AllSaints

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TESTIFY – The Way to Victory

Revelation 12-13

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Normally I would start by saying 'it's wonderful to be with you here this morning'…and it is wonderful to be with you here this morning. Some of you may be familiar with The Great British Bake Off – the episode tends to end with someone being crowned 'Star Baker' and someone else is asked to leave the tent. The presenter who announces the baker that will be leaving the tent prefaces the announcement with something like "Sadly, this week it's my turn to announce…". Because this stuff here is not cheery. And it cuts off before we get to the bit where everything turns out alright.

So, with that being said: It is wonderful to be here with you this morning. I hope you are sitting comfortably, and my advice is to clench everything.

Because we've not got a lot of time to unpack all this stuff, so if it's all the same to you I'm just going to crack on…

Quick Summary

Just to get us up to speed: we're now over halfway in our series on the last book of the Bible – Revelation. We began with letters to the churches of John's day, containing various warnings and promises. And then in **Chapter 4**, he's given a glorious vision of the Heavenly throne room, with everyone praising God the Father as the Creator. And upon his 'arrival' into Heaven, things start to spring into action (**Chapter 5**). Jesus is praised because he's the only one worthy to open the seals of God's wrath, and

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kickstart what's called 'the Great Tribulation'. Between **Chapters 6-9**, 7 seals are opened and 6 trumpets are blown with varying degrees of wrath being poured out onto the earth. Then, before the 7th trumpet is blown, in **Chapters 10-11**, we have a brief interlude where we're given more information about what's going on whilst the seals are being opened and the trumpets are being blown. We zoom in on two people - a political leader and a priest – who are in a temple and are protecting said temple from all these evil demonic forces - and we're told this is going on for three and a half years. At the end of their ministry, they are killed, and the evil forces think they have won – but God had other ideas, and 3 and a half days later, brings them back to life, and whisks them into Heaven.

And it's here that we resume the trumpets – the last one is about to be blown, ready to unleash the final bowls of God's wrath in Chapter 15. And when it's blown at the end of Chapter 11 we get what I think is the weirdest part of all of Revelation. Because what's going on can be summed up pretty simply – at the end of the world, two empires will arise with the backing of the Devil. One empire is a political body made up of 7 nations and has 10 kings. The other empire has 2 kings, and sets up an idol, establishing this empire as a religious entity. So you have a political empire, and a religious empire. Their sole purpose is to go after God's people, but God protects them. They also are made to get people to worship the Devil, and the second empire starts marking people.

Even more briefly - There's two devilish empires, one will persecute God's people, one will put a mark on a bunch of other people.

There you go…that's basically it.

Was there anything there that we didn't understand? It's a completely coherent summary.

But what's weird is how we get there. How do we know that's what's going on? Because we read about dragons and beasts, where on earth did we get empires from? We read about a woman, where did this 'God's people' come from?

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How the Bible Works – Copying Homework

And it's at this point that I think it's worth explaining a bit how your Bible works: the book that you may have in front of you are words that establish that there is a relationship between God and you. It's compiled of material from multiple authors over hundreds, if not thousands, of years – carefully and meticulously preserved. It starts with the creation of the world, and ends with a new world (which is essentially much of what we're covering in this series).

It's divided into 2 parts: what we call the Old Testament (which is all the stuff that happened before Jesus) and the New Testament (recalling Jesus' ministry and a few decades after that). And the material of the New Testament, is *heavily* reliant on the Old Testament. Ruth Rhodes in her talk on the letters to the 7 churches used a word I really liked – she talked about *hyperlinking*. You click on a word, and it takes you to the *original* source. And this is important – the New Testament hyperlinks all the time. I also like to think about it as 'copying homework' – where New Testament writers just copy from the Old Testament, except it's not cheating, that how it's meant to be used.

The writers of the New Testament make sense of what's going on around them, what they see or what they hear, based on the Old Testament.

