

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I am one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. In the 6 weeks leading up to Easter, we were teaching on the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Over the next three months, we are going to return to a preaching series we began in the Fall, focussed on the book of *Revelation*.

It's been a few months since we last looked at *Revelation*, and so I want to offer an extended introduction and summary before we before we pick up where we left off.

a. The Setting of *Revelation*: *Revelation* begins by introducing us to two different people; the first being John. John was one of Jesus' 12 disciples. The second person we meet in *Revelation* is Jesus Himself: He is the Risen and Ascended Lord, who holds all power and authority.

It was important that John see this vision of Jesus because the world in which John lived was dominated by Rome—it was the superpower of the day. Resisting Roman power and influence seemed futile—you either got with the program, or, you were beaten into submission. Consider John's own situation. At the time *Revelation* was written, he was living on a remote island that doubled as a prison. Patmos was the place where enemies of Rome were sent to die. John was imprisoned because he refused to worship Caesar as Lord and God.

But there on Patmos, John was caught up to heaven to see and hear God's perspective about what was happening in the world, and, what would happen.

b. The Literary Genre(s) of *Revelation*: *Revelation* comes to us in the form of a letter, written to seven of the churches that John

oversaw. *Revelation* also belongs to the genre of **prophecy** (it is a word of instruction) and apocalyptic.

While the word “**apocalypse**” has come to be associated with the end of the world, the word itself simply means “revelation”. The book of *Revelation* reveals the nature and activity of God, but it does so in an unusual way.

Our culture is well-versed in stories that contain strange beasts. If you've read Tolkien's *Hobbit*, or watched Peter Jackson's cinematic version, you've travelled with the hobbit Bilbo Baggins, you've cringed at the sight of Orcs, and been terrified by the Dragon known as Smaug. We know just what to do with these characters; they belong to the genre of fantasy—fictional characters, occupying a fictional world...we're entertained by them, but we don't take them seriously.

As we enter the book of *Revelation*, we are brought face to face similar kinds of creatures. In chapter 5, Jesus is described as a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes; in chapter 13, Satan is described as an evil dragon, and we are introduced to a seven-headed sea monster. Quite naturally we ask, *is this real or is it fiction?* When Jesus returns, will He look like a Lamb with seven eyes and horns? Are we to be on the lookout for an evil dragon and his sea monster friend? No. Apocalyptic literature regularly makes use of symbols in order to express deep truths about who God is and why things are the way they are.

In the 19th and 20th century, people began to read *Revelation* as though it provided a map to understanding when the end of the world will take place. I want to suggest that this kind of reading misses the

point of the entire book. *Revelation* was written to Christians experiencing persecution; *Revelation* gives us God's perspective.

c. A Summary of Revelation 1-12: We are going to pick up our *Revelation* series at chapter 13, but first I want to offer a brief summary of Revelation 1-12.

Revelation 1 provides us with an introduction to John, to his circumstances, and to the purpose of this letter—it is a revelation from Jesus Christ to churches that were beginning to experience persecution. In chapters 2-3, Jesus addressed each of John's seven churches individually; He commended each church for certain actions and chastised them for others. But in each case these churches were challenged to "overcome," that is, to remain faithful to Jesus in spite of the present—and coming—persecution.

At its most basic level, *Revelation* calls us to worship God. Revelation 4 contains a vision of God seated on His throne, receiving the praise and worship of all of creation. Revelation 4:11 says, "*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things*".

Chapter 4, answers a question that many people have asked throughout history, a question that is relevant for us today—**who is Lord over the world?** When the righteous suffer and the wicked flourish, Christians are tempted to think that evil has gotten the upper hand. In Chapter 4 John saw a vision of God the Father, seated on His throne. Despite evidence to the contrary, *Revelation* declares that

God is ruling over creation, and that one day, He will overthrow evil and rule without rival.¹

In Chapter 5, John's vision expands to include Jesus, who now stands at the centre of the throne. Jesus is the One who conquers, and He is described as the Lion of Judah. But when John turns to glimpse this Lion, he sees that the Lion is a slain Lamb; Jesus has conquered by submitting to death on behalf of the world. We're told that John saw a scroll in the right hand of God, sealed by seven seals—the scroll symbolizes God's plans and purposes for the world. Jesus alone is worthy to open this scroll and usher history towards God's intended purposes.

In Chapter 6, we discover that in order for God to save humanity, He must deal with evil. Remember, God's ultimate plan isn't to whisk people away to heaven—up in the clouds somewhere—and leave the world to destroy itself. God created the world, He loves the world, and He's not willing to scrap it and start over. For this reason, judgement is necessary; He needs to deal with evil, and those who perpetrate it, in order to make the world fit once more for human flourishing.

