

Subject Line: Revelation Week Four

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Happy Sunday!

We're well past the halfway point in Revelation now, locked in a cosmic battle between good and evil, between God and the forces that oppose God.

Over the past few weeks, we've encountered what's wrong with the world through the seven seals, God's attempts to wake people up to the destructive powers of their false worship through the trumpets, and now we turn to the final set of seven: The Bowls.

Sadly, there will be no repentance in this section. The people who have not already turned back to God have hardened their hearts. They've given themselves over to the Unholy Trinity—the Dragon, the Beast, and the Harlot (who we meet this week). As a result, these are not happy passages. This might just be the most difficult week in our journey through Revelation. But, as we will come to see, it's a necessary one.

N.T. Wright says, "What we are faced with is neither a capricious or ill-tempered divine being nor a careless, laissez-faire world ruler. We are faced with the God who made the world, and whose generous love is seen most clearly in the sacrifice of his own son, the lamb, the one who shares his very throne. If this God (to look no further than our own recent history) does not hate the wickedness of the communist and fascist systems that devastated so much of Europe, he is not a good or loving God. If he does not hate Apartheid, with its systematic dehumanization of half the human race, he is not a good God. And if he does not finally do something about these and similar systems, he is not a loving God."

Next week we get to see how the story ends... and spoiler alert, it's awesome! But, in the meantime, if you're uncomfortable this week, that's okay. Wrestle with it and be honest with God about what you're thinking and feeling. And above all, trust the process!

Happy reading, friends.

About the Reading

Monday | Revelation 14:1-14

In another interlude, breaking up the rising action of the battle between the dragon and the Lamb, John pauses to present us with a choice.

I think it will be helpful for us to once again engage our imaginations and picture this scene in our minds. Do you remember where we left off last Friday? We saw the beasts of land and sea,

and the last verse we read in chapter 13 was about the number of the beast that marks the forehead of those who follow him: 666. Now, as we turn the page and John turns his eyes, we see the lamb and 144,000. It is almost as if John envisions a great showdown: the dragon and beast versus the Lamb.

We also have a clear picture of the clash between their respective followers—those who wear the *mark of the beast* on their right hands and foreheads juxtaposed against those who wear the *name of the Lamb* on their foreheads.

The [144,000 are a familiar sight](#) to us at this point, but John adds more color to the role they play here. First, he points out that they “have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.” I’m sure most of us read that and think something along the lines of, “Wow, that’s pretty personal information, John. And why does it *matter*?”

This detail is meant to depict the 144,000 as, in the words of N.T. Wright, a group of ‘elite warriors.’ Ancient Israel had a clear policy that those who were going to war had to obey special rules of purity, which included temporary sexual abstinence because they had to be *ritually pure* to fight ([Deut 23:9-14](#); [1 Sam 21:5](#)). The point here is not literal virginity but that these **followers of Christ are symbolically portrayed as an army who are ready to fight in a holy war.**

However, the militaristic imagery shifts quickly to that of sacrifice when John calls them “the firstfruits for God and the Lamb.” As part of their cycle of yearly feasts, God commanded the Israelites to offer him a sacrifice at harvest time by bringing the first sheaf of wheat that grew in their fields to the priests. This was called the “firstfruits,” signifying the expectation and prayer that this sheaf was the first of many more that would be on the way.

So, what does it mean for the 144,000 to be the firstfruits from mankind? First, it means that we can expect that there will be many, many more who come to follow the lamb. They are just the “first sheaf” of the eventual multitude. Second, it means that *they are going to be offered as a sacrifice.*

Richard Bauckham describes this well: “Even before the end of the description of these followers of the Lamb, the imagery has shifted from military terms to those of sacrifice and witness...The reason is, as we already know from 11:3-13, that the purpose of the participation of the Lamb’s followers in the messianic war is to bring the nations to repentance and faith in the one true God. This cannot be depicted in the imagery of war... **The followers of the Lamb, ransomed by his sacrifice, are to be themselves a sacrifice.**”

Once again, we are confronted with this paradoxical truth, which John has been repeating like a drumbeat, that the way that the army of the Lamb fights is through laying down their lives. Once again, we watch the followers of the Lamb square up with the big, bad dragon, armed only with the blood of the Lamb and their testimony about him—just like we did in [chapter 12](#).

