

Study #3 in preparation for:
March 21

Revelation 8:1-12:17

The Blood of the Lamb

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame 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.”

Revelation 12:10-11

Perspective: Humanity has been in mortal danger ever since the Fall ("For the wages of sin is death..." Romans 6:23). It is only by God's mercy that the human race experiences a stay of execution. The Bible has much more to say on judgment and the wrath of God than many Christians care to admit. Salvation history is replete with warning, admonition, correction and condemnation. Humankind is "put on notice." Warning gives way to verdict; indictment leads to sentencing. Catastrophic judgment is described from beginning to end. God is serious, deadly serious against evil. Judgment is strewn throughout the Scriptures. Genesis makes that plain; first the Flood, then the Tower of Babel, then the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19). Consider the ten plagues against Egypt, rivers of blood, hoards of frogs, swarms of flies, destruction of livestock, festering boils, earth-pounding hail, devouring locusts, total darkness (presumably a sandstorm), the death of firstborn boys (Exodus 7-11), and the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:28). We recoil in horror at Israel's mandate to destroy the Canaanites. We are shocked at God's liberal use of the destructive conquest of Assyria, Babylon, and Rome to check evil and accomplish God's will.

Contrary to popular opinion the New Testament does not soften the harsh outlines of the Old Testament, it "actually engraves them more deeply" (J.Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, p.21). Jesus did not teach that everything would work out in the end. "With great earnestness he called on everyone to repent and with great compassion he invited those weighed down with cares and sorrows to come to him for rest. Yet this very Jesus uttered the most terrible warnings, not once or twice, but again and again" (Wenham, p.20).

St. John's praying imagination is packed with biblical scenes of judgment. His vision alternates between powerful worship and devastating wrath. In this spiraling intensity of God's wrath the four plagues directed against nature (earth, ocean, rivers and sky) correspond to the four horses of the apocalypse. As Adam and Eve were forced into a hostile environment, so are we. The severity of the ecological, pathological, political and spiritual destruction is bad and getting worse. St.John revisits the Exodus plagues on a cosmic scale.

Outline: The opening of the seventh seal is anticipated with reverential silence, intense prayer, and an uproar in nature (8:1-5). The first four trumpet blasts announce devastating judgment over the earth, ocean, rivers and sky. There are layers of judgment and backup systems of destruction. The fourth trumpet triggers three woes and the fifth trumpet blast announces a fallen star that unlocks the Abyss and releases an army of locusts. John

clearly intends to demonstrate that the extent and intensity of these evil "woes" is demonic. Evil has been ratcheted up exponentially. The lid comes off evil. The fallen star reminds us of Satan or at least satanic activity (Luke 10:18).

St. John's first woe recalls the prophecy of Joel and its graphic description of the systematic devastation wrought by an onslaught of locusts (Joel 2). But these are not ordinary locusts. They are like war horses prepared for battle. Their gold crowned heads have the look of victory, their appearance is hauntingly human, and their long flowing hair a sign of beauty and vitality. Yet their teeth are fierce like a lion's and their iron breastplates suggest invincibility. Their wings make them mobile and their tails sting mercilessly. This is underground evil at its worse, under the leadership of Apollyon, the destroyer. This title, along with the image of a fallen star, gives a double reminder of Satan. John may have also intended a hidden meaning behind this name. His original readers would have known for sure. The Greeks derived the name Apollo from the same Greek verb which is the root of Apollyon. The Roman emperor Domitian assumed the name Apollo and he may have struck John as an appropriate symbol of the evil underworld (see Mounce, p.198).

The sixth trumpet signals four angels. The four angels in turn release a two hundred million man army mounted on fire-breathing monsters, which is followed up by three plagues (8:6-9:16). But no matter how devastating and sweeping the judgment is, people refuse to repent and turn from their wicked ways (9:20-21; see 6:15-17).

Once again there is an interlude of revelation and witness between the sixth and seventh trumpet announcements (10:1-11:14). Between the trumpet blasts warning of catastrophic doom to those who spurn the mercy of God and the sounding of the seventh trumpet, we see the Church of the future. The lid has been lifted off evil and its devastating impact is global. No one can escape the trio of woes, except those who have been sealed by the living God. The earth is ravaged and the wrath of God is released against unrepentant, godless, self-worshiping idolaters. Between this climactic judgment on earth and the loud voices in heaven proclaiming, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever," there is an interlude. The purpose of this intermission, which separates orchestrated judgment and the Hallelujah chorus, was to clarify the purpose of the church. The followers of Christ do not hear the blasts and run for cover. They do not seek out the security of bomb shelters and backwoods communes. The believing community has a responsibility. And in a word that responsibility is "Witness."

The mighty angel boldly announced, "There will be no more delay!" As if this protracted judgment has gone on long enough, the voice from heaven refuses to add the seven thunders to the seven seals and the seven trumpets. Reminiscent of Ezekiel, John eats the scroll and is told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings" (10:11). The two witnesses dressed in sackcloth, the two olive trees, and the two lampstands (two prophets, see 11:10) all signify the same reality, the witness-bearing power of the church in the last days. The witness of the church is validated three ways: by its confirmation of the truth through a double witness (Deut.19:15; John 8:17), by its fruitful productivity and by its illuminating testimony in a dark world. The Spirit of God empowers the church's testimony by giving the body of Christ credibility, energy and illumination. Nevertheless the witness of the Church meets with brutal persecution. The world treats the Church the way the Jerusalem crowd treated Christ (11:8). The second woe passes as the witness of the Church is persecuted to death, even as the seventh trumpet announces a tremendous worship scene in heaven. Once again, witness and worship are in synch, and heaven and earth are in tandem with the sovereign will of God (11:15-19).

The blast of the seventh trumpet announces worship in heaven and a synopsis of salvation history. John brings us to the brink of history with a sweeping review of two history defining advents. "In John's vision the woman in travail is `the true Israel in her pre-messianic agony of expectation" (Mounce). She is in obvious contrast to the scarlet whore (chp.17). The moon beneath her feet speaks of dominion, and the crown of twelve stars depicts royalty. She shines radiantly, stands powerfully and rules mightily. She is the people of God, spanning Old and New Testaments, the Bride of Christ.

The enormous red dragon is as ugly as the woman is lovely; "the light-year limits of the best and worst we can imagine" (Peterson). Red symbolizes the murderous character of Satan (Jn.8:44). "John's fondness for the number seven as a symbol of completeness suggests that the seven heads of the dragon depict the universality of his power. The ten horns recall the fourth beast of Daniel 7, awesome and powerful with its great iron teeth and ten horns (Daniel 7:7,24).

John leaves no doubt in our mind. Psalm 2 defines the identity of this child. This child is none other than the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is the child of whom it is said, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery." From the moment the child is born the devil is out to get this child.

That precious moment in Bethlehem, quiet and serene, filled with wonder and worship, is nothing less than God's D-Day Invasion. The beaches have been stormed. God defeats the enormous red dragon with a baby, this son, who is Christ the Lord. This is what John gives us in his nativity scene: the meaning of that moment at the manger! Hell itself threatens Heaven. The Devil shows up, not with gifts of adoration: gold, incense, and myrrh, but with strategies of annihilation: deception, treachery, and malice. St. John wants us to know that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt.16:18). John confirms Isaiah's vision: How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the