Revelation 7 offers an initial picture of the eternal rest God has planned for humanity. Chapters 8-11 provide a detailed description of God's coming judgement. *Revelation* reminds us that until Jesus returns, the primary purpose of God's judgment is not to punish people, but to warn them, to call them to turn and repent, that they may be restored. But the tragedy of Revelation 8 and 9 is that in the

¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 8-9.

face of God's judgement, many people dig in their heels and harden their hearts.

God's judgement alone does not bring about repentance; it must be accompanied by prophetic witness. In Revelation 10, a mighty angel gives John a scroll to eat. The scroll symbolizes the word of God; to eat it is to internalize it, cherish it, and then speak it to the world.

In Revelation 11 we meet two prophetic witnesses dressed in sackcloth. Theologically speaking, sackcloth is both the clothing of a prophet, and, the sign of repentance. These two witnesses are a symbol of the entire church: faithful followers of Jesus who bear witness to Him.² As we bear witness to Jesus Christ, we offer a prophetic witness to the world—we speak the truth about God's love and mercy, but we also call people to repent and turn to God.

Chapters 12-14 mark the theological centre of Revelation; it's here we discover what lies behind persecution. There is an age-old conflict that exists between God and His primary adversary, Satan. And while God has already won the war—the decisive moment being when Jesus rose in victory from the grave—Satan is unwilling to concede defeat. The entire world experiences the tension of “a battle won but not quite over.”³ Until Jesus returns, Satan directs his fury at the people of God—persecution and suffering are the end result.

² N.T. Wright, *Revelation For Everyone*, 99.

³ Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Book of Revelation*, 263.

⁴ Gordon Fee, *The Book Of Revelation*, 161.

In the time remaining, I want to direct your attention to Revelation 13; if you have a Bible with you, please turn there with me—you can find it on page 998 in the Blue Bible.

Revelation 13 begins with a dragon; Revelation 12:9 tells us that the dragon is a symbol for Satan, the archenemy of God. The dragon has lost the war against God—defeated by Christ at the cross—and Satan knows his time is short, and so he wages war against those that God loves.⁴

Living here on the West Coast of Canada, it's easy to distance ourselves from the reality of war—when was the last time a war was fought in Vancouver? War is something that happens somewhere else. And when we hear the words “*Holy War*,” we tend to think of fanatics, extremists, jihad. What does *Holy War* have to do with Vancouver?

We live with flesh and blood realities that we can see, taste, and touch, but *Revelation* reminds us that we are also surrounded by unseen, spiritual realities. Ephesians 6:12 reminds us that our battle is not against flesh and blood “*but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*”

Revelation 13:1-2 says, *“The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.”*

The first thing to notice is that the beast share certain similarities with the dragon: Revelation 12:3 tells us that the dragon had 7 heads, 10 horns, and 10 crowns—so too the beast. From the verses that follow, we learn that the beast is endowed with the authority of the Satan(v. 4), blasphemes the name of God (v. 5-6), wages war against God’s people (v. 7), and demands worship and praise (v. 4, 8).

If the dragon is a symbol for Satan, *who*, or *what* does the beast represent? Most New Testament scholars agree that the beast is a personification of the Roman Empire. When Roman troops invaded the Eastern Mediterranean, they came onto the land from the sea. Why a seven-headed beast? It is well attested to that the city of Rome was founded upon seven hills.

On each of the seven heads, John saw a blasphemous name; these names likely correspond to the blasphemous titles taken by the Roman Emperors. Caesar Augustus allowed his subjects to refer to him as being divine; the coins Caesar Nero had minted referred to himself as the “Saviour of the World,” while Caesar Domitian demanded to be addressed as “Lord and God.”⁵

⁵ Mounce, 245.

⁶ Mounce, 246.

In one sense, the beast represents the Roman Empire, but in another sense it represents every Empire throughout history that is—or has been—self-centred, without accountability, and demands the obedience and worship that properly belongs to God.⁶

Vs. 3-4 says, *“One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?’”*

We can make sense of these verses by a careful study of history. Rome, being the superpower of the day, had almost unchecked authority to do whatever it wanted—and it did. Under Nero, many Christians were arrested; some were sent to the arena to be eaten by lions, while others were bound, lit on fire, and used as lanterns to light Nero’s garden parties.

While the Emperor Nero was evil incarnate, he was neither the first, nor the last, to fit such a description. History tells us that Rome faltered under Nero’s leadership—there was a movement afoot to kill him, but before he could be killed, Nero took his own life in AD 68. What followed was a year of bloody chaos.

But while the “head of the beast” was certainly wounded, the Roman

Empire made a full recovery. In AD 69, Vespasian became Emperor and the Empire was stabilized.⁷

Vs. 4 contains a sentiment that many of us can relate to: *Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?* How does one stand against an all-powerful Empire?

The key is in recognizing that God alone is all-powerful. It's clear from vs. 5-7 that the beast, while powerful, can only do what God allows. "It was *given a mouth* to utter blasphemies...It was *given power to wage war* against God's people". Though the State has power, God is the source of ultimate authority. The State operates within the boundaries, and timeline, that God has set.

