



Week 8

A series in REVELATION

03 August Monday

Read Revelation 12

The whole passage is replete with echoes and imagery from the Old Testament, Jewish traditions, Greco-Roman imagery and ancient myths. The latter, especially, containing similar stories of children snatched away from dragons at birth only to eventually be victorious. John is speaking the language of his day while 'presenting a distinctively Christian view of history.' So, we have 3 main figures: the woman, the child and the dragon. The woman represents God's people – those faithfully carrying forward God's good purpose in the world. The dragon is the devil – the dark spiritual evil that seeks to devour and destroy God's purposes and has done from the very beginning, since deceiving Eve in Eden. And the child is Jesus, the 'Messiah', who comes as the very purpose of God.

The lesser told Christmas story, in which Herod seeks to kill Jesus as a baby, provides an interesting parallel but does not exhaust the whole story told here. The cross is front and centre as we see in the hymn, which helps to explain the story. Whilst we 'see' battle between the angel Michael and the Dragon, we 'hear' about the slain lamb and those who loyally cling to him. At the cross, (through the 'blood of the lamb') the devil and all wickedness and evil were defeated, while God's purpose in the world for good, healing and restoration stayed true. Paul writes to the Colossian church saying, 'having disarmed the powers and authorities, he (Jesus) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross...' Spiritual darkness was defeated at the cross, but it has not lost its ability to wreak havoc. The ongoing pursuit of the woman and her offspring warns the church of its ongoing presence. But God will protect

them, like he did in the Old Testament, when he brought his people into the desert, on eagles' wings (Exodus 19) and protected them from the pursuing 'dragon-inspired' Egyptian army, who were, it says, 'swallowed by the earth' (Exodus 15), much like the water is here.

There are too many hyperlinks to mention. Each image here is dripping with symbolic significance and the intentional echoes of prior stories. It's a memorable, powerful and arresting story. One author writes, '[the primary] intent of the passage is to assure those who meet satanic evil on the earth that it is already a defeated power, however contrary it might seem to human experience.' Whatever we face, we can take heart, because we know that Jesus has already won – decisively.

When the disciples went out healing the sick and casting out demons, we read Jesus saying, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.' (Luke 10:18) The people of God – the church – whether represented as 'two witnesses', or 'lampstands' or 'the woman and her offspring', have a role to play: to work with the tools of God's kingdom and push back the dark. They will be opposed and rejected and even silenced at times, but they will also be protected by the one who has already won. Perhaps take a moment to thank God again for the cross and allow the hope of that victory to whet our appetite for the day when there will be no more suffering or evil.

04 August Tuesday

Read Revelation 13:1-4

In Daniel chapter 7, Daniel has a vision of four beasts that come up out of the water. A winged lion, a bear with tusks, a leopard with wings and heads, and, finally, an even more terrible beast with 10 horns. The imagery in the vision spoke of empires and kings over which ultimately God would triumph, and was well-known and well-studied among 1st century Jews desperate for God to overthrow their oppressors; feeding and fuelling their hope of the 'messiah'. They weren't thinking of fantastical beasts but of 'pagan' empires and systems and of Rome, in particular. Few doubt that John had this passage from Daniel in mind, given how similar his vision is (all four of Daniel's water birthed beasts compressed into one). The 'dragon's' ongoing presence and deceptive voice locates this scene within the big picture that the previous chapter paints; revealing the animating evil behind such oppressive power. While Rome was at least partially in view, as N.T. Wright points out, 'the phenomenon of heartless, dehumanized pagan empire, sadly, did not end with the decline and demise of Rome.' No, it marches on through history, leaving footprints of chaos, suffering and darkness. Generally, it seems questionable and unprofitable (not to mention unverifiable) to attempt putting too finer point on specific moments, events or people represented here. (Although, some make that attempt.) But it's fair, perhaps, to recognise dark footprints where we see them; to pay attention to a certain 'Modus Operandi' where we notice it.

Sometimes, it can feel hard to pray what feel like 'big' prayers and yet Paul encourages us to pray 'for kings and all those in authority...' (1 Timothy 2:2). Perhaps take a moment to do that; to pray for wisdom – that they would lead and leverage power for life and good, and that they might have closed ears to any and all 'whispering dragons'.