Think about the visuals John is creating here. If you had to choose between these two sides, by all worldly counts, you would think that the odds would be weighted heavily in the dragon’s favor in this fight. Surely, a Lamb and his followers are no match for him and his beast! Yet, three angels start flying around proclaiming just the opposite:

“Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

“Fall, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.”

“If anyone worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath...”

In other words, they declare that **God wins**.

But wait! we think. The battle hasn’t even happened yet! Isn’t it a bit early to be proclaiming the Lamb’s victory?

This is precisely John’s point. These angels are essentially declaring that the outcome of this epic confrontation is inevitable, and God will win, no matter how unlikely it seems to us. He calls this message the **eternal gospel**.

For those who are living under Rome’s thumb, or another “Babylon,” the promise of future judgment as part of this eternal gospel would bring hope. On the other hand, this is something that we oftentimes get tripped up by in our modern context. While we might be willing to acknowledge it as necessary, I’m guessing many of us have a hard time calling it “good news,” and I won’t sugarcoat it for you—the images of judgment that John describes in verses 9-11 are horrifying.

However, I do want to defer most of our discussion about this judgment until tomorrow because we can explore it more fully then. Until then, try to remember that this is imagery, and it is a *warning*. John is not depicting this judgment as it happens but rather offering it as a cautionary tale. N.T. puts it this way:

“What we are not allowed to conclude from all this is that either John, or we, or anybody else, know who if anyone comes into the category described in verses 9–11. These things—which are themselves symbolic, evoking yet more biblical passages, and not literal descriptions—can only be heard with awe, and with **the recognition that the deep seduction of evil really can swallow people up whole. John is eager, anxiously eager, to prevent any of Jesus’ followers being sucked down into that dark whirlpool of wrath.** Their part is to be patient, obedient and faithful, knowing that death itself has been defeated, so as to become now a source, not of curse but of blessing.”

Thus, now that the angels have proclaimed how this will all shake out in the end, John presents us with a **choice: Will you resist the dragon and follow the lamb, or will you follow the dragon and suffer his inevitable defeat with him?**

The way of the dragon can look attractive. Babylon is cushy, undemanding, and indulgent. It is full of intoxicating (but false) promises for fulfillment.

On the other hand, John has already made it clear that the way of the slain Lamb will not be easy. He says that these 144,000 “follow the Lamb wherever he goes.” And that’s just it, isn’t it? To be a disciple is to choose to follow Jesus wherever he goes, and where he goes is to the lost, the hurting, the oppressed, the outcast. He moves towards service, instead of his comfort. He moves towards the weak and lowly, instead of power and influence. He walks to the cross.

Will we follow him there?

In a sense, there is little more that needs to be said. Jesus tells us that whoever wants to follow him must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. The way of the cross is indeed the way to victory, just as the angels declared...but that doesn't make it any less challenging.

Following the Lamb wherever he goes will require humility and sacrifice to prioritize God's desires over our own. This was true for the first-century Christians, and it is true for us today. That's why the call for the saints, those who choose faith in Jesus and obedience to God, is to endure (v. 12). John is not afraid to tell the stark truth about the cost of following Jesus. When the voice from heaven proclaims, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on," it is because following the Lamb might actually lead there, especially for a first-century Christian.

The risk of martyrdom may not be so high for you and me, but it is no less true that we must make the choice.

If we want to be people who follow the Lamb wherever he goes, where do you see him walking? Who is he moving towards? Where does the way of the cross lead in your life?

Will you follow him there? Will you accept the costs of walking in his footsteps, trusting that it will one day lead to resounding, eternal victory?

– EH

Tuesday | Revelation 14:15-20

Today I want to begin with a love poem from [Isaiah 5](#).

