utterly obliterates evil. **You might be thinking, "That doesn't sound like Jesus. Jesus was gentle and compassionate when he walked this earth." But if you had lived in a time like John did when a million Jews and Christians were put to death by the Roman Empire you are waiting for Jesus to come as a victor over evil.** And notice that no one, not even Jesus himself, draws a sword. He's pictured with a sword coming out of his mouth. That means that by his words alone he will destroy his enemies. All he has to do is speak a word and evil is obliterated. This is what we see in the battle of Armageddon. It's a vision of a day when all that is evil, all that terrorizes, all that leaves people broken and starving and violated; all that is opposing God will be destroyed. John's telling us to not be found on the side of evil on that day.

This takes us to Revelation chapter 20 where we find a few verses that can be confusing and have led to big debates among Christians for centuries. The verses relate to the thousand year reign of Christ. A thousand years is a millennium. Look at chapter 20. **"And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years"** (Revelation 20:1-4, NIV).

This is a vision John has of a 1000 year period of time when Satan is locked in a pit and Jesus reigns on earth. People have debated about how that 1,000 years will unfold. One view is called Historic Pre-Millennialism. Which says that we are in the end times now, and that one day, Satan will take control for 7

years, a time of tribulation, then after that 7 years, Jesus will return and lock Satan in the pit for 1,000 years. During that time Jesus and all the faithful followers (dead and alive) will reign in a time of absolute purity, and joy, and bliss.

A more recent view of the Millennium is called Dispensational Pre-Millennialism. This view looks at Revelation and says Jesus will come secretly first and take away all the faithful followers (the rapture), and those left behind will go through the time of tribulation for 7 years. Then Jesus will return with all the faithful and set up his reign on earth for 1,000 years before a final judgment. This is the way Tim LaHaye views Revelation and depicts it in the *Left Behind* books.

A third view is called Amillennialism which looks at these events as symbolic rather than literal. It says that we are currently living in a symbolic millennium because this is the age of the church, the living Body of Christ. And every time somebody becomes a believer and Christ reigns in their heart, and in churches that are faithful Christ reigns there, Christ's kingdom is already present and growing. Jesus said, "My kingdom is among you, it is upon you, and it is within you." This view says that the millennial reign is a symbol of the time of the church where the church is able to do God's work in the world. And then at some future time, Jesus will return at the second coming and the last judgment and then there will be the creation of a new heaven and a new earth just like Revelation describes. That is the view that was held by most of the reformers, Saint Augustine, it is the view held by most mainline Christians.

I share all that with you so that you know that there are different ways to read this book. The way Tim LaHaye depicts the *Left Behind* books is not the only way to read Revelation. In fact, it's not the way that most Christians have read it for the last 2000 years. But each of these views says that Jesus could return at any time, without warning, so there is a clear call to be ready. To not wait for signs of the end, but because Jesus could arrive for the final judgment at any time, we should live as people who are prepared. People who are living as followers of Jesus every day. People who are ready for the day of judgment.

It's important for us to recognize that John says there will be a judgment day--a day of reckoning. In fact this message is communicated throughout the New Testament. Each of us will stand before Christ one day, and give an account of ourselves. Part of the book of Revelation is asking, "Are you ready for that day? Are you ready?" It tells us that at the judgment day there will be books that are opened. The Book of Life. The question will be, "Is your name written in the Book of Life?"

That leads us to the final picture of the new heaven and new earth. Listen carefully to these words from Revelation 21:1-4. **"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'"** (Revelation 21:1-4, NIV).

John tells us in the rest of chapter 21 and chapter 22 that what he sees in the New Jerusalem is a beautiful garden and beautiful trees. There is one tree at the center of the garden called the tree of life. And there's a river that flows through the New Jerusalem and brings life to the city. And the trees at the banks of that river have leaves that bring healing to the nations and God is in the midst of that place and there is no need for the sun anymore because God is the light and he lives with his people and all suffering and sin and pain are abolished. And the serpent is nowhere to be found.

We're supposed to read this part of story and say, "Hey, that sounds familiar. I think I've been here before. I think I remember this place. Where have I heard that before?" It's meant to take you back to the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 2 where it says, **"Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground-- trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life...A river watering the garden flowed from Eden..."** (Genesis 2:8-10, NIV).

