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Revelation 7:9-17  
The Wrath...of the Lamb?!



Norman Vincent Peale once said, *“Part of the happiness of life consists not in fighting battles, but in avoiding them. A masterly retreat is in itself a victory.”* The same might be said of preaching on Revelation. At first glance it seems a battle the preacher cannot win with the endless terrifying visions of the beast, the dragon, Satan, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Not to mention the endless dangerous misinterpretations of its purpose. But let me begin by stating this plainly, Revelation has nothing to do with predicting the end of the world and everything to do with living in the present. For you and me to read this book as a roadmap to the end of the world would be like reading an Emily Dickinson poem to predict the stock market. Not only silly but dangerous.

In today’s sermon we will see that Revelation was written to people undergoing horrific persecution, which led John to write in allegory as a more powerful means to bolster their courage while finally promising them that no matter what happens a glorious heaven awaits them.

Revelation is about the final victory of God, about which our Easter hope assures us through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The call is to faithfulness and perseverance not to fight or even to avoid the coming terror. Speaking of avoidance, the so-called Rapture, in which

people are whisked into heaven at the end of times, is nowhere to be found in its pages. John is not preaching escape from persecution but heaven through persecution.

And that is who this book was written for, those under the threat of martyrdom, and when we read this book we must do so as if we are looking over the shoulders of John’s first century audience.

The persecution of Christians by Rome resulted in the most horrific of deaths. They began around 64 A.D. when Nero was emperor and Rome was ravaged by a great fire. It was rumored Nero started the blaze and when he could not silence those rumors, he began the killings. During the writing of Revelation a few decades later Domitian was emperor, and he zealously invigorated this terror.

A first century Roman politician and historian, Tacitus, notes that many were killed, covered in hides of wild beasts, fed to dogs, fastened to crosses, lit on fire to give light to his garden.

In the first chapter of Revelation we read, *“I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance.”*

Revelation was not written to frighten people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was written with imagery familiar to John’s audience. That is

why it is a mystery to us. If I were to describe a scene with helicopters and soldiers wearing a green colored hat, you would instantly think of the Green Berets. Right before our passage in chapter 6 is the opening of the Seven Seals which brings the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Very mysterious to us. But not to John's audience.

John describes one of the Four Horsemen as an archer riding a white horse. This would mean one thing to John's readers, the dreaded Parthians. They were the only mounted archers riding white horses in those times. They were never truly subdued by Rome and Rome's defeat in the Tigris Valley in 62 A.D. would still loom fresh in their minds. They represented a mysterious unknown enemy bringing terror.

The third rider makes a mysterious declaration, "*A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!*" Again, to John's audience this would have made perfect sense. War always hurts the poor the most. The prices stated for the staples of life, wheat, and barley, were exorbitant, but the prices for the luxury goods of olive oil and wine went untouched!

John was not describing what was going to happen thousands of years later; he was describing what was happening! Or rather what he feared was about to happen, namely that the persecutions were going to get worse before they got better. But rather than a straightforward style as in Paul's writings, John received a vision filled with allegory, metaphor

and imagination that could help his readers in ways perhaps simple prose could not.

Think about the stories of Santa Claus growing up. Certainly, St. Nick was a real person. But the power of generosity and giving of gifts is more powerful at Christmastime because rather than simply saying, "Be generous." the story telling weaves the meaning deeper into the human spirit. In a similar fashion, Charles Dickens powerfully described the weight of sin and its effects in *A Christmas Carol*, not simply by writing, "Sin and greed is destructive!" but by describing the heavy chain and exquisite agony Marley bears that was grown link-by-link through his life's actions, while trying to dissuade Ebenezer Scrooge from following the same fate. Story helps the message sink down deeper into our bones, giving it greater strength and power.

Some of those John's audience were about to experience were the worst terrors that human beings could imagine, and he wrote with imagery equally dreadful to the challenges that faced them so that he could convey an even more powerful promise. It was written to strengthen believers' resolve and to assure them of God's final victory and the glorious destiny that awaited them in heaven.

Revelation, despite being the most fearsome of books, is clearly the most resplendent the most hopeful book in all of scripture; there is perhaps the greatest visions of the horrors of human evil, but these are contrasted to the even greater glorious forgiving and loving God.

The structure of the book employs a spiral logic from basic earthly advice to the

heavenly throne and then circles between increasing dread and an even more increasing glory and triumph of God.

As I said in chapter 6, we find the vision of the Seven Seals. It is a passage of dread and ends with truly odd verses, “...*hide us from...the wrath of the Lamb.*”

The wrath of the lamb...an almost comical image. A wrathful lamb. Lambs are cuddly and cute. They are warm and friendly. Earlier in Revelation, the whole of heaven is waiting for the lion to arrive; essentially, they are awaiting a wrathful Jesus to come. But as they await the lion instead the lamb arrives, a lamb when they were expecting a lion. Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Human instinct is to fear the wrath of God; knowing how we, like sheep, have gone astray, and instead the Lamb of God arrives, gaining victory through sacrificial love. In this message of hope our passage today pulls back the curtain, offering sublime insights into the nature of heaven.

The first harvest of the people of God is counted to a rather precise 144,000 sealed out of every tribe of Israel. The Jehovah's Witnesses use this number to convey the precise number of people going to heaven. Unfortunately for the several million Jehovah's Witness, the vast majority will never see the celestial city.

I was a math major, and believe me, the Biblical authors would have made terrible accountants. In scripture, numbers are less about accurate counting and more about

conveying a message. There are twelve tribes in Israel. 144,000 is 12 times 12,000. Thus, 144,000 represents the entirety of the Jews. Revelation is explaining to us that not one of God's people of Israel will be lost. God's promise to them is fulfilled.

But Revelation's vision is not narrow but vastly expansive. As God fulfills the covenant with Israel, God also expands the promise beyond the narrow vision of human exclusivity into the most glorious love imaginable. Deep pain.

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*

I am not sure about you, but for me one of the hardest parts in life is seeing people standing against one another; in judgement, in hatred, in violence, in killing, in contempt, in apathy, and in ignorance.

The result of this human evil in the first century was the killing of innocent Christians by the Roman enemy. Though we don't have the martyrdom that happened in John's time, we can understand deep division, the violence, and the hatred. And Revelation promises John's audience and promises us that God's love will undo all that division...all of it.

Though John wrote this long ago to people from a different time which makes it hard to understand, there is vast power in this book for us today. Sometimes life will be terribly, almost impossibly difficult. When it is, hold on tight to faith in Christ, no matter what,

remain faithful to God and Jesus' values. The values of love, of forgiveness, and of mercy. Next, no matter how hard it gets on this earth, God will be victorious which means so too will we. And when we gain the promised heaven, it will be with a united humanity all, the breaches and divisions healed. There will be people, vast, countless seas of them from every race, every color, every language, every tribe, streaming as one into heaven. Amen.