

April 29, 2018

“Controversies of Our Faith: Revelation”

This sermon is based on *Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today*, by Adam Hamilton. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014. See Chapter 30.

I heartily recommend Rev. Hamilton’s wonderful book. I am covering only a small portion of it, and there are many treasures in it you will discover if you buy and read it.

All Biblical quotes are from *The New International Version*.

The Book of Revelation. You can’t wait to dive in, right? Well....maybe not. Let’s be honest. Maybe only Leviticus is less loved than Revelation. It’s known for being difficult to understand, violent, full of unpleasant images, and just plain bizarre. Christians often avoid it in their devotional reading. Which is a shame, because there is good stuff in there, lessons that can speak Christ to us if only we pause long enough to hear.

Here’s how I’m going to break it down. We’ll talk about who wrote it and why, and who it was written for. We’ll review the four main ways it’s been interpreted through the ages, and then talk about what it would have meant for the original audience. Finally, we’ll look at what it might mean for us.

Many of our questions get answered right in the first few verses:

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ...

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come...
1: 1-2, 4a

And so we know that ***this is a letter, from John, to seven churches in “Asia,”*** what is now central Turkey. John received a revelation from Jesus, via an angel, and John has recorded it for the churches.

In verses 9-11, John lets us in on some of the process:

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the

Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

So, he is writing while on the island of Patmos (in the Aegean Sea, off the coast of eastern Turkey), perhaps in exile because of persecutions of Christians. In this age of suffering for God's people, John received this message for seven specific churches. In Chapters 2 and 3, he gives a personal message to each church. A common theme of these messages is that the people were not being true to their faith by participating in emperor worship required at the time. They were also caving to cultural pressures from the pagans around them.

In these first three chapters, the purpose of the book is laid out. All that John writes is to address the problems of the Asian churches. He sees his job as offering both correction and encouragement in the face of adversity. Part of what he offers is visions that serve this end. ***Revelation is not directed to us, to tell us about end times; rather, it is directed to specific churches for a specific purpose relevant to them and their times.***

John's visions of angels, horsemen, a great sea and death were a form of writing well known to both Jews and Christians of the first century. Today we call it apocalyptic. It involves images that are challenging and powerful, not meant to be taken literally, but meant to point to greater truths. It is not supposed to have a 1:1 correlation with the present or the future, but to evoke a sense of crisis and warning, and sometimes comfort.

Christians have typically interpreted these powerful images in four different ways. Perhaps the most common way we might label ***futurist***. This is a popular theme for television preachers, and is reflected in the *Left Behind* series of books. This perspective sees all the visions in Revelation as reflecting what will happen in the final days before Christ's return. And many people believe those days are now. Thus those that subscribe to this interpretation believe Revelation is about now.

A second approach could be called the ***historicist*** view. This sees the book as predicting the future, starting with when it was written and moving forward in history. So Chapters 6 through 8 are about the decay of Rome and the growth of Christianity. The rise of Islam is covered in Chapter 9. In Chapter 10 the Protestant Reformation is described. This was a common view of Christians until the 1800's.

A third view we could call ***preterist***. This word means "past," and this view holds that Revelation is about the people of John's time and events in the Roman Empire they were familiar with. Most scholars of mainline and evangelical denominations hold this view today.

Fourth is the ***idealist*** view. This looks at the visions and sees a narrative of the eternal struggle between good and evil, and the never-ending challenge of living as a person of God in a pagan setting. It also sees the book as a beacon of hope for all who are persecuted and struggle to

remain faithful. By this view, every person in every generation should be able to see themselves in the story.

With this many views on interpretation, it's no wonder we have probably all found Revelation to be confusing from time to time. To sort it all out, let's look at how John's original audience would have likely understood it.

In Smyrna, one of the towns Revelation is addressed to, about 195 BC, a temple was built to the goddess Roma. It's not a coincidence that "Roma" and "Roman" sound alike. Roma was an ideal of the qualities the Empire desired to follow. Sixty years later, the region surrounding Pergamum, another of the Asian churches, was given to Rome. Temples to Roma sprouted up all over the area.

Another important historical development was the practice of worshipping Roman emperors as gods, which began around the time of Jesus' birth. Temples to the emperor, and to Roma, were often next to each other. This was nowhere more popular than in the regions of Asia where the seven churches were.

