

The Book of Revelation

Session 5: The Beasts (chapters 11-14)

The next four chapters deviate from the progression of the storyline of Revelation to include details about things that have happened, are about to happen, or are happening. With all of these events we must see them both allegorically and prophetically since John tells us that he is going to prophesy about what is to happen.

The Two Witnesses

John begins his prophesy in a way similar to Ezekiel: by measuring the Temple. Unlike Ezekiel who measures the physical space of the Temple, John is measuring the number of people who make up the Temple. The Temple then becomes analogous to the Church. Those who are faithful and witness to God are the physical structure of the Heavenly Temple or the building of the Church. The outer court is omitted in the counting. The outer court, or the court of the Gentiles, was destroyed by the Romans when they sacked the Temple in 70 AD. Actually, the entire Temple was destroyed. John is telling us that the Romans only conquered the outer court but couldn't destroy the *true* Temple.

The numbers 42, 1260, and 3.5. These numbers will dominate the next four chapters and all mean basically the same thing. It will either be 3.5 years, 42 months, or 1260 days which are all the same amount of time. This amount of time is the prophetic and eschatological destruction period through which the world is being tried or punished. This period of time is prophesized by Daniel as the eschatological period through which the world is being destroyed or tested by God. Each time these numbers are used we must understand them as the trial period.

The two witnesses are unclear. Some scholars want to link them to the two witnesses of Zechariah's prophesy: the two witnesses are the King Zerubbabel and the high priest. These two witnesses do not make sense in context. Usually prophesies like these are rooted in historical people. Yet, these two witnesses have no historical analogue. Therefore we must interpret them allegorically or prophetically. Some of the church fathers named these two witnesses as the Old and New Testaments. Most likely John did not intend this interpretation since the New Testament was not finished yet. The two witnesses most likely refer to the Old Testament law that judgement for the sake of the death penalty could not be rendered unless there were at least two witnesses to testify to the crime. Therefore the two witnesses will be those two people who affirm to God that indeed the world is ready for judgement and his just judgement. The image of the candlestands and the oil reminds us that the light of Christ shines in these two witnesses who are faithful and true in their word. The fire that comes from their mouths reminds us of God's judgment on the world which is an all-consuming fire devouring everything in its path. These two witnesses have the same power and authority of the great prophets of Old like Elijah who closed the sky for three years.

The beast returns. The beast comes from the abyss as we saw in chapter 9. The abyss and the details of the beast remind us of the great sea serpent Leviathan whom God destroyed in the

psalms and the Book of Job. Leviathan was another way of depicting the Canaanite gods and depicts the great power of God conquering the gods of old. The nature of the beast has changed significantly. In the Book of Job, Satan is the accuser of the people who was able to walk into God's presence. Now the great accuser has been cast out from God's presence and waging a war against him. This war is a war of power and control to destroy God's people and his creation and begin a new reign. This reign and show of power begins by destroying the two witnesses. This destruction should not surprise us. Evil always fights against good and good triumphs in surprising ways. Again the two witnesses lie dead in the streets from 3.5 days. Then God raises them.

The power of evil and seduction

Throughout the next four chapters the power of the devil and his many ways will become obvious to us. We start this discussion with the two witnesses. The people, having seen the witnesses destroyed, gloat over their destruction. God's ways always challenge us and tell us we cannot do some of the things we enjoy. Thus the witnesses, or God's laws, oppressed the people. Now dead, the people rejoice over their new freedoms. Then God raises the witnesses to life and inflicts punishment on the people. Remember this moment since the book will continue to build upon this theme as we explore the nature of the beasts and the thoughts and hearts of the people.

The cities of Sodom and Egypt

The city of Sodom represents the evil of the world: the epitome of sin and evil. Egypt represents oppression. These two cities are used symbolically both biblically and by John to represent the evil nations of the world. John adds a few more details: the place where the Lord was crucified, Jerusalem, and the great city, Rome. These four cities are nowhere near each other nor are they considered one city. John is depicting the Roman empire as that great and terrible city that destroyed the Lord and led to the great destruction of God's holy people. This could also be the symbolic city that oppresses the people of God giving it a timeless quality.

The final end of the two witnesses is their ascension into Heaven. Now God reveals their truth when no one else was willing to listen. This end brings about a great destruction where 7000 people are killed. This is a surprisingly low number considering all the other much larger numbers throughout the book thus far. The number is symbolic of the complete number of those who should be killed for their gloating over the death of the witnesses.

The Seventh Trumpet

Much like the Seventh Seal, the Seventh Trumpet leads to a theophany: a manifestation of God. This time the Kingdom is revealed before all people, the same kingdom that Jesus prophesizes and explains through the Gospels. Notice the details. Everyone is again worshipping God. The temple is opened, much like at the beginning of the Book of Revelation. Inside the Temple is the Arc of the Covenant, clearly Temple imagery. Then, the great theophany shown in earthquakes, thunder, and lightning, reveals the true God for all to see.

