

HOW'S IT GOING?

Revelation

How's it going? Check the news, and it all seems bad. War in Ukraine, the specter of nuclear war, inflation—it can look real bad.

It looks a lot like images in Revelation. As we read the book of Revelation, we can get all caught up in all the images presented in the book—four horsemen, a beast with seven heads, an army with wings a woman sitting on a dragon. This can lead to all kinds of weird beliefs. But it is important to remember what John is describing. People who talk to us about war, like those in Ukraine, can only describe it only so much. They say, “You just had to be there.” The same is with people who undergo cancer treatment. John is describing things beyond our comprehension. Why is this beyond us? St. Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12:

For our struggle 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.

John is describing things beyond normal earthly existence, both spiritual goodness and evil. To see things as John intended, don't picture things in your mind. Instead listen to his words. The words, not the images we may see, are what are important. Those words are based mainly in the Old Testament.

Let me give you an example from outside of our faith. The most successful American rock band of all time is the “Eagles.” Their biggest hit was “Hotel California.” Over the years many have interpreted the song as showing they were Satanist. This would especially be seen in the words, “They stab it with their steely knives, but they just can't kill the beast.” If you try to imagine this, you think of a satanic ritual. But if you focus on the words themselves you realize the “Steely Knives” is just a playful reference to the group “Steeley Dan” who had made a playful reference in a song to the Eagles. This was a response to that.

With this we also have to understand time as John presents it. In our Western world we think of time as a line—past, present, future—in that order. But John was an Asiatic Jew, an easterner. He is writing in Revelation with a view of time as a circle. In the flag of India, you see a wheel at the center. This reflects the eastern view of time going back and forth in circles. In Revelation John uses five series of “circles” to explain the course of time. If you read Revelation with things going on one thing at a time, you get all kinds of goofy beliefs about what is going on. But with each of these circles, when John gets to the seventh one, it all starts out all over again. Each ends with God in control.

Seven is the number of God. The five cycles all have seven things which shows us that this is from God. He is control of what is going on, even when it is not something He causes,

but lets happen, like He lets the devil do things, like get Jesus enemies top put Him on the cross, to accomplish His purposes. The five cycles are:

Revelation 6:1-8:1 seals

Revelation 8:2-11:18 trumpets

Revelation 11:19-15:4 signs

Revelation 15:5-16:21 bowls

Revelation 17:1-20:15 sights

The Seven Seals 6-8:1

The first cycle, the seals, begin in chapters five and six where Jesus is shown to be the only one who can open the seals. The idea is that He is in control of what happens.

The first four seals are the famous four horsemen. No, this is not talking about the Notre Dame football backfield in the 1920's, but how God allows four things to inflict suffering on the world. The white horse is conquest, the red is war, the black is economic exploitation, and the pale horse is death. This all what we have been experiencing as human and will continue to do so. "The words with the black horse say, "A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and wine!" Cheating is going on there, just as it is today.

The fifth seal shows how despite all that bad going on, God's people are protected, "sealed," until the end of time. The sixth seal speaks about stars falling like figs and the heavens rolling up. Don't try to picture that. In the Old Testament world they viewed the sky as a dome over the land which had lights—sun, moon, and stars. That is how they could "fall" to earth and the dome could "roll up." The point is that evil here is not earthly like the four horsemen, but spiritual. The seventh seal is opened and there is silence—as there is in the presence of God. As the Psalmist says, "The LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him." We might expect things to go on, but the seventh seal just leads into the next cycle, the trumpets.

The Seven Trumpets 8:2-11:18

The first trumpet brings hail and fire that destroys 1/3 of all plants. The 1/3 is not so much an exact amount, but saying that the damage is extensive, but not most of it. The fire reminds us of how He used that as judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah.

The second trumpet causes 1/3 of mountains to fall in the sea, 1/3 of water turned to blood, and 1/3 of sea creatures and ships destroyed. Again, don't picture things, just the words that the destruction is extensive, but not the majority. The water turned to blood calls to mind God's first plague against Egypt.

The third trumpet is "Wormwood." This is the name of an apprentice devil in C.S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters.

The fourth trumpet is 1/3 of the sun, moon, stars, days and night struck. Again, don't picture this, but hear the words that it reflects big things, but not total.

There is a pause before the last three trumpets called the "Three Woes." The first woe (5th trumpet) is a star falling to open an abyss. This points to Revelation 12 where Satan is kicked out of heaven by Michael and the Angels and falls to the ground. Then come out these creatures with gold crowns, man's faces, women's hair, lions' teeth, and wings sound like horses. Once again, do not try to picture them; hear the words that describe something grotesque, but not part of our everyday life. This is spiritual evil.

The second woe (sixth trumpet) is the 4 angels who dry up the Euphrates River. The river was at the eastern edge of Israel and is where Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians came to conquer the land. Violence and war—what we have seen since John saw this vision.

Then there is silence before the last trumpet (3rd woe). During this time the scroll is sealed to show this is certain. What God promises will happen.