“Let me sing for my beloved
my love song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
and he looked for it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and briers and thorns shall grow up;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.
For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
and he looked for **justice**,

but behold, **bloodshed**;
for **righteousness**,
but behold, an **outcry!**”

This poem functions as a sort of parable. God planted his covenant people in the Promised Land. He had committed to staying by their side, blessed them with a land of abundance, He had given them the Torah so that they would be a light to the nations. And Israel’s job was just to be that light by bearing good fruit in their actions, words, lifestyles, etc. They are the vineyard set up with perfect conditions to produce grapes.

And yet, when God looks for the grapes, he sees rotten fruit instead. Instead of justice, he sees bloodshed. Instead of righteousness, an outcry.

This was a difficult message for Isaiah to bear for his people, that they had so squandered the opportunity God gave them to be a light to the nations and had forfeited their responsibilities. So now Isaiah tells them that time is up. The decision has been made, and the day of the Lord’s justice is coming.

For many of us, judgment is a hard thing to talk and think about. It’s scary, it seems harsh, and it can feel like we are seeing a side of God that is so opposite from the Jesus we see in the Gospels.

I wanted to begin with this poem precisely because it is a *love* poem. In his pronouncement of coming judgment, the prophet Isaiah does not portray an angry drill sergeant, or a bloodthirsty God out for revenge. Instead, we see a God who is in love, searching for his beloved in the vineyard he planted for them, and getting his heart broken by what he finds.

I think this is important for us to recognize as we turn to Revelation: what we are looking at when we see judgment is **a loving God like the one in Isaiah 5 who is deeply grieved.**

So before we dig into the text, I want to mention two things:

First, if judgment is a topic that is a particular struggle for you, I could not recommend [watching Hannah Buchanan’s sermon](#) from last Sunday highly enough, if you haven’t already. She handles this topic with honesty and tenderness.

Second, I want you to know that we don’t have to have a taste for these things. God doesn’t either! Michael Gorman gives an essential perspective on God’s relationship to judgment in Revelation:

“In the book of Revelation, divine judgment is not an end in itself. **It is God’s 'Plan B' when humanity persists in evil rather than repenting. It then becomes a means—a necessary means, to be sure, but still only a means—to the fulfillment of God’s plan to heal the nations and create a space for all people to flourish in harmony with one another before God.** This space is the new heaven and new earth, whose principal distinction from human history as we experience it is that evil is nowhere to be found. In fact, God will not permit evil to be present there; indeed, God will have permanently eradicated it by making all things new. Thus evildoers must either repent and participate in the renewal of all things, or be excluded from that space. The decision is theirs and theirs alone. This picture of wrath means nothing more or less than the terrible truth that the sufferings of those who persist in rejecting God’s love in Christ are self-imposed and self-perpetuated.”

We turn to this last chunk of Revelation 14 and see imagery depicting what happens when God, out of his commitment to his people and the New Heavens and New Earth, has to choose plan B.

In verse 14, John sees “a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand.” This is an image taken straight out of [Daniel 7](#) when Daniel sees the Ancient of Days (God the Father) sit on his throne with his books of judgment and the Son of Man (Jesus) coming in on the clouds. John sees an angel calling out to the one like the Son of Man, saying “Put in your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.”

There is some debate amongst scholars about whether this is the reaping of believers or the unrepentant, and it seems to me that the use of the word “harvest” is key here. I think John is calling back to the harvest of believers that we would have hoped for and expected after the 144,000 were offered as the first fruits (v. 4)! The harvest of these faithful followers is now ripe, and God is collecting them and bringing them to himself. This is a moment of joy! After all of the seeds of the Gospel that were sown and all of the goodness and love poured out to water them, it has yielded a plentiful harvest of believers!

Next, another angel comes down with a sharp sickle and is told to gather the grape harvest of the earth. John depicts a morbid scene of the grapes being thrown into the winepress of God and being trodden, producing mass amounts of grape juice...or blood. Yikes.

I think what we are looking at here is a vision of final justice. First, there is a reaping of the good grain harvest, which is God’s people. But because some are still unrepentant, following the dragon, then there is a second harvest of wine grapes, which represents humanity’s intoxication with evil. Again, in this second harvest, John is calling back to an earlier verse in the chapter: “Fall, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations **drink the wine** of the passion of her sexual immorality.”