And at the time the material for the New Testament was being written (unbeknownst to the writers themselves), the Old Testament was divided into 3 sections. 1) The Laws; 2) The Prophets; and 3) The Writings.

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And it's the prophets of the Old Testament that are quoted all the time. In their day the prophets in the Old Testament gave messages to God's people (Israel) that ranged from a jolly good telling off, to words of enormous comfort. And, sometimes, they were given glimpses of the future, really important stuff. And so, it shouldn't be any surprise to anyone, that when Jesus turns up - the Son of God, God in flesh, who came to die for you, and to take away your sins – when he turns up, the people and eyewitnesses who would record his life, would *obviously* turn to the prophets of the Old Testament to see if they could make sense of what was happening.

Just twenty-two verses into the Matthew's account of Jesus' life, we get this:

Matthew 1:22

(NIVUK) 22 'All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet:'

And then he quotes Isaiah 4:6, a **prophet** from the **Old Testament**, who was speaking hundreds of years prior. Do you see? It's really important we get this established – this is how they made sense of what was going on in the world around them - by going back to the Old Testament. And we're meant to the same.

And the Revelation given to John is NO exception. John LOVES the prophets.

He can make sense of his vision because he has old friends to call upon. Now I remember when I was a kid, streaming music wasn't a thing yet. You'd buy CDs to listen to music, and every so often, a CD would come along that would effectively be a compilation of greatest hits from a band. If you look at the top-10 number 1/greatest hits albums on Wikipedia, you'll see the likes of *The Beatles 1, ABBA Gold*, *Queen Greatest Hits*.

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Why am I saying this? Because I think it's very fair to say that this book, Revelation, is basically a greatest hits record but for prophets. With hits from Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Habakkuk, and many more.

And in these chapters 12 & 13, it is painfully obvious how much he adores Daniel.

- We've got beasts and heads and horns (from Daniel 7).
    - This is where we're told that beasts refer to empires, heads refer to nations and horns refer to kings.

- We have 3.5 years/1260 days/42 months/times, time and half a time (also from Daniel 7).
    - This is where we're told that there's going to be a time of trouble (a *tribulation*) for 3.5 years, involving some bad guys in a Temple, and the persecution of God's people.

- We have body parts from a leopard, a bear and a lion (Daniel 7).
    - This is how we know that the empire in Revelation is MASSIVE. In Daniel the animals (empires) are separated, in Revelation they're all in one animal.

- Archangel Michael has a feature (from Daniel 12)
    - That's how we know what Michael is doing in Revelation 12 – he's defending the woman, because that's what he does in Daniel 12.

- We can see people being *marked* (from Ezekiel 9)
    - In Ezekiel, people marked by God are *saved*. So what do we think happens to those who are marked by the evil empire?

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Habakkuk also features in this section…

- we also have the mention of a sea (Habakkuk 1)
    - Habakkuk 1 is where the people of the earth are described as a 'sea', so it makes sense that a beast (an empire) emerges from them in Revelation 12.

We also have two important points who aren't from prophets but from the writings:

We also have a nice reference to Joseph's dream from Genesis 37:

- that's how we know the sun refers to Jacob, the moon refers to his wife, Rachel and the 12 stars are their children – the 12 tribes of Israel.
    - So the *woman* who is dressed in these things is Israel.

And following from that we have a Psalm, a song from the Old Testament, Psalm 2.

- It's here that we get a reference to 'the rod of iron', given to the woman's child. So, we recognise as Jesus from Revelation 2. This is nice because the homework has already been done here.

Okay – let's have a pause. If you're watching or reading this, I would make a cup of tea. But it's worth saying that all of this will be made available on our Home Group study notes that we've been publishing weekly.

Revelation 12-13 | What's going on?

I'll leave a key here to remind us who's who so we can refer back to this as we go along. Now I'm going to say that this is *an* interpretation of what's going on. You'll know that everything that's being said, someone will have a different interpretation. I haven't got time to explain all the views available. I'm just giving you an understanding I think makes sense. You ought to be testing what I say.