Do you see it? Where we are in Revelation chapter 22? We've come back to paradise. It's astounding when you read Revelation that somehow through the Holy Spirit working in John we find that we end up where we started. We began the Bible in paradise where God created human beings to walk with him in the cool of the afternoon and enjoy that life of closeness, until the serpent in that garden that deceived them and tempted them to disobey God. They were banished from that garden, that paradise.

The rest of human history is the story of human beings running away from God, being disobedient to God and God chasing after us trying to redeem us, and save us, and protect us, and draw us to himself so that finally in the end he could take us back to paradise where the serpent was banished forever. Where there would be no more suffering, no more sorrow, no more death and God would walk with us in the cool of the afternoon. Paradise has been found and restored.

Knowing that this is how the story ends, we're meant to live a certain way in response. And it's not to be consumed by the end times and when that's going to happen. Jesus himself said, **"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36, NIV).**

Instead the book of Revelation paints for us a picture of the end, of paradise and it says, "Live like it's already happening now! If you know that God's plan in paradise is that there is no more hunger, no more suffering, no more injustice, no more evil, then live like it today! Start bringing paradise into being today! Start living as though it's already happening." Yes, we look for the return of Jesus, but not so that we get lulled into passivity or complacency. We look at it with a sense that there is work to be done in the mean time. Revelation is telling us to get on with that work!

How you look at the final judgment and the last days in the book of Revelation has a lot to do with whether or not you see yourself in the Book of Life. Where you're sitting when you look at things matters. Think of it this way: When you're sitting behind the wheel of your car driving through a snow storm, seeing cars in the ditch, driving white-knuckled, fearing for your life as the snow piles up. That's terrifying. But as soon as you pull into your garage and get in front of the fireplace and look at the snow from your easy chair, you say, "Isn't that beautiful?" Where you're sitting when you look at the snow makes all the difference, doesn't it?

The same thing is true of Revelation and the Book of Life and the final judgment. Where you sit affects how you see it. After a life of faithfulness and striving after God's will and God's word, you have a different perspective than if you know you've been far from God and living life for yourself rather than for God and others.

So where are you sitting as you read Revelation; as you see the description of the events of the end times. Is your name written in the Lambs Book of Life? In Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells us that at the final judgment there will be some people who thought their name was written in the Book of Life and it was not. He will say to them, "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. I was naked and you gave me no clothing. I was sick, I was in prison and you did not visit me." Those people will be surprised and say, "Wait a second, Lord. When did we see you like that and not do anything." His response, "Whenever you did not do it for those who were in need, you did not do it for me." There will be people who think their names are written in the book of life, but they won't be.

Revelation is asking, "Is your name in the book?" For your name to be written in the book of life means that you're trusting in Jesus Christ. It means you've transferred ownership of your life to him. It means you're trusting in the one who is coming to fight that last battle on the white horse. The one whose name is Faithful and True, whose robe is dipped in blood. Who is called the King of kings and Lord of lords. It means you're trusting in him and daily you are striving to follow him—to live in a way that honors him and glorifies him. Then your name is written in the Lambs book of Life and you are ready for that day and you look forward to it.

The challenge we're given in Revelation may be the most important challenge of the entire Bible: How do you and I, if we've chosen to be followers of Jesus, live in this world, but not be of it? How do we exist within our culture, without compromising our faith and how our faith gets lives out? I once heard it put this way: "If being a Christian were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Is there evidence of

following Christ in what you do, in how you respond to people, in how you use your time and money, in how you respond to the hungry, the homeless, the hurting?

Some days I do better than others. On some days if Christ were to return he'd definitely find me doing his work, loving his people, being there for the least of these. On other days, I'm afraid he would say to me, "I do not know you." The challenge of Revelation is to grow in love and Godliness to point where more and more, Christ would recognize me as one of his own. As one whose name is written in the Book of Life; as one who fails occasionally, and falls down in his faith, but at the same time is covered by God's amazing grace.

As your pastor, I want you to look at the message of Revelation, not with fear, but with a sense of expectancy, a sense of joy, a sense of doing what the King of your life would want you to do. Knowing that as you give this King ownership of your life, one day you will be with him in a New Heaven and a New Earth. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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