This image of the wine of Babylon will be explored in a later chapter but suffice it to say that it leads people away from God. When John says that it is the wine “of the passion of her sexual immorality,” he is talking about idolatry. In the Old Testament, adultery and sexual immorality are constantly used as a metaphor for idolatry—betraying and cheating on the One True God.

Then in verse 10, John warns us that whoever drinks the wine of Babylon and follows the dragon will have to drink another cup—the cup of God’s wrath. So, when John picks up the image of wine again in verses 18-20, it is as if he is saying, “I warned you. This is what will happen to those who drink the wine and follow the dragon. They will become the grapes that God must stomp out.”

God must one day hold the earth accountable, just as he held Israel accountable centuries before, for the mismanagement of his world. They had an opportunity to participate in God’s story for the world, but they rejected it. So, he crushes the rotten grapes.

Now, I understand completely if you are still feeling squirmy about the imagery of judgment in this chapter—it’s incredibly severe! I won’t sugarcoat these images or skate over them. Judgment isn’t pretty. But I will ask you to remember that we are talking about the same loving God from Isaiah 5 who was grieved over the rotten grapes in Israel.

Gorman puts it better than I could, “It is tempting to read the visions of judgment and (symbolic) destruction as the activity of an angry God and/or the ranting of an angry people; many have been unable to resist the temptation. But in the end, we have argued, God is portrayed in Revelation *not as uncontrollably angry, but as inexorably just*. God’s faithfulness to the creation, all humanity, and the church leads to the divine war against evil empire, and their lies, represented by the unholy trinity and named “Babylon.”...**The church celebrates the victory it has longed for *only* because the judgment of Babylon means the salvation of the world.**”

We follow a loving God who is on a mission to create a beautiful, good world for all of his faithful ones. He is committed to a future with no Babylon, no evil, no crying, no sin, no pain. And his Plan A is for all nations and tribes and tongues to choose him. That’s why the apostle Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:9 that God is “patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

But for those who don’t follow plan A, God will resort to plan B, because they will not thwart his purposes for this world and for you and me.

– EH

Wednesday | Revelation 15:1-8

We’ve witnessed the seven seals and seven trumpets, now comes the time for the seven bowls, or plagues. Chapter 15 acts as a short introduction to the plagues, reminding us why they are happening in the first place. The time for repentance is over. The plagues are the moment when God makes all things new, destroying the destroyers of the earth. With them, we’re told, the wrath of God is finished. Remember, we’re at a point in Revelation where we’re looking *forward* to a reality to come, not to a present or even past reality.

Throughout Revelation, the author has pulled from the familiar Exodus story to bring meaning to the narrative as a whole, and he does so again today. We encountered the beasts in chapter 13, standing on the edge of the sea, like Pharaoh’s conquering army chasing after the Israelites. Then, in ch. 14 the angel declared “Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the great!” The grape harvest was completed.

Now God’s people can sing a victory song, just like they did thousands of years before on the other side of the sea in [Exodus 15](#); Take a moment to go read this passage, it’s beautiful. Then come back to Revelation and see how this chapter begins.

“And I saw what appeared to be **a sea of glass** mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, **standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands**. And **they sing the song of Moses**, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb...” (Re 15:2–3).

The people of God sing a *new song*. We’ve talked about this idea before back in chapter 5. In the tradition of the Exodus story, God’s people looked forward to a time when they could sing a new song about God’s deliverance. And here it comes.

“Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,

O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

Don't miss the focus of this poem. Just like in Exodus 15, God gets the credit for the victory. God is the one acting on the people's behalf. Who do we have to fear if God is behind us and before us? God alone is the one all nations will worship. He is the ultimate and true king.

To round out this chapter we get a stunning scene—the sanctuary of the tent of witness is open in heaven. The Greek word for “sanctuary” here is *naos* which means *temple*, and the word for “tent” means *tabernacle*. This is a picture of the structures that for most of the Biblical story mediated God's presence and forgiveness to God's people. This is the place where the High Priest would come for the [Day of Atonement](#) rituals, among others.

