

So we're finishing up our series on Revelation this morning; Pastor Steve has been leading us through it and has given me the task of ending it. So I'm going to read from Revelation chapters 15, 16 and 17 – it sounds like a lot but it's only roughly 30 verses. Revelation 15 from verse 1:

[Reading Revelation 15:1-17:18]

Powerful stuff!

We're thinking about this theme of Collapsing Empires – that is what this passage is talking about. Revelation is written entirely in symbolic language and pastor Steve has been going through these symbols with us, but sometimes as we go through these symbols and we think about them, the actual theme of the book becomes more and more opaque – we get taken away from what the book is actually about. Most of the symbols and images are metaphors drawn directly from the Old Testament, and they're used in application to the new situation of the persecuted churches; and the books seeks to answer such questions – fundamental questions – as these:

- Why does God allow persecution?
- If Christ is King where is his victory? (Why don't we see it?)
- What place does suffering and martyrdom have in the plans of God?
- What attitude should Christians have in the face of persecutions and suffering?

Because this is what the Christians at the time were experiencing – severe persecution and suffering. And the text progresses through long passages of suffering and violence, but it ultimately concludes with a vision of hope. The theological message, if you like, is that a loving God is in control of history and will eventually bring healing to a world which is broken.

For all its symbolic complexity, and really the book through a series of illustrations using separate symbols depicts the historical conflict between Christ and his followers on the one side, and Satan and his followers on the other. And the book furthermore gives us principles of interpretation in order to understand the methods used by each of the chief combatants: Christ and Satan.

The key emphasis, even from Chapter 1, is on two Kingdoms: first, you have the Kingdom of the world (the Empire ruled by men and women under the control of Satan); and on the other hand you've got the Kingdom of heaven (the Kingdom of our Lord and Christ, which is represented by the Church of Christian believers – the Church here but then the Church globally as well).

I was walking down in Bromley yesterday and I saw a street preacher, and bless him he was out there – I feel almost convicted saying this, but – he was saying “If you welcome Jesus into your heart today you'll have a free ticket to heaven.” Have you heard that? I wanted to say to him “That's not what it's about: the Gospel's not about getting a free ticket to Heaven and we have to then suffer through out life, and then eventually we'll come to it, the Gospel's about getting the kingdom of heaven now. Jesus talks about it as crossing over from death to life when you receive the Gospel. Paul talks about being translated from the Kingdom of the world (the Kingdom of darkness) into the Kingdom of the Son (the Kingdom of heaven).

And Revelation is depicting the Empire of this world which is referred to alternately as Egypt or as Sodom or as Babylon, and then as Rome. But ultimately they all come to refer to this idea of a Spiritual City, which we find in Genesis 11 – the Tower of Babel – where in the story of the Bible

the people all get together and they start building a tower because they're trying to reach heaven and God intervenes and stops – he splits them up so that they speak different tongues and scatters them to all corners of the earth. And some interpreters think that that to mean that if God hadn't intervened they would have succeeded – they would have reached heaven – and they wouldn't have needed God any more because they would have been their own God.

Actually that's not what the story's about; the story's about a fundamental misinterpretation of the way the universe works: heaven isn't in the sky. In Acts chapter 7 when Stephen is being stoned to death he sees heaven – the veil is peeled back and heaven is right there where Stephen is, and Stephen's face begins to reflect the glory of heaven. This activity of building the Tower of Babel was utterly futile, and God intervened to stop them because if he hadn't done they would have used up all of the earth's resources in order to achieve it.

An illustration from our own time is Easter Island (Rapa Nui). I don't know if you know the story about Rapa Nui but the islanders build these huge heads which represented their gods, and they wheeled them out to the coastline so that their enemies if they were coming in by sea would see these gods, these massive gods, and they would be too terrified to attack them. But in order to get them out there they had to cut down the trees and roll these great big stone heads to the coastline on them; and they cut down every single tree, and they no longer had any resources and they died out.

And that's a depiction of the Tower of Babel – that's what they were doing, and that's why God intervened to stop them. But that's what's happening now, isn't it? That's what's happening in our world today: we're absolutely obliterating the earth's resources – for what? Technology and industry, and for an easier life, and consumerism, and so on – that's what we're doing. And we're either part of the problem or part of the solution – there's no middle ground.

Revelation also portrays an evil trinity: you've got the dragon (who's Satan) and then you've got the beast (which is all forms of spiritual authority that are opposed to God), and then you've got a second beast which is also referred to as a false prophet (which is political and religious human institutions that promote Emperor worship). And you can think about this in the church: how often has the church been participating in the most heinous of crimes against humanity. And then you look at the stock market, or you look even the UN, the government – our own government – sometimes does things which are detrimental to having a good life, to bring good to us. They act against our good sometimes.