So a conflict was set up for Christians. Will they participate in the culturally sanctioned and expected worship of Rome and the emperor, or will they be true to God? Some of the people in the churches thought they could stay safe by doing both—participate in a little public Roma worship, while being a secret Christian. John though, is saying that to worship Rome is idolatry and disobedience. John paints a picture of contrast. In Chapter 4, he invites the reader to observe true worship:

Day and night they never stop saying:

“‘Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

v. 8c-11

So the visions start with worship of the one and only God in his Kingdom.

The following chapters present the contrast—a picture of the goddess Roma’s kingdom and the desolation she brings. The vision continues, showing her destruction, along with the Empire, and the ultimate salvation of all who are faithful.

In Chapter 13, we find one of the most infamous and misunderstood passages.

The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666. v. 15-18

What would this have meant to the seven churches? In multiple places in the book of Revelation, we see the number seven. This represents perfection, completeness and wholeness. Hamilton says:

The Holy Spirit is described as the sevenfold spirit. Jesus is described as a lamb with seven eyes and seven horns. The number six is one less than perfection—it symbolizes imperfection, and 666 symbolizes utter imperfection. But beyond this in Hebrew, Greek and Latin letters represent numbers. Various names have been associated with the number 666. Among them is Nero Caesar. p. 287

This was the emperor who had been responsible for the murder of the most prominent apostles, and stood for Rome at its most heinous.

In Chapters 17 and 18, it becomes more clear that the enemy is Rome. It is referred to as “Babylon.” Early Christians would have recognized this as a code word for Rome, because both Babylon and Rome had destroyed Jerusalem—Babylon in 586 BC, and Rome in 70 AD. Rome is pictured as a prostitute who rides on a seven-headed monster. It says in Revelation 17: 9: “This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits.” You may recall that Rome was referred to as the “city on seven hills.” Then in Chapters 19 and 20, the ultimate defeat of evil and the victory of God are portrayed.

One final question: what does all this mean for us?

We no longer live under the threat of the Roman Empire. We are not required to worship our political leaders as gods, or to worship any gods at all. But ***because we are human, and our government is run by humans, there is always the temptation to make idols out of those powers that govern us.*** Hamilton says:

...every nation has values and practices that are contrary to those of the kingdom of God. The state at times seeks to be worshipped and served (it seldom uses these words, but it demands the allegiance of the heart). And God's people may be tempted to give in and compromise and to accept the state's values. The question Revelation raises is, will you worship God or will you give your primary allegiance to the state?
p. 288

And "emperors" still long to be worshipped. You will recognize their names: Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Pol Pot, Hussein. We could go on. Giant statues of these leaders and their faces in every public place are a sign that they seek to be worshipped. ***The situation that John warns about has happened again and again in human history.***

In our country, our representative government was put in place in part to prevent this kind of thing, but it's not 100% successful. Political parties, certain leaders, and some special interest groups still at times demand allegiance to values and practices that are inconsistent with the gospel, and then they demonize those who won't go along.

Here's how Hamilton sums it up:

Perhaps the gods we're more likely to be tempted by today are the trinity of money, sex, and power. But here's the point I want you to get—the real point of Revelation: It is not aimed at telling us when the end will happen. It is aimed at telling us that *in the end, none of these gods will be left standing, and that Christians are called to give our hearts and our allegiance only to one God, who is worthy of our praise.*

And so we are challenged to search our hearts and make sure that God is in charge. ***We are challenged to not be influenced by false gods in our government, economic system, politics, or celebrities; rather, we are to influence them as a light to the nations, and a beacon to all people.*** Revelation also tells us that ***to resist evil, in all its manifestations, may be difficult and painful, but ultimately, evil will never have the last word.*** Because of the grace of God, we are part of the heavenly Kingdom that is now and yet to come.

And here's something else it tells us. In Chapters 21 and 22, John describes this Kingdom, the ultimate triumph of God—what will happen when the forces of evil are permanently defeated, and God reigns in every human heart. While much of Revelation is strange and hard to understand, these words are simple, beautiful, and worthy of our devotion. I will close with them.

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, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will

dwell 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."

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Revelation 21: 1-4, 22: 1-5, 17, 20