Instead of a High Priest going into the sanctuary, seven angels come out. And they are carrying the seven plagues of God's wrath. They are handed seven golden bowls. In the Temple, these massive golden bowls held the ashes of past sacrifices, and we know from [chapter 5](#) that they also hold the prayers of the saints. Revelation wants us to always keep in mind the suffering of those who cry out for God's deliverance as we hold in tension God's judgment.

The idea of a “bowl” or [cup is closely associated with God's wrath](#); it's a key image the Hebrew prophets use to speak about how God is going to deal with His anger against Israel. He will make them drink the cup of his wrath. How this works itself out in the story is that God will often hand people over to the consequences of their *own betrayal and idolatry*. If this is new for you, [check out these study notes from the Bible Project on God's anger](#). This is why Jesus prays in the garden for God to take away *the cup* he is going to drink. Jesus allows himself to be handed over to the nations to be killed in place of the people. He faces the consequences of their betrayal for them. In Revelation, the cup of God's wrath is going to be poured out on the earth, on all those who didn't repent when given the chance. They are now going to have to face the consequences of their own destructive behaviors.

The smoke of God's glory fills the whole place and no one is able to enter. Smoke filling the Tabernacle or the Temple is a sign that God's glory and presence filled the space. It's [a familiar scene from the Old Testament](#), where priests are said not to be able to enter the sanctuary or witnesses fall down in fear. Again, Revelation wants us to keep in mind that what's about to happen needs to happen because of God's glory and greatness. The smoke will remain in place until the judgments are finished.

– AJ

Thursday | Revelation 16:1-21

God tells the angels to go and pour out their bowls over the earth. The nations are about to drink the cup, suffering the consequences of their own rebellion and their unwillingness to repent.

And so the first four plagues are poured out over the earth, the sea, the rivers, and the sun. NT

Wright argues that this is God allowing the natural elements to exact their judgment on those who failed to live up to their God-given role as stewards of creation.

Notice, in the first plague we're explicitly told the ones who suffer are those who "bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image." Those who give themselves over to the forces of destruction and death reap death and destruction in turn. The other thing we need to take note of in these plagues is their totality. There are no more one-thirds; these are all-encompassing. That may seem harsh to us, but as NT Wright points out it this is a necessity. He says, "If they were any less than harsh, the wickedness in question would merely pause, furrow its brow for a moment, and then carry on as before."

The time of repentance is over, but not because God is unwilling. The hearts of the people are hard. "They cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory."

These plagues are quick-moving as if the narrative speeds up. But we get a brief interlude after each set of three. After the third, we're reminded that all of this comes because of God's justice. Why does God bring these judgments? Because God has heard the cries of the saints, those whose blood cries out to God from the ground, and God must act on their behalf.

The fifth bowl is poured out and darkness comes over the kingdom of the beast. This is once again reminiscent of the plagues of Egypt. The sixth bowl dries up the Euphrates River, the one boundary that stands between the nation of Rome and their greatest enemies, the Parthian Empire. Now, the armies of the enemy will be able to easily march against Rome. This judgment fits well with the Biblical tradition of God using foreign enemies as agents of His justice and judgment.

What happens next, though, is just plain weird. What's the deal with the frogs? Frogs in ancient thought represented evil. They croak incessantly (spewing lies and hatred) and they are slimy (slippery). One scholar, J.P. Love describes it like this, "That which men fear most [dragon and beasts] because it appears to be mighty and eternally entrenched becomes at long last only a ridiculous spawning of sickly creatures of the night."

These frogs croak in such a fashion they are able to gather the kings of the earth together creating one mighty army. But the joke is on them. All they've done is centralize the enemies of God so God can take care of them easily at one time. They've played right into God's metaphorical hand, reminding us of [the words of Joseph](#), *what you intended for evil, God will use for good*.