William Blake when he wrote the hymn “Jerusalem” talked about Dark Satanic Mills, and that is what he saw growing up in the land, the green and pleasant land of his time: he saw this industry that was coming along, the mills were coming up pumping out this smoke, this thick acrid smoke, and people were being wheeled in and they built towns where the people who worked in the mills could just stay next door to the mills and they never really had any kind of life – their lives were given over to industry completely.

But in our world today there are still “Dark Satanic Mills”. We might not see them in this country, and technology now has got a little bit shiny and it all seems nice, but actually it's still “Dark Satanic Mills” - we're still acting in the same way Easter islanders did.

Revelation brings this picture of the woman, Babylon (and he calls it Rome) and the woman is said to sit upon many waters. And in this picture of Rome John uses many of the things the prophets said about ancient Babylon. In Jeremiah [51:13], Babylon is addressed as the one who lives “by mighty waters” and Babylon was the centre of a system of irrigation canals spreading out in every

direction. But that depiction doesn't apply to Rome, it only applies to Babylon. John realises this and gives the waters a symbolic interpretation. But really what John is saying using this image of Babylon and Rome to say that the Lord is bringing up against it mighty flood waters – because that's what the prophets prophesied.

And again, when he talks of the “Golden Cup of Abominations” he's calling back Jeremiah who said “Babylon is a golden cup in the Lord's hand making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine and so the nations went mad” [Jeremiah 51:7]. So, Rome is said to hold this golden cup which contains the power of seduction which has spread immorality over all the earth. And she is said to have a name on her forehead “Mystery” - and that's because in Rome the prostitutes in the brothels wore on their foreheads a band showing their names, which is a vivid detail showing Rome as being a prostituting influence among the nations, and she's said to be drunk with the blood of God's dedicated people and with the blood of the martyrs (which, of course, is a reference to the persecuted Christians).

But this does more than simply stamp Rome as the great persecutor. Rome is literally saturated with slaughter and has revelled in that slaughter. And the book prophesied Rome's destruction by an uprising against it of the nations who had been under subjection to its power, which is to suggest that this great prostitute, this spiritual city, will in the end be destroyed by her lovers who turn against her.

A lot of the text that I read harps back to what Alf was saying about this Old Testament God who seems to be vengeful, particularly chapters 16 and 17 where you've got the plagues that are being poured out. And commentators complain this focus, this violent focus, on the end of the adversaries of God and on the people of the earth is unfit for those who profess a Christian ethos. And it has been argued that the Book goes against Jesus' policy of non-violent resistance, portraying him instead as a bloodthirsty conqueror. But that's not right and it slanders the broken body of Jesus but also blasphemes the Spirit of Christ. It misses the dual intentions of the book: first that the Christians in the early church who were being persecuted desperately needed a prophetic word to confirm that their Saviour who experienced crucifixion and torture in the flesh will ultimately prevail in the Spirit as the Lord of Lords, as King of Kings, the Lord of the heavenly Hosts; and, moreover, that those who profess faith in him will prove to be victorious.

And at the start of Chapter 15, we hear about the song of Moses. In the scriptures there are two songs of Moses: there's one in chapter 15 [of Exodus] which is after the people of God have come through the Red Sea, and there's another one at the end of Deuteronomy which is before the people of God cross over the Jordan into the promised land. And the song harkens back to the two. But the one that is referred to here indicates that the people of Israel who arrived triumphantly through the dangers of the crossing of the Red Sea [Exodus 15:1-18], give an example to those persecuted Christians who come safely through a sea of martyrdom and have arrived at the shore of heaven. It is said that the martyrs had emerged victorious from their contest with the forces of the Antichrist, and there is something really significant here: the martyrs died the most savage deaths—and yet they are said to have emerged victorious. It was their faith which survived death which made them victors; if they had remained alive by being false to their faith, they would have been the defeated.

David Wilkerson gives an amazing sermon on this; it's called “The Right Song, but on the Wrong Side” – the people sing this praises to God after they have come through the Red Sea but not before, because before they came through the Red Sea they were all complaining and they wanted to go back to Egypt. And he's saying they should have been singing this song of praise to

God before they went through the Red Sea, they should have been anticipating it with faith.

And this harkens back to chapter 14 where you have the 144,000 with their harps who are the saints who are called to fight by suffering and dying, and these are the ones who become victorious conquerors alongside the Lamb by virtue of their martyrdom. And there's a notable characteristic in their, which is here "Great and marvellous are your works Lord God Almighty, just and true are your ways. You king of Saints, who shall not fear you O Lord and not glorify your name? You alone, you only are holy." There's not one single work in it about their own achievements: from beginning to end the song's a lyrical outburst regarding the greatness of God. Heaven is represented by the right attitude of worship, it's a place where we forget ourselves and are possessed only with a desire to worship God – that's heaven.

