

The Rider on a White Horse

One of the great challenges of the book of Revelation is that it is not written out in chronological order. John doesn't say, "This happens and then this happens and then, after a hundred years or so this happens." Rather, he says, "I saw this and then I saw something else and then I saw some-thing that looked a lot like the first thing I saw. And then I saw something completely unlike anything else, but I saw it and I think it's important and I'm writing it down so you can know what I saw." Those aren't John's words, of course, but they express a bit of the sense a person gets as we try to decipher the clues and put it all together.

For example, when was Satan thrown down from heaven? If you read chapter 12, where the phrase "thrown down" is repeated three times in reference to Satan, you have to conclude that this happened during or immediately after the earthly ministry of Jesus. But chapter 12 comes after the seven seals are broken and the seven trumpets have sounded and the plagues have happened. And we've seen earlier that the martyrs have been crying out for justice - was that before the earthly ministry of Jesus? No, because they were martyred for their testimony about Jesus. So, we do not have an order of events in the book of Revelation. We have vision after vision after vision, but no indication of how they relate to each other in time, only how they relate to each other in content.

It is reasonable to suppose that the plagues associated with the breaking of the seven seals are roughly the same as those associated with the seven trumpets which are very similar in nature to the plagues that were poured out of the seven bowls of God's anger. They seem to differ a bit in degree of severity, becoming more intense as they lead toward the final judgment, but that is explained by God's desire that no one should perish, but all come to repentant faith and by the fact that there was little response to earlier plagues. God hoped to break through to hard hearts by sounding a more severe warning. But, ultimately, positions were hardened, and those who had aligned themselves with the values of this world, with defiance against their Creator, refused to repent and to acknowledge God as their Lord.

Now we're in to the very late chapters of Revelation and yet we still haven't gotten to the end. Why do I say that? Because in chapter 20 we come across something that seems out of order, something that can't come after the end, but which seems to, because it's after the defeat of the beast and the false prophet and the kings of the earth who attack the rider on the white horse who wears the title "King of kings and Lord of lords". And yet, it's also right before Satan gathers the nations to fight against God's people. In neither case is there a description of an actual battle, but in both cases the enemies of God are defeated and punished. In between these two descriptions is something called the thousand year reign of Christ.

Now, what do we know about the use of numbers in the Revelation? We know that they are not statistics, but symbols. So, the 144,000 who were sealed were a number that represented the old covenant and the new -- twelve tribes, twelve apostles -- and then a number from every tribe and tongue and nation and people, a number that was

too great to count, $10 \times 10 \times 10$. What is the thousand year reign except $10 \times 10 \times 10$ - another number that is too great to count. If Christ's reign is an indefinite, to us, number of years, then when did it begin or when will it begin?

To answer this requires a technical discussion of John's use of the word "and". Chapter 20 begins with the word "and" followed by "I saw" followed by a description of an angel coming down out of heaven with the key to the abyss. Whenever John uses the word "and" with "I saw" followed by a description of an angel coming down from heaven, with power, he's taking you back in time. This is not a chronological sequence in which the events of chapter 20 come after the events of chapter 19, but it must be referring to something that happened earlier or at the same time as the descriptions in chapter 19.

The descriptions of the gathering together of forces for battle that come right before and right after the description of the thousand year reign -- in other words, from Rev. 19:17-21 and 20:8-10 -- both rely heavily on Ezekiel 38 and 39 as well as Zechariah 12-14. The use of these Old Testament prophecies in all the accounts of preparations for battle in Revelation tell us something: that they all refer to the same gathering of forces, the same preparation for the last battle. This also includes 16:12-16. There is only one final confrontation between good and evil, but it appears in John's visions in three separate passages, possibly four, and those occur after the thousand year reign described at the beginning of chapter 20.

Now we can put the visions in a general order. There was something very important that happened in the ministry of Jesus which we don't understand as well as we should. Jesus confronted Satan in the wilderness after 40 days without eating and He overcame His enemy's temptations by appealing to the Scriptures. At the beginning of His public ministry, He announced that the Kingdom of God had arrived. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom, called His first four disciples and then drove out an evil spirit, a demon. Still in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, we read:

And Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but He would not let the demons speak because they knew who He was. (1:34)

And in 3:23, Jesus told a parable to contradict those who were saying that He was casting out demons by the power of Satan. Listen to this parable, especially noting v. 27:

How can Satan drive out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. . . . If Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. (v. 27) In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house. (3:23,26,27)

Jesus is essentially describing the scene in Revelation 20 in which Satan is bound and kept chained for 1000 years. This is the church age, however long it lasts. During the church age, as we have seen over the past few weeks, there is still lots of

deception going on, but it is being conducted by the beast out of the sea and the beast from the earth while Satan is kept bound in the bottom-less pit. That's why you can present the gospel to some-one and they can quickly come to a saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and experience the new life that He brings. Satan has been bound since Jesus confronted him in the desert and overcame his temptations.