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And just quickly – Satan's name means 'adversary', in the legal sense – the prosecution. His job, right now, is to accuse the church, which he always fails to do thanks to Jesus. Just bear that in mind…

So here it goes:

Chapter 12 – when the 7th trumpet is blown, the world is effectively treated to a cosmic cinema. This is what they see…they see three people. 1) A woman, (Israel) who is giving birth to 2) the child (Christ), who is wanted by 3) The Dragon (the Devil and Satan). The child (Christ) is removed from the earth, and the woman (Israel) mysteriously flees into the wilderness protected by God for 1260 days.

And now that we know what's happened to the child (Jesus), we're about to find out why Israel has fled into the wilderness. In heaven, Satan hears a song:

Revelation 12:11

(NIVUK) 11 'They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Blood of the Lamb…word of their testimony. The church has arrived in Heaven – is safe, and sins no more. Just as a reminder – Satan's job is to accuse God's people. Satan can't be accusing anyone in the church anymore, so he goes after the woman, Israel. And after a frank exchange of views, Michael does his job, defends Israel, and turfs Satan and his entourage out onto the earth. He's very cross, and his employment status changes. He now is called the Devil – the deceiver. And he goes after the woman (Israel), he has to act fast, because he's only got a little time (3.5 years). She is sheltered from his attacks. These attacks go on for 3 and a half years. This is why she went into the wilderness at the beginning of the chapter.

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Chapter 13 – we get introduced to how Satan goes after Israel. He uses two empires, who are designed to *deceive* the world, and go after God's people. The first is made up of 7 heads (nations) and 10 horns (kings). It's MASSIVE, unlike anything the world has ever seen. This beast blasphemes in the world for 42 months – the three and a half years mentioned earlier.

The first empire is basically political in nature, and all the bad guys on earth go "wow isn't that empire really *really* brilliant!" but they actually worship it. And by doing that they worship the Dragon, the devil. The second empire is different, it *looks* like a lamb. We can think back to the start, who else looks like a Lamb – Jesus. The second beast's aim is to look like the Messiah, and he uses miraculous signs and wonders, like bringing fire, just like the Two Witnesses in Chapter 11. You may know the tune "anything you can do I can do better"…that's the method of deception this beast uses. It's just like the Egyptian priests with Moses, where they mimic Moses' signs to dissuade Pharaoh from persecuting God's people Israel.

And then they set up a talking idol, which looks after the image of the first empire. Some people are deceived and worship it, and then we get the infamous mark that's put on people so that they can be economically active.

TA-DA!

Now some of you will want to know about the whole 666 thing. And I honestly think this does not need to be overcomplicated – it should not leave you thinking the entire Bible is embedded with some kind of code which reveals that the Beast is, conveniently, the political bogeyman of the day. At the end of the day, it's something no one should have. It's a mark of man, as opposed to the mark of God. There are two popular answers, and I can't think of a reason why they can't both be true: first is that God really likes the number 7 in the Bible. It's a number in the Bible that tends to mean something akin to "everything is as it should be". We'll recall God rested on the 7th day – he Sabbathed on the 7th Day, He took his place as king in Creation.

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I don't think it's any coincidence that later on in this series, we'll come onto the arrival of the Kingdom of God at the end of the world, and to the ultimate Sabbath, which rather than lasting for a day, lasts for 1000 years, with Christ reigning as king – everything is as it should be.

So, we'd expect a Godly ideal number to be something like 777, which 666 would fall short of. And wouldn't that perfectly capture humanity's standards with God's standards. Remember Paul's words –

Romans 3:23

(NIVUK) 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Closing Thoughts

So, what do we do about this? Whilst I think the story itself is simple enough to understand, that still leaves a lot to unpack. So, what do we all make of this? What on earth do we do?