These words "who will not fear you, O Lord" – this "fear of the Lord" is used both of a terror instilled in the enemies of God due to his awesome acts, but it also describes the religion worshipping Yahweh. They had no word for religion – "religion" didn't mean anything to them. The "fear of the Lord" meant understanding him, Yahweh, to be the one true God, and their willingness to submit to him and to live in conformity to his commandments – that's why in Revelation you get this continued refrain that God's holy people are the ones who keep his commandments and hold firmly to the testimony of Jesus.

So Revelation is set in the context of worship. But it's not a strategic manifesto for bringing down an evil regime. The book may have all kinds of implications for political, social, and economic behaviour, but the central focus is on the worship of the Lamb, not on political activism. And the calamities and disasters that are listed do represent the consequences of humankind's rebellion against God, but they don't represent God's chosen method of reconciling humankind to himself.

This is how God reconciles to himself: he's reconciling the world to himself in Christ by not counting people's sins against them. He's committed to us the message of reconciliation. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the single signifying event in human history through which God has ordained to bring about the "fear of the Lord" among the nations, and by which to bring them back to him through the triumph of mercy over judgement. The work of the Lamb (our Great and Good Shepherd) and his lambs (us individual Christians) represents God's method of tackling the problems posed by evil in the world. Followers of Jesus, by accepting his invitation to pick up our crosses and to do exactly what he did, continue and complete God's work of bringing the world to himself.

I'm not talking about that we're all got to be crucified. Please don't get me wrong. But we each have crosses we can bear in our life, and we each have challenges, and we'll each have a path that we have to walk where we have to remain true to God and possibly turn away from the ways of the world. And you might say how is it then that single-handed Christians, how is it that I, a single, small man, can stand up and bring about the collapse of an Empire so colossal as that of Rome? But you see in the Old Testament so many illustrations of power through weakness:

- Joseph came from the pit and the prison to stand in the courts of Pharaoh and be appointed the second most powerful man in the land;
- Moses came from exile in the desert to stand again before Pharaoh and to hold a staff in his hand and through him the Spirit performed miracles;
- Joshua and his marching around Jericho, brought about the destruction of Jericho by simply praising God and blowing trumpets, and singing, shouting praises to God;
- Gideon was called out from the threshing floor which was below the ground, as a young

man – a teenager – and fought against the Midionites, and supernatural events occurred in the battle;

- David came from keeping his sheep as a teenager and stood against a giant, Goliath;
- Elijah stood against 400 prophets on Mount Carmel and called down fire and prayed that the rain would stop and then it would start again; and
- Daniel went into the lions' den, and the Spirit closed the mouths of the lions.

Throughout the Old Testament we see the prophets of God being called to go and speak to the rulers of the nations who were hostile to God; to call them to repent. And frequently these prophetic utterances would lead to the punishment of the prophet. Jesus Christ being referred to as “the Word made flesh” encapsulates this prophetic calling and therefore for those who, like Jesus, fight against “Rome”, come against the beast, by accepting martyrdom, by accepting death, share in this testimony of Jesus which is the “Spirit of prophecy”.

The glorious thing about this is that the temple of testimony (which is referred to in the text) is an allusion to the temple in the Old Testament where the Spirit of God would come down and meet with the people and where his glory (called the Shekinah glory) would descend upon the mercy seat (which was the top of the Ark). And the Ark was said to contain the Spirit of God, the whole power of the Spirit, and you see this in the text because when the temple is open power comes out of it – thunder, lightning, peals of thunder, etc, etc. And again this is absolutely bursting with scriptural connotations from Isaiah 6 where the train of the Lord's robe filled the temple, and then Exodus and 1 Kings when the Spirit came down – when they had built the temple and consecrated it, the Spirit came and filled the temple and the priests couldn't even worship any more. And finally in Romans 3 where Jesus' blood now constitutes for us the thing which sanctifies us before God and by virtue of which the Spirit can come and indwell us.

Every Christian prophet becomes someone who unites themselves with Jesus, and the prophet is the one through whom Jesus, the living Word, expresses himself. But for that to happen the prophet has to participate in costly witness.

When the first Christians used to have to say “Jesus is Lord”, and this is from 1 Corinthians where it says “no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” - that's because when you said “Jesus is Lord” in the New Testament it meant that you were going to get beheaded. And it was only by the Spirit of God being present in you that you could have that power to stand against somebody who you knew was going to come to kill you.