The seventh trumpet sounds and we see the 24 elders, which represent the 12 tribes of Israel (the Old testament Church) and the 12 disciples (the New Testament Church) in the eternal worship of God. But leads only to the next cycle of seven, the seven signs.

The Seven Signs 11:19-15:4

The first sign is the woman and the dragon. The woman stands for the Church; the dragon is clearly identified as the devil who tries to stop her. There is a whole journey of the woman fleeing from the beast, the beast trying to drown her, and the earth sucking up the water the beast tries to use to drown her. Then she gives birth to a son. Jesus came from the Church. God protected His Church to send Jesus into the world.

Then we see for the second and third signs two beast that come from the dragon-- the beast out of the land and the beast out of the sea. In the Old Testament world the people of Israel were landlubbers. They saw the sea as evil. The beast from the sea is secular evil. The beast from the land is the evil that seems to come from within the Church, a far more subtle, deadly evil. This is identified in 1 John as the "antichrist." It is also the "man of lawlessness of 1 Thessalonians. The land beast props up the sea beast, just as the devil props up both. Spiritual evil hides behind the secular.

The fourth sign is the 144,000 and the "Great Multitude." As we heard two weeks ago these are two different ways of the describing the same group—the Church, the body of Christ. The 144, 00 shows the Church is complete, and the multitude that it is vast.

The fifth sign is the three angels who tell us to fear God, that Babylon will fall, and so will those who have the mark of the beast—those who do not have faith in Christ.

The sixth sign is the harvest of those who will perish. This is where the Battle Hymn of the Republic gets the words, “He is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”

The seventh sign is seven angels with bowls, which will pour out plagues like those that hit Egypt in the time of Moses. This shows God’s judgment on evil. Then the sea becomes as glass. Since the sea was evil to the Old Testament people, having in turn to glass shows God’s power over it. Near the end of Revelation the sea disappears.

Again, there is a pause, showing there is something bigger than all of this—God.

The Seven Bowls 15:5-16:21

The bowls are poured out. The first puts sores on people. The second turns the sea to blood. The third turns fresh water into blood. The fourth is scorching by the sun. The fifth is the darkening of the beast’s throne. This speaks against the pagan worship of the Sun god. The sixth bowls dries up the Euphrates so evil can come like an invader from the east. The dragon (devil), beast (secular evil), and false prophet (antichrist) are a part of this. Frogs come from them, like the plague on Egypt.

The seventh bowl shows Armageddon, a description of the end of time. “Armageddon” means Mt. Megiddo.” In the Old Testament several battles were fought there. As you travel between the major trade route between the main areas of ancient civilization from Egypt to modern Iraq, you move up the coast of Israel, and then turn inland to avoid mountains. Megiddo is the pass that lets you move through that area, so it is an image of war. The final “Armageddon will not be a World War of an asteroid hitting planet earth. All of creation will be destroyed for God to make a new one. And it will be clearly God who is making this happen. We know this because of the description of islands disappearing, mountains falling down and 100 pound hailstones.

The Seven Sights 17:1-20:15

This leads to the final cycle of seven sights. It is like we start all over again. The first sight is the woman on the beast. This is not the woman earlier who represents the Church. She lies on the beast—she is allied to it.

The second sight is Babylon. This city represented evil in the Old Testament since the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and took the people of God into exile. At the time of Revelation it is a symbol of Rome, which was beginning to persecute the Church.

The third sight is the multitude praising God.

The fourth sight is Jesus on a white horse conquering with His sword.

The fifth sight is the 1,000 year period, the so called Millennium. If we look at this as 1,000 years of definite time, we get all mixed up. The Millennium is not some future time when people who didn't come to Christ can be converted. It is now, the time when Jesus rule through His Church on earth. If we would need a future 1,000 years to save people, then what Jesus did is not enough.

The sixth sight is the sea of fire. Fire destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. It is also a symbol for purifying.

The seventh sight is the end, finally. We saw part of the description of that week with the New Jerusalem. We will see it again next week with the tree of life.

Five cycle of sevens—on and on it seems to go. That is what we can experience in our lives. But as all that goes on, God is with us, God is in control. No matter what happens, God is with us. That moves us to get the Word out, to share our faith.

We can see this in chapter 11 where the temple is measured and the two witnesses proclaim God's message for 1260 days or 42 months. This time interval is 3 and ½ years, the time God prevented rain from coming to Israel as the prophet Elijah spoke out against evil King Ahab. It represents the Church in witness to God as two witnesses who are killed by the beast from the Abyss and ridiculed. But they rise from the dead.

This shows how again and again the Church seems to lose to evil and the world. We see fewer people coming to church. Our faith seems to have a lot less influence on our culture. But in the midst of that, God brings victory. He continues to raise up His Church in witness to the world.

So how is it going? Revelation gives us the big picture. No matter how bad it seems now, God is in control. And as the temple was measured, we are too. We will not be missing in the end. We will be with God forever!