We talked a bit about the children of Israel, in the future, and God defending her. How does that all fit in with the story of salvation? What happens to God's people in the end?

There will be questions around how literal or how figurative this all is. How much of this is simply imagery describing the spiritual ferocity of evil in the world? Will there really be two empires working together? Is it literal, or allegorical. My view here is that there is room for both. In one sense, this kingdom of the Devil in chapters 12&13 is indeed representative of man's final 'hoorah' attempt to rule the world.

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We get this throughout the Old Testament, with Babylon being a symbol for man's attempts to rule the world – the model upon which all empires are built from. "You are the head of gold" Daniel told the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. And lo and behold, when the Devil's empire is defeated, what is his empire called? – 'Mystery' **Babylon**. So it *does* symbolize man's rebellion against God, just like it did with Nimrod back in Genesis, when he built the tower of **Babel**.

But whilst it has this symbolic element to it – Babylon's empire *did* exist. That 'beast' was real. And I think so will the two empires we just read about. They *will* exist in the world in the future – because that's what happened with Daniel. The visions given to him, about beasts and heads and horns were not an allegory or a commentary on the nature of sin in the world (although there will be lessons to learn from that). They represented real empires – the Greeks, Persians and the Babylonians. Daniel's vision goes almost into an excruciating level of detail about the Syrian wars in the lead up to Antiochus Epiphanes, who the Antichrist is based on. So, if that's what happened with Daniel, where his visions materialized into world empires, I think it stands to reason that it's going to happen again with John here in Revelation.

Do we know who these empires will be? No – and I would remind us of Tom's warning at the start of this series, of reading modern politics or global events into things described in Revelation. In my view we do not need to be looking to the usual suspects like America, China, Russia, the EU, NATO. At any rate, no empire has ever arisen where people actually *worship* the empire. Having respect for or being impressed by the scale of an empire is not the same as actually worshipping it as if it was divine.

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Marks and Blood

I want to pick up on a couple of things that struck me – and maybe they'll strike you too.

To close, can I just dwell on a verse that we picked up on towards the beginning I really think it's worth dwelling on the blood of the lamb -

Revelation 12:11

(NIVUK) 11 **'They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.**

Just think about that for a second – remember who 'him' refers to…Satan the accuser. And think about what on earth we've just read about. The Devil will end up having an empire like no other. It will be MASSIVE. It will make statues that will talk, and rain fire down from heaven. People will worship the empires. It's just some ridiculous, mind boggling stuff, all in the name of this dragon, Satan, the Devil. He's insanely powerful. He seems completely insurmountable.

But he's not – why? The blood of the Lamb.

Can I just rattle off what the blood of Christ accomplishes for us?:

Acts 20:28 – Christ purchases the church
Romans 3:25 – we have atonement and are made right with God
Romans 5:9 – justification and saved from God's wrath
Ephesians 1:7 – redemption and forgiveness
Colossians 1:20 – peace and reconciliation with God
Hebrews 9:12 – eternal redemption
Hebrews 10:19 – nearness to God himself, even here and now

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Where does victory come from? – Christ's precious, precious blood. It's gory, it's messy, and in our modern culture totally weird to be so fixated on someone's blood. But with respect to everything that we've been talking about, there is nothing more important for us – if we want to not have to worry about any of this scary stuff, we need to put our confidence in the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. That is our security – and what is more, we are not to be ashamed of it. Ever. If you're a Christian, that's part of your testimony, you can be proud to claim Jesus as your own.

And finally – the bad guys are not the only one's who mark. The blood of the Lamb one of God's marks on those who are open and willing to say – 'God, I really need you'. Those that receive God's mark, *live*. Life to the full. If you want victory over all this stuff, call on Jesus, trust him to help. Don't worry about saving yourself, leave that up to him. He's a great God, and, as we shall see, and as a reminder of what Tom Peryer said two weeks ago – he wins. He's a God who's in the business of victory, and you're invited. Let's get on board.

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