During this "church age", we have encountered the forces of evil attacking believers in Christ. John is clear that many have been martyred for their faith. God's response has been to send plagues, to try to stir people to repent from their sin and their evil intentions towards the church, but, for the most part, people choose defiance against God. They align themselves with the beasts, impressed by their power and in awe of the signs they perform. When God judges them, they curse God and their defiance gets stronger and stronger.

At the end of this church age, Satan will be released for a short time. He will use his gift of deception to convince the rulers and many of the people of this world to fight against Jesus and His followers but they will be destroyed by the words of Jesus ... that's the sharp sword coming out of His mouth. Then Satan and his two beasts will be thrown into a place of torment. This is followed by the final judgment which makes way for the New Jerusalem. Another way of describing the defeat of Satan is from 20, verse 9, where it says that fire came down from heaven and devoured them - again, fire is a symbol for judgment, not just in Revelation, but in many parts of Scripture.

Which brings me to the fate of those who are found wanting at the last judgment. Let me describe the scene:

John saw a great white throne with someone sitting on it. He saw the dead from land and sea, from all history, standing before this throne and he saw books opened, including the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to what was written in the books. And then some amazing things happen:
Death and the grave were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death - the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire. (20:14f)

So death itself is thrown into something called the lake of fire. If fire signifies judgment, as we've just seen, then death itself is judged and destroyed, which means that, from this time on, there is no more death. And then there are people who are also thrown into this place of judgment. This is described in various ways in Scripture: in the final chapter of Revelation we are told that some people, those who have washed their robes, may enter the eternal city, while another group who are defined by their acts of rebellion against God's laws, remain outside the city. Jesus spoke of the place of punishment, the place we call hell, both as a fiery furnace and as outer darkness. There is both the sense of judgment that comes from passing through fire, which He also spoke of specifically, and the sense of being lost and very alone. In the pictures Jesus painted and in John's visions, the overriding sense is

that people existing without God will live with profound regret.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul speaks of the fate of those who have rejected the knowledge of God and His gospel. He says that they will be shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power. This is similar to the description in Revelation 22 of those who remain outside the city, or of those who will find themselves weeping outside, in the darkness, as Jesus described in Matthew 8:12, 22:13 and 25:30.

I'm not sure which part of the language about the afterlife is symbolic and which part might be literal, but I don't think of the God of great love and grace as being the eternal torturer of the souls of the dead. It seems that their fate is the one they have chosen, and it's a choice they deeply regret, one that leaves them in a state of anguish. It is irreversible, because it was made when they had freedom to choose whom they would worship. If our hearts have been touched by the love of God, we should not want our worst enemy to endure such an existence. Even if they mock us, we should still have the compassion to tell them that God promises us joy and peace with Him in eternity.

I've focused on chapter 20 so far, because it establishes a time frame for the book as a whole. We see certain things in Revelation that belong to the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, certain things that belong to the age in which the church operates and certain things that belong to the time of the end, including the end of God's wrath, the final judgment and the final state of Satan and those who serve him. A great number of the details that people through the ages have assigned to the time of the end are, in fact, events that take place during the age of the church -- including the thousand year reign of Christ, including the plagues that come with the possibility of repentance and including the deception of the beasts from the sea and from the land.

But now I want to go back to chapter 19 and try to describe the joy and celebration that the defeat of Babylon brings to those who inhabit heaven. Imagine that you were born into slavery, like some of the people we read about in our monthly updates from International Justice Mission. Maybe your father or grandfather had a debt he couldn't pay and was pressed into working in a stone quarry where he lived and worked, day after day after day, where he raised his children who became part of the "payment package" and who also worked long hard hours with no chance of escape or being set free. And then, some Christians - lawyers and social workers accompanied by local police officers - came to your quarry one day and you were taken away into something you had never known before -- freedom. You were able to go to school, to get a job that you chose, to marry and raise children who didn't have to work off some impossible debt. Maybe your reaction would sound a little bit like the opening verses of Revelation 19:

"Hallelujah! Salvation is from our God. Glory and power belong to Him alone. His judgments are just and true. He has punished the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and He has avenged the murder of His

servants.” Again and again their voices rang, “Hallelujah! The smoke from that city ascends forever and forever.” (19:1-3)