05 August Wednesday

Revelation 13:5-8

Revelation challenges us repeatedly to stop seeing the world in 2D but instead to be mindful of the 'thing behind the thing'. C.S. Lewis suggested,

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.'

As we know, the apocalyptic genre operates with vivid and arresting images, but it presents the same reality that Jesus did; that the spiritual world is real and interacts with the world we see, hear and touch; that there is Kingdom of darkness and there is a Kingdom of light and they are in collision; that some things in the world carry forward the agenda of darkness, but that Jesus came to push back the dark, to 'destroy the works of the devil'. Today's text, again, presents the dragon, the 'devil', as the power at work behind the scenes, it sees 'his' fingerprints in corrupt and oppressive and evil power. To recognise that is hold a 'thick' or 'deep' view of reality, in which there is more going on that we 'see', more at stake perhaps that we might realise, a bigger story in which we have a part to play.

The beast and the dragon resist God, seek worship and violently opposes those who won't follow them. Rome certainly marched to that beat. The emperor cult presented emperors as gods – coins from the era show it quite

clearly – and required that they be worshipped. To refuse was to court danger and, to those in the church, it must have seemed like the whole world went along with it. It would have been important for them to remember that there is more going on than meets the eye: that the 'beast' carries forward the dragon's dark agenda and, whilst many welcome it, those faithful to Jesus mustn't. A warning though, and they knew it already: faithfulness carries a cost. But in a similar way to how the language of being 'sealed' or 'measured', in the previous chapters, spoke of God's 'keeping' of those who are his, John speaks of their names 'written in the lamb's book'. It's like he's saying, 'It will be hard, but stay faithful; God knows you, he's with you and he will strengthen and sustain you.'

Which of C.S. Lewis' two 'errors' are you most prone to lean towards? Bring it to the Lord in prayer.

06 August Thursday

Read Revelation 13:9-10

The last few readings all fall within the larger storyline that chapter 12 established: The story, we might say, of God's purposes moving forward and the devil's attempt to destroy them; or, we might say, the collision of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness; or, we might say, the good news about Jesus and the persecution of those who receive it; or, we might say, the dragon's pursuit of the children of the woman! Whichever language/lens/image we use, John is saying that there is a big story in which we play a part. That's the context. But today's reading is quite bleak, quite plain; it's like John is saying, 'stay faithful even to death, for that may well be the sad reality.' In Rome, it was and, in certain places around the world today, it is. It also was in the story of Daniel, which is ever-present in the background of this book. The cost of faithfulness in Daniel led to fiery furnaces and lion's dens. In both scenarios, God miraculously saves his people, but they faced these things not knowing whether he would. It's here that we read the well-known words, spoken to their oppressor, 'if we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it... But even if he doesn't, we want you to know, your majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.' They didn't fold or give in, they didn't compromise, nor did they fight back or take up arms. They just faithfully refused to comply with the dragon's whispers.

The air of revelation is perfumed with the book of Daniel. The 1st century believers needed to stay faithful, like Daniel had, amidst huge pressure.

And throughout the centuries between them and us, the pressure to abandon Jesus' way remains. In our context, it may not look like emperor worship – but we shouldn't ignore the subtle pressure to compromise with sex or money, the lure of comfort and ease, or the pull in our hearts towards 'stuff' – towards accumulation. And whilst, thankfully, in our context, we don't live under the threat of death, nor should we underplay the social ostracization, the economic implications, or any number of the myriads of challenges that accompany decisions that run against the grain. The kingdom of God advances in a million small decisions to faithfully live like Jesus, however hard it is.

When did you last feel pulled towards something you know deep down is not Jesus' way? Spend some time asking God to give you strength in that place.

07 August Friday

Daniel 3

Take some time to notice the Old Testament backdrop to images and phrases that John uses in the book of Revelation. For those to whom it was originally written, these things would have been immediately clear; the images would have functioned like hyperlinks opening up a whole world of meaning. It reminds us, like John Bodily mentioned in talk 1, of the important principle: whilst this book is for us, it was not originally written to us. As you read today, notice the internal links and referencing within the Bible itself.