The Woman and the Arc (chpt. 12)

No doubt we need to skip over the chapter heading to make the proper connections. The arc that we saw a moment ago in the Temple is now revealed as a woman. Since women “house” their child in their womb, so does Mary “house” or “tent” the Lord in her womb making Mary the perfect analogy of the Arc of the Covenant. But this is a sign or a prophesy. This event is taking place and has taken place. Whereas most of the events of Revelation are more or less in the future, this event takes us backwards to the past.

The Woman

The woman is described in great detail. She is clothed with the sun showing her connection to the divinity of God, that God has clothed her with himself. The sun, moon, and stars show her connection to the divine and the power he gave her. The twelve stars represent her connection to Israel and the twelve tribes of Israel. She is with child. Many prefer to depict this woman as Israel, who is normally referred to as a woman and the bride of God. In many ways this image works. Israel is to bring forth the messiah, the 12 stars represent her, and she is a woman. We can add another meaning to this passage since Mary is also a woman who birthed the messiah. Both of these depictions work. The drama ensues that she is in labor pains; the messiah is coming.

The Dragon

The dragon, Leviathan, or the Devil, emerges on the scene from the great abyss. The dragon has seven heads representing fullness of authority, ten horns representing fullness of power, and seven diadems representing kingly authority. In all ways this dragon is strange in that it contains such power and authority, which makes it similar to God. The color red represents its violent character. Through its power it brought down God’s holy ones (swept away a third of the stars). Some interpret this to indicate the fallen angels. Either or both interpretations work. The dragon wants to rule without challenge and knows that this child will challenge and destroy his rule.

The drama

The dragon tries to devour the child but God prevails. The child is swept up to Heaven and a battle ensues. The woman flees to the desert, reminding us of the Exodus, to a place prepared for her, showing God’s providence, and the amount of time is 1260 days or the period of trials. Now the true battle ensues between Michael and the dragon. This caused the dragon to be cast out of Heaven and rule the earth during these period of days, namely during the time between Christ’s ascension and the end of times. Hence the prophesy from Genesis comes to pass: he will strike at your heels and you will strike at his head. The people will be subjected to his most pernicious action, deception. Whereas God preaches truth, the Devil perverts the truth. The people of Heaven rejoice that the great accuser is thrown down and removed from the Heavenly court. Now the only person who can pass judgement is the Lamb. The Devil’s final act is a torrent of water which is also personified as the great deluge which destroys God’s holy people. The Earth came to the woman’s aid like the many times that the earth swallowed the wicked. Like the power of the angel in chapter 10, the Devil now takes that role of having dominion over the sea and land.

The First Beast (chapter 13)

Now our drama reaches an important pinnacle. The beasts emerge from the depth and teach us about the nature of the Devil and what we ought to watch for. The first beast emerges as a leopard with a lion's mouth, a powerful looking creature. Its ten horns denote power, seven heads denote wisdom, and the ten diadems on its horns show it is more powerful than the dragon. The blasphemous name have several meanings. The more historical approach is to connect the blasphemous names with the names given the emperors of Rome both in life and in death: king of kings, he who is and was, my lord and my god. The other side of the names is to recall that the beast doesn't want to resemble God but represents the pain and challenges the people face in permitting God in their lives. These blasphemes summarize the sentiments of the people towards God. The dragon gives its power to this next beast like the Lamb giving his power to God. The contrasts and similarities between God's actions and the beasts' actions lead to confusion among the people of the earth. The mortal wound of the beast is in imitation of the slain Lamb to show that this beast is an almost exact replica of God. The mortal wound fascinates the people. Jesus' wounds caused no fascination. Now the people worship the beast and name it as the all-powerful. Notice the contrast: the angel from chapter 10 blessed God and announced his power to the world, the beast spoke proudly against God. God always allows a way for people to recognize him and his power even in midst of impressive imitations. Remember: God is always in power. God allows this beast to do these things as indicated by the end of this passage.

The Second Beast

Notice the similarities to God between the three beasts. The dragon, or the first beast, was considered immensely powerful and could do all he willed. The second beast was given all power and continued to have the power and glory from all the people who worshipped it. The third beast resembles the Lamb in almost every way. The second beast has two horns, like a ram, speaks in words of power like the thunderous voice of the Lamb, and wields all the authority of the first beast, like the Lamb. We are supposed to make these connections. Everything that the Devil is doing is in direct imitation, if not copy, of God. This seeming similarity causes confusion for us but even more so for the people of the world. I will expand upon this issue at the end of this section. The beasts are then allowed to perform great signs which are exact replicas of the great prophets of Old: making fire from Heaven like Elijah, making images of itself like the people in the Desert, making images speak which was a Canaanite or pagan practice, and wielding authority over life and death. The last thing the beasts do to control the world is to mark their own like God did. The seal of the beasts in the case did not simply indicate property and protection. Now the mark of the beast is necessary for engaging in civil society. Everyone must have the mark of the beast in order to survive in the world, i.e. in order to get food, shop, conduct business everything. God did not do this for those who were unmarked with his seal. His seal protected them from the trial and encouraged those without the seal to become sealed. Sharp contrast between the two seals.

Who is the beast?