At this point, Jesus pokes his head in for our second interlude, offering a word of warning and encouragement similar to those he offered to Sardis in ch. 3. "Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!" The force of this statement is the same as the whole book, *Stay awake, remain faithful, don't give in and worship the beast*. Clothes are associated with justification--our status in the family of God because of our faith in Jesus. *Worship the true one so that you are not caught sleeping!* As the battle armies gather on the fields of Armageddon, Jesus urges those who bear the seal of God to stay awake.

The Seventh Bowl

Armageddon is a famous idea. My favorite kind of movies are the earth-destruction tropes found

in films like *Armageddon* or *Deep Impact*. But that's not what this scene is about. The Greek is actually Harmagedōn, though the "h" is usually left off in our modern pronunciation. The name comes from the combination of two words, *Har*, meaning "mountain range" and *Megiddo*, a city that sat at the top of a mountain overlooking the Plain of Jezreel. Below is a photo I took when I visited the ruins of this city in Israel.



Jezreel was like an ancient highway, a gateway to the surrounding regions, which made it the popular choice for conquering armies to pass through. As a result, this valley became the stage for countless battles in history. So many in fact, that if you wanted to talk about the perfect place to stage a metaphorical cosmic battle between good and evil, this would be the ideal location. The city of Megiddo is quite literally built on the bones of past cities, layers and layers of excavations revealing dozens of battles fought in an effort to claim this central strategic staging ground. Control Megiddo, you control the trade routes and military might of the entire region.

Revelation draws upon this imagery to impress upon us that a great battle has finally come. There can be no turning around, the Day of the Lord has arrived. The tension has reached a fever pitch. This is not referring to an actual battle to be fought, but a cosmic reality that we know has already been decided.

"It is finished."

Before any fighting actually takes place, these words are uttered. They are the same words Jesus cried out from the cross ([John 19:30](#)), which reminds us again how God ultimately fights His battles. Revelation wants us to remember that it was *on the cross* that the battle was won and evil was ultimately defeated. Everything since that point has been like the death rattle of a dying beast.

And we get the last occurrence of our common refrain, "Flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder." The Day of the Lord has come, prepare to meet God. Babylon will drink the cup of God's wrath.

About this moment, NT Wright says, "**God will allow the lie at the heart of pagan society, like a crack in the earth's crust, finally to be exposed. The tectonic plates of different**

idolatrous human systems will move against one another one more time, and nothing will ever be the same again.”

– AJ

Friday | Revelation 17:1-18

Today we encounter the final character that makes up what Michael Gorman calls the “Unholy Trinity,” the Dragon, the Beast, and **the Harlot**. This is meant to be seen as part of the seventh bowl, the final judgment of God poured out on the enemies of God, one of which is the Great Prostitute.

John *hears* the angel describe this threat. She is said to be sitting on the waters (think decreation, chaos), the kinds of the earth have committed sexual immorality with her, and the people on earth are drunk on her sexual immorality. Remember, in Revelation, a majority of the time sexual immorality is not talking about sexual ethics, but idolatry. To be in bed, so to speak, with the Prostitute is to cheat on the One True God. Look for example at [Hosea 4](#).

“A spirit of prostitution leads them astray;
they are unfaithful to their God.
They sacrifice on the mountaintops
and burn offerings on the hills.”

And [Isaiah 57](#):

“Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed,
you climbed into it and opened it wide;
you made a pact with those whose beds you love,
and you looked with lust on their naked bodies.”

The Great Prostitute is a metaphor for the forces that would lead God’s people into worship of anything other than the God who created them.

What John sees when the angel carries him into the wilderness is a woman sitting on top of a beast. At first glance, she looks beautiful on the outside, adorned with jewels and expensive purple robes. No wonder so many admire her! Even John seems tempted to do so in verse 6. This woman has seduced many to her table, but her cup—what she forces people to drink—is poison. She drinks the blood of the saints, those who died because of their faith in Jesus.

