

The Gospel End To the Story

Intro

Winston Churchill once remarked that Russia as “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” To borrow and butcher the great man’s phrase I will suggest to you that Revelation is also “A riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” A book filled with imagery, symbolism, strangeness, and profound hope—The Apostle John wrote Revelation to encourage the church as she was about to face a season of intense persecution. The Book of Revelation was incredibly encouraging to its original recipients—it told them of God’s victory over the powers of darkness and gave them courage to stand firm in the face of persecution. It was a glimpse of the end of the story—when the Triune God defeated the powers and principalities on the earth and established his dominion forever.

This lesson—we will briefly look at the outline of the Book and draw a few key insights to discuss together. While we do not have time to cover rich depths of biblical symbolism and imagery deployed by John in this book we will briefly sketch its outline—then center ourselves on its great challenge and question.

(Note to Instructors—you may invite your classes to watch the Bible project introduction to Revelation during the week before class. 2 videos combining to 22 minutes in length. It isn’t perfect—but it does an excellent job of overviewing the key themes of the book)

Revelation 1-3	7 Letters to 7 Churches	Christ addresses the “7 Churches” in Asia faced with the pressures of life and the coming “Great Tribulation”
Revelation 4-5	The Throne Room of God	Throne Room of God is depicted—God is holding a scroll with 7 seals
Revelation 6-16	Three Cycles of 7: 7 seals 7 bowls and 7 lampstands	History is played out through three lenses which all share a climax of the victory of the slain lamb and his people. Important to note: God’s judgments do not bring repentance—however the Lamb and his people’s self-giving sacrifice do in fact lead many in the nations to repentance.
Revelation 14-15	Interlude-Peek to the End and a View into Heaven.	Interlude: Picture of the Lamb’s victory—Babylon Judged—those who submit

		to Babylon judged—Praise for those who die in the Lord—preview of the Last Battle. Picture of Saints in Heaven, Temple, and Tabernacle.
Revelation 17-19	The Fall of Babylon	Babylon falls along with all who serve her—Babylon here serves as a type of all who trust in empire as their ultimate hope: Babylon, Persia, Macedon, Rome, Holy Roman Empire, British Empire, United States of America—all of the rulers of the earth are envisioned in this city.
Revelation 19-20	The Final Battle and Final Judgment	<p>The Church—washed by the Blood of the Lamb—is joined to Christ forever.</p> <p>But With the defeat of Babylon—Satan comes out from under the mask of empire and marshals one last attack—but is utterly destroyed by the “Lamb who was slain”.</p> <p>Death is defeated, God’s Kingdom is established, and all come before the judgment seat of Christ.</p>
Revelation 21-22	New Heavens New Earth and the wedding supper of the Lamb	Eden is restored to mankind—God comes back to dwell with his people forever—the curse is reversed

If you could strip away all of the fantastic creatures, all of the beautiful and terrible imagery, the blended mix of history and prophecy we are left with one theme that is the very essence of the book of Revelation—**the war of the Lamb and the Dragon**. Throughout its pages we glimpse through a series of windows into the cosmic struggle between good and evil, light and

darkness, those with God and those with Satan. Revelation gives us a look behind the curtain of human events into the real centers of power in the universe—the throne room of God and the Lamb and the forces of Hell wearing its masks of empire, economics, and false religion. Behind all chaos and confusion is the Throne room of God where he is working out his purposes to the pleasure of his will. Behind all human endeavors of empire, economics, and “meaning making”. Is the Dragon who is the same Serpent from the Garden of Eden seeking to lead humans to destruction. The good news of Revelation is that the dragon will not win. The forces of hell will be defeated—the Lamb and those who follow the Lamb will conquer and will conquer without using the Dragon’s tactics of domination and destruction.

Revelation is a book all Christians need—**but is especially important for Christians who face a growingly hostile culture.** The Christians of the 1st and 2nd centuries faced social exclusion, rejection by families, were barred from economic positions and associations, and eventually faced prison, torture, and martyrdom. Such pressures create profound temptations for the people of God.

Three Profound Temptations

Temptation to Conform

- When faced with social exclusion, political attack, and economic loss there is a profound temptation to conform to “the world’s” standards. This was the sin of the Nicolaitans as well as all of those who received “the mark of the Beast”. (Which was most likely a certificate that they had offered incense to the “Divine Caesar” as was required by law in order to do business in the Roman Empire.

Temptation to Anger and Hatred

- If you avoid the temptation to conform, and Satan is a real and perpetual force in this age, then suffering in this world on account of our faith is not likely—but absolutely assured (See Romans 8:16). Not only suffering on account of our shortcomings, but sufferings because of our virtues. **We are at war with hell and our enemy has power in this world.** If you live the life of a disciple there will be injustices, slights, cruelties, even death. Our Lord warns us of this on countless occasions in the gospel accounts—it is why he demands we count the cost before following him.

If the enemy is unsuccessful in leading us directly into the temptation of conformity the next best thing (and in many cases more effective thing) is the temptation to wrath, indignation, bitterness, malice, and pride towards those who inflict suffering upon us. We will “forget the love we had at first”. (Revelation 2). Such anger is wholly natural—but the church is not a natural institution—she is called to something far greater than what mere nature is capable of and she was empowered with the Spirit of the living God to accomplish her calling. She was called to love her enemies, to actively seek and wish the best for those who engage in barbarities towards her—the first Christians accomplished this and in doing so they overcame the world—“conquering” Rome in the process.