John continues to describe not just the nature of the beast but now the actual person who is the beast. The mark is 666 and is also the number for the beast. This number has held more fascination for peoples throughout history than any other part of this book. The number is

slightly confusing. We can interpret John's number in several ways. The most logical for the book is to realize that this is the most incomplete number we can have in the Greek language. Since 1000 is the largest number 6666 is impossible. Therefore the greatest sign of incompleteness or deviation from God's 777 would be 666. The number takes on a historical meaning as well, as John indicates. If you take the name Caesar Nero and transliterate it into Hebrew (QSR NRWN since Hebrew doesn't have vowels) and take each letter at its numerical value (Q=100, S= 60, R=200, N=50, W=6), then you get $Q-100 + S-60 + R-200 + N-50 + R-200 + W-6 + R-200 = 666$. If you transliterate this name into Latin, however, you get 616, which some manuscripts claim that is the *evil* number.

The power of the Devil

No passage in Scripture better explains the nature of sin and the Devil than this passage. We must remind ourselves of two starting principles before I venture into this topic. God is all powerful. No demon or fallen angel can circumvent or overcome God's authority. Therefore everything that happens God allows. Second, the Devil is trying to *destroy* God's plan, hence his name is destruction. Everything he does is take people away from God and bring them to himself. As the passage began the beasts are described as direct imitations of God. This imitation shouldn't surprise us. The Devil wants everyone to think he is God and therefore can confuse and lie to people to get them to turn away from God. We already had examples of this in other passages. The locust main attack was with their mouths, speaking words. The beasts speak powerfully and with authority. The spoken word is the greatest defense of God and the greatest challenge to God. The imitation from the beasts makes people pay attention to truth. The second main attack of the Devil is deception and lies. The more people distrust truth and believe that there is no absolute truth, the more they turn away from God who is absolute truth. The last major deception of the Devil is to trap people in situations with no escape. Without the mark, the people cannot function in society. This is a lie. God always provides a way for those who are faithful. What is the moral of the story? Only those who are faithful enough to God that they know him well, know his ways, and have faithfully built a relationship with him will know the deception of the Devil. Those who have grown cold or not built a relationship with God will be easily deceived and fall prey to the Devil's attacks. God wants only those who are truly faithful to him.

The Harvest (chapter 14)

Chapter 14 begins with a familiar image with some new changes. We are used to the image of the Lamb being in power, but now he's on a high mountain like Moses. The faithful are gathered around him with the seal or name of God on their foreheads and are singing, but with harps and a new song. The new song indicates victory and triumph, something new has happened. Notice the difference between the 144,000 and those worshipping the beast. The 144,000 are joyfully singing a special song and no longer face torments, the worshippers of the beast are carefully following his precepts and living on earth below with all the normal human activities. Who are the virgins? Given the context, John's idea of virgins does not mean those who are unmarried. Instead these are the people who are pure before God, they have washed their robes in the blood

of the lamb, they have remained unstained of the worldly pollution of idolatry. Hence “on their lips no deceit has been found” (14:5).

Enter Babylon the Great. This passage begins the theme of Babylon and the fall of Babylon. Babylon was the great Babylonian city that conquered the Israelites and sent them all into slavery. Therefore Babylon is depicted as the epitome of evil, of slavery, of sin, and of defiance of God’s ways. Here Babylon will be depicted as a woman and a harlot. She requires the people of the world to drink her poison and wine of her passion, or encourages them to turn away from God towards her and believe her teachings. The angels try to oppose her and teach the people the right way to act. Those who fear God and worship him alone will be fine. Those who drink Babylon’s poison and worship her will feel God’s fury. The dark passage ends with a somber yet happy note: “Here is what sustains the holy ones who keep God’s commandments and their faith in Jesus” and “let them find rest from their labors, for their works accompany them.”

The image shifts suddenly to someone in a cloud: God. This time God is holding a sickle, an instrument used for the harvest of grain. What is he harvesting? Souls. After everything that has happened thus far, now it is time to harvest the people from the earth and begin the great end. Notice the agricultural imagery. The earth has been growing its produce and now it is time to reap the produce. But the only produce that is reaped is grain and grapes, the two elements used in the Mass. The grain are the good people of the earth. The grapes are the evil ones who must be pressed in the wine press and fermented before they can be used. Notice the wine press is outside the city, the same place where Jesus was crucified. The imagery here is very challenging. Obviously the wheat are the faithful of God who survived the great trials and are now glorifying God in Heaven. But what about the grapes? The grapes are characterized as the “evil ones” or maybe “the sinful ones.” Let’s explore both images. If the grapes are the “evil ones,” then God has sent his fury upon them to crush them into grape juice and most likely wine, the drink of cheer and joy. This indicates that the grapes are those who are wicked and by law must be dealt with outside the city. What if these are the “sinful ones”? In this case they would be purified and made into something of cheer and joy. The connection to “outside the city” means that they are connected with the grace of the Cross and made into something new. This could be an example of purgatory: a place where you feel God’s wrath until you are purified enough for Heaven. Most commentators suggest that interpretation is the first one: these are the wicked ones. But the details suggest that God needs these people for something. Again, layers of interpretation.