Vs. 5 uses the language of 42 months, but this number is meant to be understood symbolically. No Empire, no matter how powerful, controls its own destiny; it cannot last forever. No Empire, no matter how powerful, can destroy God's holy people; persecution will only last for a time.

In vs. 11, we are introduced to a second beast; the second beast serves the first, and both serve the interests of Satan. Satan seeks to destroy God's people by stamping out faith. What means does the beast—the State—use? Hit people where it hurts—economic sanctions.

illus: In recent months, our Canadian government has issued an economic sanction against churches and Christian organizations across Canada. For many years, our church has participated in the

Canada Summer Jobs program. In partnership with the Canadian government, we have hired summer students to work at our church, and the monies we have paid have been matched by the government. But the Liberal government introduced a new section to the application process requiring organizations to sign a statement that affirms their particular stance on abortion, gender, and sexuality.

One of our staff members sat down with our Member of Parliament; he affirmed that we have been great partners in the past, and that they would be happy to give us the money—if we sign the statement. Needless to say, we didn't sign it—we couldn't sign it. Our choices reveal who we are and who we serve.

Vs. 16-17 says that the beast "*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.*"

What is this mark of the beast? Many Christians have wondered what kind of mark this might be, and it has led to speculation about credit cards, and computer chip implants...is Apple Pay is the mark of the beast?! I believe these fears are tied to an overly literalistic reading of this text.

This "mark of the beast" corresponds to a previously mentioned "mark". Revelation 7:3 talks about God placing a "seal" on the forehead of Christians; Revelation 14:1 tells us that this seal—or mark—is the name of Lamb and the name of God the Father. This

⁷ Mounce, 248.

mark is a sign of identity, and more specifically, of ownership; the mark reveals who belongs to God.

Now, I don't believe that *Revelation* is being literal at this point. I don't believe the day is coming when God will supernaturally tattoo His name, or the name of Jesus, upon every Christian forehead. Nor do I believe that every non Christian will receive a physical mark on their right hand or forehead. Instead, our loyalties will reveal who we are and who we serve.

Who do you serve? Where do your loyalties lie?

Vs. 8-10 says, “**8** *All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb's book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.* **9** *Whoever has ears, let them hear.* **10** *'If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity they will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword they will be killed.'* This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people.”

Fear is a useful tool in the hands of any Empire. The greatest weapon the State holds over its citizens is the threat of death—*if you do not comply, we will demand your life*. John reminds Christians in every era that there will always be conflict between the demands of the State and our allegiance to Jesus. John says that in the face of such threats everyone will worship the beast—everyone bow before the demands of the State—everyone that is but those who follow the Lamb.

And here John uses a curious phrase; he refers to Jesus as “*the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.*” John has been

describing the battle that the dragon and his beasts wage on the people of God, but he frames this battle in terms of the war God has already won—*the Lamb of God, slain from the creation of the world.*

Before Satan rebelled against God, before he was banished from heaven, before the world was created—before there was anything but Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—God made provision for sin to be dealt with, humanity to be rescued, and death to be destroyed. The cross was central to God's plan, before He created anyone or anything. His victory has never been in doubt; our rescue has never been in doubt.

Revelation reminds us that there is more going on than meets the eye. The conflict between the demands of the State and allegiance to Jesus is tied to an unseen battle that is taking place in the spiritual realm. Satan stands opposed to God, and seeks to destroy who and what God loves. *Revelation* reminds us that Rome is not all powerful—Jesus is. Ottawa may demand our ultimate loyalty, but only Jesus is worthy.

The battle that Satan is engaged in is doomed to fail; he cannot destroy God's people. God is already at the finish line, He knows the outcome, He's already won. That's why we are called to “*patience endurance and faithfulness.*” We may be imprisoned, mistreated, even killed, but, victory for the Christian is never in doubt—even if we die, we win.

The Lord's Supper: As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we do so knowing that we belong to God. Romans 14:8 says, “*If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*”

Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. At this meal we celebrate the truth that the power of sin has been broken. At this meal we celebrate the truth that death has been defeated; even though we die one day, like Christ, we too will rise to new life. At this meal we celebrate the truth that Satan himself has been defeated; though he might do his worst, nothing—and I mean absolutely nothing—can separate us from the love of God.

For this reason, we can be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.⁸

At this time I would like to invite those who are serving to come and take their place. We will have three serving stations up front, and one/two in the balcony. I've asked Paul and the team to play instrumentally for a few moments—as they do, let me encourage you to direct your thoughts to the Lord. Where there is sin, make your confession; where there is divided loyalty, return to the Lord with your whole heart.

When Paul begins to sing, you can make your way forward—row by row—beginning with the back row.

First Service: For those in the balcony, those serving will begin on the left side first, and then they will bring the elements over to the right side.

While you are waiting to come forward, our prayer ministers will be available to pray with you and for you—at the back on the left, right, and in the centre.

Worship

Benediction

⁸ Romans 12:12.