Whenever any Christian prophet stands up and professes “Jesus is Lord” in a manner which is costly the power of the Holy Spirit is present bringing glory to God, but also convicting those that witness that prophetic act of sin, their own sin, and convicts them of righteousness, and convicts them of judgement, because that is what Jesus' prophetic act did on the cross – it convicts us of our own sin because the most righteous man whoever lived chose to go to a cross. In the narrative it's for Barabbas, but we know it wasn't just for Barabbas, we know it was for us as well.

I read something this week that says Christians, we have a fascination with suffering and that we somehow have a kind of glorifying suffering, but we don't glorify suffering – Jesus didn't glorify suffering: when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane before he was crying out to the Lord, to his father, he was saying “can you take this cup away from me? Please God don't let me have to go through this.” But he knew it was necessary to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgement. And that's what Christian suffering does.

When the world witnesses God's righteous people suffering, when the nations witness that, it

convicts them of sin, righteousness and judgement. And you've got this glorious thing in the text where it says so what then of the enemies of Yahweh? Well in chapter 17 it said God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule until his words are fulfilled. So we know that God is sovereign, and he has programmed even his enemies to fulfil his purposes through their own evil actions. We see this in Acts 2:28 again: "This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan of foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death. This was God's plan."

In God's strategy the use of force is counterproductive. You can bend and break people by force, but the result will only be hatred and revolt. With Christ one wins by losing! And I'm going to play a little video because this might lighten the tone a little bit, but I think it's really good. It's from a comedy series called "Red Dwarf" (and you might have seen it)

[Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vO4Xw6m9IAI> ]

Ok, so what was happening there was the crew of the ship Red Dwarf had been put in this place which is called "A Justice Field" and the justice field was designed to stop crime because any crime that you commit against anybody else was visited upon you. And I wanted to bring that in because that's an image that Satan must experience when he's trying to bring suffering upon Christians, but actually every time he does it it's working against him because it's bringing glory to God. When he engineered Christ's death upon the cross it was revisited against him because so many people came to faith through Christ's death on the cross. And when he visits it upon Christians even today the way that Christians suffer, if they suffer in a way that glorifies God, again is visited back upon the devil. I can see him just saying, like in the picture of this robot saying, "Does not compute!" He can't figure it out because he's still doing it.

With Christ, and this is baffling but with Christ one wins by losing – you win by losing! Persecuted Christians can be encouraged in their knowledge that the kingdom of God is ours not only in the future but now, because being 'in Christ' means not only suffering with him but ruling with him. I had a chat with Tony last week and he quite rightly pointed out: we have one foot in heaven now (I'm at the right hand of God now) but I'm also here now. We rule with him. Whatever tribulations the followers of Christ face, we have to act not as victims but as more than conquerors – that's what Paul says.

Before the Reformation came about the only way the kingdom of heaven was represented was in the re-enactment of the Mass, the sacrifice of Jesus in the Mass. And ordinary people used that ritual to reassure themselves by the acting out of this Mass by the religious professionals who were performing this 'high' religion and acquiring merit for the community. But in stark contrast, the depiction by John is that the proper order of things is that it is the faithfulness of every single faithful Christian.

In the testimony of our faith as demonstrated by our identification with Jesus and through our exemplification of Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross, through our own re-enactment of his sacrifice, we make a way for those who are still in the Empire of the world, the kingdom of the world, to lay hold of the redemption that Christ has accomplished for them. That's what the scripture says: They will wage war against the Lamb but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and with him will be his Called, Chosen, and Faithful" followers. We also will triumph over them who wage war against Jesus.

The initial victory that was won by Jesus at Calvary must be repeated by those that follow him. Only in this manner will the forces of evil be finally overcome. Belovèd, in God's economy, one

conquers by dying! We put to death the deeds of the flesh by the Spirit. And whatever the deeds of the flesh are for you, only you know. But we put to death the deeds of the flesh – it's the flesh that has to die in order that the Spirit can glorify God. So long as we put the Spirit aside so that we can satisfy the deeds of our flesh, and the desires of our flesh, the Spirit's ability to work through us will be marginalised.

All nations are prophesied to come and worship before God. This is the prime focus of John's vision in the book of Revelation, and the faithful testimony of the martyrs is a prime reason why unbelievers are drawn to faith. Tertullian in the 2nd century said this: "The more you mow us down, the more numerous we grow. The blood of Christians is seed."

You see, when the nations watch individual Christians die, or put to death the deeds of the flesh, their eyes are opened so they can believe in God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and their hearts are moved to accept him as Lord, giving him all the glory and worshipping him. And thereby the Empires of this world collapse, and the kingdom of God advances upon the earth, one transformed heart at a time!