Temptation to Lose Heart

- If in our present age we are able to avoid the temptations of conformity and hatred Christ will be uplifted in our world. Hell will be outraged for the Kingdom will advance with power in our midst. But, God's ways are not our ways and his timing is not always our timing. What may look to the outside world a crushing defeat for the Church of Jesus Christ—may be a smashing victory for God's ultimate purposes. Hell delighted in calvary because it could not understand nor predict Easter. When all avenues of deception are lost our enemy may overwhelm the church with a tidal wave force-leaving a sea of martyrs in its wake. Iraqi Christians experienced this with ISIS, Iranian and Chinese Christians know this all too well. Their martyr's crown is glory and we shall be honored to kiss their feet on the last day. The temptation to the Christian harassed from all sides an yet never striking back or despising their enemy is the temptation of despair. To lose heart in the face of the temporary advance of evil in their region, in their lifetime. Our prayers should ever be with Christians in these circumstances—we cannot tell their stories enough—nor honor their memories and their legacy for they are the great cloud of witnesses.

Discussion Question

- Of the three temptations which do you find yourself most pressured to?

Revelation's Response to Temptations:

Temptation to Conform

- Christians who were tempted to conform to culture were shown who was really behind the cultural practice/power. These early Christians lived and died with the Roman empire being the most powerful political force in human history. If Revelation is true—than the ultimate power in the universe is secure in the Throne-Room of God. The power behind Rome is not the Divine (as all Romans and Roman Emperors claimed) but rather the demonic—mutations from the good that ultimately will not last. Something unthinkable in the 1st century that we know to be true today.
- Revelation also raised the stakes of conformity. Throwing a pinch of incense on Caesar's altar to be a good citizen even if you don't believe all the hoopla seems like the perfectly reasonable thing to do. It would seem to be terribly unreasonable for anyone not to do it. But the Christians refused at tremendous personal cost. **Perhaps because they knew that behind every single one of their actions—was the advance of the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Satan.** That idolatry was not innocuous, but the worship of demons, that purity was not prudishness—but the path to victory for the Kingdom of God.

Discussion Question

- Considering where Hillcrest maps on the scale of “Conservative to Progressive” which American subculture to which subculture (Theistic Populism/Secular Progressivism) are we more likely to be seduced by?
- How do we distinguish between a neutral change in style/preference (which may even make the proclamation of the gospel more effective) and a situation where a church or individual has caved to cultural pressures—losing some biblical truth or even denying Christ?
- What are some contemporary ideas, practices, and beliefs do you think Satan’s forces are trying to get our church to adopt?
- What are some contemporary ideas, practices, and beliefs do you think Satan’s forces are trying to get individuals in our churches to adopt?

Temptation to Anger and Hatred

- In response to this temptation Revelation offers a powerful look at ultimate reality—what is really going on in the world. What looks like government agents and persons who hate Christians seeking to destroy the livelihood and reputation of a Christian cake baker who cannot in good conscience take part in a so called same sex wedding is not a band of reprehensible actors hating God and those who follow him. In fact—we know that behind all of the actions and ideologies which have led American culture to abandon biblical morals and precepts are truly evil and reprehensible spiritual forces misleading and deceiving our fellows to their harm and ultimate destruction. Their actions of cruelty towards the Christian baker demands our pity much more so than our scorn. The real evil—that which is to be totally and completely hated—is the roaring lion behind the scenes who is devouring souls in our very midst. With this picture we can unreservedly love those who hate us and unashamedly hate the evil forces which deceive our present enemies. **We have no right to hate our fellow image bearers for we were also enemies of God until Christ’s mercy found us.**

Discussion Questions

- What is the difference between righteous anger toward evil and injustice and hatred and bitterness towards our enemies whom we perceive are God’s?
- Do you believe Satan’s forces exist and are active in “secular events” of today?
- How would our language change about non-Christians if this idea was firmly planted in our heads?

Temptation to Lose Heart

- In response to unrelenting attacks from the enemy—the Book of Revelation offers us the Throne Room of heaven and a savior whose robe is drenched in his own blood. In the throne room of heaven we find that the Triune God is seated on his throne working

out all things to the purposes of his will. No evil can befall us that the Father cannot ultimately undo. No suffering is meaningless—evil has no ultimate power—no matter how bad it gets—all will come to right. We are also given the picture of “the Lamb who was slain” and his robe which is drenched in his own blood. This war is real, the pain is real, the suffering is real, we do not serve a commander who leads his forces from the safety and comfort of the rear. At every point in the battle our savior is with us at the front. More than that—at the darkest hour, the most difficult engagement, the most crucial battle our savior fought alone. Gethsemane holds the key to all suffering for there Jesus accepted the physical torment of calvary—but much worse he submitted to drink the wine of God’s (his own) wrath down to the dregs. We do not suffer in vain and we do not suffer alone—these are the promises the Book of Revelation offers the church. May they give us courage to be the women and men we ought to be.

Discussion Questions

- What would it look like to “lose heart” in the 21st century church? Would apathy towards the things of God (church, prayer, study etc.) be a sign of despairing God’s goodness/ultimate victory?
- What would our picture of God be like if he never suffered?