It sounds a bit strange to our ears, this rejoicing over the scene of the destruction of Babylon. While kings and sea captains and the merchants who have become wealthy on the back of deception and seduction are deeply grieving their loss, those who value justice and righteousness are celebrating. It continues:

Then I heard again what sounded like the shout of a huge crowd, or the roar of mighty ocean waves, or the crash of loud thunder: “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice and honor Him.” (19:6-7a)

The triumph of good over evil is a theme played out in countless books and movies. The writer draws you in to the conflict and has you pulling for one side to win the final battle. I mean, who wants the orcs to rule Middle Earth under the control of Sauron? Or who wants Darth Sidious to rule the empire and continue his campaign of destroying or corrupting all the Jedi knights? We want justice and truth and peace to rule in our lives, and that's what happens when God's Kingdom comes in full and the enemy of justice and truth and peace is taken out.

This is the cause of the “Hallelujahs!” and mighty shouts in heaven. The power that has inspired evil, destructive actions all over the world has been dealt with. There is a strong sense of relief as well as the exulting feeling of victory. God has won the last battle and we can be glad and rejoice and honor HIm.

Then, one last time, John writes these words: “Then I saw heaven opened.” (19:11) This time he sees a vision that reveals the last confrontation between the power of God's Kingdom and the power of evil -- we've already looked at the defeat of Satan and the final judgment from the end of chapter 19 and in chapter 20. But this is where it starts:

Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. And the one sitting on the horse was named Faithful and True, for He judges fairly and then goes to war. His eyes were bright like flames of fire, and on His head were many crowns. A name was written on Him, and only He knew what it meant. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God. The armies of heaven, dressed in pure white linen, followed Him on white horses. From His mouth came a sharp sword, and with it He struck down the nations. He ruled them with an iron rod, and He trod the winepress of the fierce wrath of almighty God. On His robe and thigh was written this title: King of kings and Lord of lords. (19:11-16)

Some quick points on this passage:

1. When someone was riding a donkey, he was coming in peace, but riding a horse is riding to war.
2. Jesus having a name that was unknown to anyone but Himself means that there was no person that had an advantage over Jesus. In those days it was thought that if you knew someone's name, you had an advantage, you had at least some degree of

control over that person -- not so with Jesus. He is in control.

3. His robe was dipped in blood - whose blood? His own. The cross was the place of His victory, and why He won't have to fight His enemies at Armageddon -- He has already won the battle.

4. The armies of heaven are dressed, not in armor or in a soldier's uniform, as if going to a real battle, but in white linen, the garment of a priest. They know they are not riding to war, but are riding in a victory procession.

5. We see Him again as John first saw him, in chapter 1, with the sword in His mouth, the Word of God. He is the living word of God; His life is God's speech to us, as the writer of Hebrews puts it in the first chapter. He is victorious because He is what John wrote about in his introduction to the gospel:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

6. He will rule the nations with an iron rod. This is a fulfilment of Psalm 2, where the nations are plotting against God and against His anointed one. The "nations" in this sense are not all the people, but the rulers who represent nations and who want to throw off God's authority and be absolute rulers themselves. As Psalm 2 tells us, the Lord's anointed will destroy this pretension to power and will exercise His rightful authority.

7. Finally, we see the ultimate reason for Jesus' victory. It's simply because of who He is. He has a title: King of kings and Lord of lords. He is supreme over all powers in the cosmos. He wins the battles He faces simply by speaking -- that's what we learn from the passages that tell us He destroyed His enemies by the sword in His mouth. It is the words of Jesus, who is the Word of God, that all the forces of evil arrayed against Him must yield before. They have no chance. Jesus will triumph because of who He is, the Word of God, and because of what He has done at Calvary, the sacrifice of perfect love.

To John's audience, the church in Asia Minor, a church caught between the power and grandeur that was Rome at the time and the new faith that was spreading quickly throughout the Roman world, this was a timely message. There is no arm wrestling or power lifting or light sabre match going on for supremacy in the created order. There is one King, one Lord, one creator and ruler over all who defeats His enemies with the words that come from His mouth ... and it's not Caesar.

The Christians were faced with the potential for persecution if they stood up for their faith in Christ, but John is urging them to risk it all, to pay whatever price it takes, to stay on-side with the One who will be victorious over all earthly kings. There's nothing worth more, he tells them, than Jesus and the Kingdom He brought to earth.

Therefore there is no sacrifice too great. He is the pearl of great price that He spoke about in a parable, or the treasure hidden in the field. He is worth living for and dying for and, at the end, when all else that Satan used to draw our hearts away from Him is destroyed, He will reign in glory and welcome all who love Him to share His eternal home ... but more on that next week.