She sits on the scarlet beast full of blasphemous names (rulers who would declare themselves god). The beast has seven heads (seven hills of Rome) and ten horns (Domitian is the tenth emperor of Rome). She has a name on her forehead, Babylon. Babylon was the great enemy of God’s people. Through the Old Testament, it represented the ultimate empire of evil. The name, Babylon, could be used as a label when you wanted to talk about the depths of evil a city had succumbed to. In Revelation, Babylon is used to describe the Roman Empire. John is saying this glittering empire, which seems so strong and luxurious and full of promise, is just a beast in disguise, luring you away from the true worship of God to the worship of the goddess *Roma*, or the emperor Domitian, or any other number of Greco-Roman gods. Worship of God brings life, but the worship of anything else will only lead to death.

In a rare bit of clarity, John is told all of this by the angel who breaks down the different images describing this Harlot and her beast. We get some confusing math about kings that don't easily line up with history. These kings will make war on the lamb's people, but they don't have a hope in the world for victory. That battle, like the others, has already been decided (with no fighting actually taking place mind you). Only one king can emerge victorious, and his name is Jesus.

It's important not to get lost in trying to decode this section. Remember this is a vision, a great drama playing out on stage. As NT Wright says, "What matters is that the monster's kingdom looks perfect and impregnable, but forces from within its own ranks will destroy it."

We're told the ten horns (kings) hate the prostitute. They will turn against her and conquer her.

Leon Morris says, "There is no cohesion in evil; it is always self-destructive. Wicked men are not just one happy band of brothers. Being wicked, they act in jealousy and hatred. At the climax their mutual hatreds will result in mutual destruction."

Michael Gorman adds, "Empires often eventually die of a self-inflicted wound; their subjects revolt and destroy the very thing that has empowered them, and this reversal may be seen in a real sense as the judgment of God."

In other words, what the world intends for evil, God can use for His purposes to ultimately bring about good. We can rest assured, that no matter how alluring the forces of evil look in our day, their destruction is assured. Our job in the meantime is to *stay awake*, and not give into the temptation to worship anything other than God.

– AJ

Weekly Practice

After they crossed the sea, God's people sang a victory song to God. In Revelation, the *new song* of chapter 15 looks forward to the ultimate victory of God over evil. Take a moment this week to craft your own song of praise to God. It can be as long or as short as you'd like, but try to incorporate the following elements. When you've finished, spend a few moments praying your song back to God.

- Thank God for the ways He's delivered you thus far in your story.
- Use this as an opportunity to shower God with praise and adoration for the ways you've seen His fingerprints over your life.
- End by confessing the areas where you're still waiting for deliverance and God's justice, both in your own story and the grand story of the world.

Reflection Questions

- What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?

- Where has following the Lamb led you thus far? How does the idea of “following the Lamb wherever he goes” shape your values, priorities, and plans for the future?
- What are the costs of following Jesus that you have experienced in your life? Have you ever felt like the costs might be too high?
- The Holy Spirit says in 14:13 that the deeds of the faithful ones have eternal ripples. Whose faithfulness has sent ripples into your life? In other words, whose shoulders are you standing on? Who might one day be standing on the shoulders of *your* faithfulness to Jesus?
- Be honest. How does it make you feel to read the judgment imagery in Revelation? Take some time to pray about those feelings; the best thing we can do here is lean in with him and wrestle through it *together*.
- Why do you think the people in chapter 16 still don’t repent?
- Jesus says in Rev. 16:15, “Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!” What do you think he means by this? What does it look like for you to stay awake?
- What gets the focus of your adoration, attention, and affection? On what or who do you spend most of your resources—time, money, etc.? What do these things say about the object of your true worship?
- Over and over in these chapters, we see how God can use what the world meant for evil to bring about goodness. How have you seen this same idea play out in your story? Are there parts of your story you’re still hoping this will be true?

Resources

- [Character of God Theme: Slow to Anger Study Notes](#) | Bible Project | PDF
- [The Day of the Lord Theme Video](#) | Bible Project | Video
- [Guide to Revelation](#) | The Bible Project | Webpage
- [Revelation Overview \(Ch. 12-21\)](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation Class](#) | Teaching Series with Rev. Walt Marcum
- [Reading Revelation Responsibly](#) | Michael J. Gorman | Commentary
- [Revelation for Everyone](#) | N.T. Wright | Commentary
- [Bearing God’s Name](#) | Carmen Imes | Book