

REVELATION

Study 10: The End of Evil

In our previous study, we looked at John's sobering description of the inevitable downfall of the Babylon-like empire of his day. We discussed the urgent warning given to those in the church who are compromising with the empire, and we also pointed out the stark contrast between Rome being portrayed as the great prostitute and God's faithful people being portrayed as a virgin bride who has made herself ready for marriage to the Lamb.

As we are approaching the end of the book, it would be helpful to keep repeating and remember what we've learned about how the Lamb brings God's kingdom here on earth.

Jesus launched God's kingdom by his faithful witness to the point of death – which defeated evil and redeemed a people for God. God's people (the church) are now called to continue what Jesus started by fulfilling a special role in bringing God's kingdom here on earth. This special role of the church is revealed to John's audience in the scroll that the Lamb receives and opens. The opened scroll reveals to the churches that their special role is to be God's faithful witnesses, like Jesus, who patiently endure the tribulation and conflict with the beast of their day (Rome). They are to confront the injustices and idolatry of the Roman Empire by being God's faithful witnesses – to the point of death if necessary. This is what it means to conquer with the crucified Messiah, and this is what will bring God's kingdom here on earth – this leads the nations to repent and turn to the one true God.

However, there is something else also being communicated in the Book of Revelation regarding the church's role as God's faithful witnesses. And that is this double-edged impact that our faithful witnesses has on the world around us. On the one hand, as we just mentioned, it leads nations to repent and turn to God. But on the other hand, when our faithful witness is ignored and rejected then it becomes evidence against those who reject it. This means that our faithful witness also has a way of leading people and nations to further reject God which puts them in a situation where they will have no excuse when they experience the consequences of God's judgement. This has been a consistent theme throughout the Book of Revelation. Like the faithful witness of Jesus himself, the faithful witness of God's people leads to both, salvation for some and judgment for others.

In this particular study, we are going to read and discuss what John sees next as he describes the return of Jesus as the executor of God's final act of judgement against the evil that has ruined his good world. John's visions in Revelation 19-20 pick up on what was portrayed in the pouring out of the sixth bowl (Revelation 16) where John described the nations joining forces with the beast to wage war against God's people at a place called Armageddon. However, we know how this battle will end. And so, this section could be appropriately titled, *The End of Evil*.¹

The End of the Beast

Revelation 19:11-21

John now sees Jesus as the great hero of God's people returning on a white horse with a calvary of Christian martyrs following right behind him. John describes Jesus with images from the opening vision of the book and from other images found throughout the book. Jesus appears as the great conquerer who has come to defeat God's enemies once and for all. However, his robe is covered in blood before the battle even begins, and his only weapon in this battle is "the sword of his mouth".

So why is that significant?

These are important images and descriptions of Jesus' return that tend to be misunderstood or sometimes just overlooked. The robe that he is wearing is covered in blood before the battle even begins. Contrary to many popular assumptions, this blood does not represent the blood of people that Jesus is slaying; nor does the sword of his mouth represent a typical sword that slays people in battle. As the Lamb who *had been slain* and who has redeemed a people for God *by his blood*, the blood on his robe is his own blood – it is the sign of his original victory over evil at the cross.

You see, contrary to some of the more popular ideas about Jesus' return and this famous Battle of Armageddon, John's vision of this final battle is not some bloodbath where Jesus leads his army to defeat his enemies like William Wallace in the movie *Braveheart*.

Commenting on all this imagery, Richard Bauckham writes:

"The military imagery is controlled by judicial imagery. The sword with which he slays is the sword that comes from his mouth (19:15, 21): his word of true judgement (cf. 1:16; 2:12, 16).

¹ Loren Stuckenbruck, *Revelation, In Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2003), 1565

His eyes of flame (19:12) are those of the divine judge who sees infallibly into hearts and minds (1:14; 2:18, 23). So this is not the slaughtered Lamb turned slaughterer, but it is the witness turned judge.”²

Jesus, the faithful and true witness is now seen as the faithful and true judge. The double-edged sword that comes from his mouth represents the double-edged impact that his faithful witnesses has on the world. As we mentioned earlier, the intent is to save, but it also leads to judgement. And this is something that Jesus alluded to during his earthly ministry when he said:

I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness. If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. (John 12:46-48)

Jesus says that he did not come into the world to judge the world but to save the world, and that those who reject him and do not receive his words have a judge already. And what is their judge? The words that he has spoken (and that they have rejected) will be their judge on the last day.

The forces of evil who oppose God and all of those who do not want to participate in the kingdom of God will face the consequences of their decision to reject Jesus and his message. They will be given exactly what they have asked for – they will be cast away from the kingdom of God and given an eternal existence isolated from God’s presence and his people forever.

And so, this vision of Jesus’ return is not trying to tell us that the same Jesus who willingly gave his life for his enemies is going to one day turn into some blood-thirsty “Warrior Jesus” who storms in and violently kill his enemies with a sword. John’s vision of Jesus’ return is meant to inspire hope and to assure Christians who are suffering at the hands of the empire that evil will not get away with evil. Jesus will one day return as the executor of God’s final act of justice, and he will hold everyone who has rejected him and refused to repent accountable for corrupting his world with injustice, immorality and idolatry. The beast, the false prophet and all of those who align themselves with this kingdom of corruption will one day face God’s final act of judgement – and they will be defeated and dealt with once and for all.

² Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 105

The End of the Dragon

Revelation 20

John's previous vision portrayed the end of the beast as the beast and false prophet are destroyed and thrown into the lake of fire. Now John sees an angel seizing the dragon and locking him up in the pit where he will serve a sentence of one-thousand years.

Now, it should be stated that Revelation 20 is perhaps the most controversial and debated chapter in the entire Bible. Some people believe that the events described here in this chapter refer to a literal thousand-year period in which Jesus will return and rule here on earth before God's final act of judgement. Others believe that this thousand-year reign symbolizes the entire period between Jesus' resurrection and return. However, we are not going to get into the more popular debates about the nature of this millennial reign because more often than not these sorts of discussions and debates end up missing the main point that John is trying to communicate here.

So what is John trying to communicate in his descriptions of these visions in Revelation 20?

To better understand what is being described in Revelation 20, we need to go back to the Hebrew Bible and better understand a specific vision described in the Book of Daniel. It is a vision that we have discussed already in our study of Revelation, but one that John is definitely using here in this final section of the book (Revelation 19-20).

In Daniel 7, Daniel has a vision where he sees a terrible beast rising out of the sea and waging war against God's people. He is told that this beast will overpower God's people until one day when God will return in judgement. God will come and vindicate his people who have been trampled by this beast. The beast will be given over to be burned with fire, and God's faithful people will reign over all the earth in a new eternal kingdom that will never be destroyed.

This vision in Daniel 7 provides us with the outline for understanding what John is describing in Revelation 20. In Revelation 19:11-21, we see Jesus returning in judgement and vindicating God's people who have been trampled by the beast. That judgement concludes with the beast being given over to be burned in the lake of fire. John now sees those who had been slain by the beast being resurrected in order to reign with the Messiah for one thousand years. This is John's way of portraying what Daniel's vision promised as well – God's faithful people will be vindicated and will reign over all the earth in a new eternal kingdom that will never be destroyed.

The seizing of the dragon and sealing him shut in the pit symbolizes the fact that nothing will be able to change God's plan concerning his kingdom.³ Not even Satan, the ancient serpent, who disrupted God's good world in the garden will be able to disrupt the coming of God's kingdom.

But what about John's vision of Satan being released?

The release of Satan demonstrates what was promised in the Book of Daniel – the vindicated people of God will not be defeated. Unlike the beast's kingdom, the kingdom of God will be an everlasting dominion that shall never pass away and a kingdom that shall never be destroyed. And so, John's vision of Satan's release and then immediate defeat is meant to further highlight the fact that the eternal kingdom of God is indestructible. It is invincible, even against the serpent himself! All of God's people can rest assured that there will be no replay of the garden.

Highlighting this main message that John is trying to communicate, Richard Bauckham writes:

"This shows that the theological point of the millennium is solely to demonstrate the triumph of the martyrs: that those whom the beast put to death are those who will truly live... that those who contested his right to rule and suffered for it are those who will in the end rule as universally as he – and for much longer: a thousand years! Finally to demonstrate that their triumph in Christ's kingdom is not one which evil can again reverse, that it is God's last word for good against evil, the devil is given a last chance to deceive the nations again (20:7-8). But it is no re-run of the rule of the beast. The citadel of the saints proves impregnable."⁴

And so, this is the theological purpose of the millennial reign that would have inspired hope for John's original audience and that should still inspire hope for Christians today: Those whom the beast kills are those who will truly live. Those who confront the beast's rule are those who will rule in the end. On the last Day, God will finally put an end to all the forces of evil once and for all. Satan can do nothing to stop this, and there will be no replay of the garden. God will vindicate his faithful people, and they will reign over all the earth in a new eternal kingdom that will never be destroyed.

³ The language John uses to talk about the seizing of the dragon is pulled from the same language used to describe Daniel being seized and thrown into the lion's den. "And a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel" (Daniel 3:17).

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 107

The New Creation

Revelation 21:1-8

John now sees the long-awaited arrival of the new creation – a new heaven and a new earth. These final two chapters (Revelation 21-22) are “the climax of the book of Revelation, the New Testament, the entire Bible, the whole story of God, and also the story of humanity.”⁵ As N.T. Wright puts it, “It is the final answer to the Lord’s Prayer [may your kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven].”⁶

The arrival of the new creation is portrayed as the new city of Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth like a bride on her wedding day who is all dressed up in white and walking down the aisle to be joined to her husband. This image is an important one that ought to reshape some of our common misconceptions about where we will spend eternity.

In the same way that the original exodus story ended with God coming down from heaven to dwell in the tabernacle, this new exodus that we are a part of will not end with humans going to heaven but with heaven coming down to earth. The story of human history will end with heaven and earth finally being intimately reunited and restored forever.

We have now reached the great climax of John’s apocalyptic message of hope. The descriptions of the new creation in these final two chapters are intended to encourage the first-century churches that the suffering and tribulation of their present moment is not even worth comparing to what God has in store for them. The Almighty God of Creation is going to put an end to evil once and for all. The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and he shall reign forever and ever. God is going to make all things new, and this renewed earth is going to be his eternal dwelling place where all of his faithful people will live in security with him forever.

⁵ Michael J Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 163

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 104