

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOD DOING: REVELATION, VISION 3

Vision 3. The church and the spiritual powers**The Woman and the Dragon Ch 12 (actually starts in 11:19)**

We see the ark of the covenant., symbolic of the presence of God. We have this vision of this woman. Who is she? It is most likely this is talking of Israel. In the OT Israel is referred to as a woman, , wife, mother. Out of Israel is born a child. All we are told is child is born , will rule nations with iron rod (power) and returns to God in triumph. It is easy to see this as referring to Jesus. This woman gives birth to other children. So the woman is Israel, and out of Israel the church is born. The church can also be seen as a mother, a place of comfort and security. But as this is happening, another ugly beast appears. He has 7 heads - completeness, 10 horns -power, 7 crowns - control over the kingdoms. Stars represent angels. He tries to kill Jesus but fails so then attacks the church. Next this is explained .vs 7-9 We discover the monster is thrown down to earth. How can Satan be defeated and yet be still at work? Jesus death and resurrection is the beach head, assuring us victory but more fighting is to come. He fights through accusation.

How do we overcome Satan? The Cross, our testimony and our willingness to die. The Devil wins if someone falls away from faith but Satan has no hold over someone willing to die. The dragon tries to do everything to destroy the church but she is given wings like an eagle and is cared for and protected. (see last week for the symbolism of the time, times, and a half (3 1/2) This mirrored the experience of early church who fled into the desert as Jerusalem was destroyed. But it also is a picture of God's care for his people even in the face of this onslaught.

We in the West don't face life and death issues at the moment. But can we be the kind of Christian who will fight the subtle but just as real evil in our world today.?

The 2 Beasts Ch13 We have the dragon, Satan, on one side, 12:18 as the first beast arises. He sounds very similar to the dragon with 7 heads, 10 horns, 10 crowns. It's not the dragon directly but someone who does his work - a manifestation of the dragon who is given power to rule over the world. In Daniel 7:1-7 we see a very similar vision. 4 beasts like lion, bear, leopard, something very large. John sees is all four beasts together which is a clue. To Daniel, the four monsters represented four kingdoms that were to rule the earth. To the early Christian it was obvious Rome was the beast of their day who ruled the world, persecuting the Christians. But the beast is more than Rome. It represents Satan working through oppressive gov'ts and nations. Paul wrote about the Roman gov't, saying it was to be obeyed But now Roman empire is a beast demanding to be worshipped. We need gov't, but when it abuses it's power, it becomes a beast.

V3 one of heads suffers a death blows, but then the wound is healed. We see this through history as we get rid of one beast but another arises. Millions have been killed through these beasts. In NZ, the state has limited control. But in other countries, the state has huge powers. What do you do as a Christian in such a context. Vs 10.11 are a call to passive resistance, not to violence. This is not a call to do nothing. Jesus used non violent resistance in the Temple, when he saw those with power exploiting the weak. If we did nothing, the beast would not be locking us up. It is a call to resist the state, but not by violence. (see John 18:36) Hugely relevant to many today. Maybe one day for us too.

A second monster then appears. He looks like a lamb, but he speaks like a dragon and has power to do many signs and wonders. This beast is false religions, deception, false prophets. In many countries there is state funded religion whose true purpose is to give power to the state. Martin Luther saw the beast as the Catholic church. The Catholics saw the state Protestant church as the beast. In both cases the church and state very closely linked and did many atrocities. The Anabaptists took the Protestants to task for not being radical enough in following Jesus. Both the Catholic and Protestants turned on the Anabaptists, and killed them in their thousands. Anabaptists saw both the Catholics and the Protestants as the second beast. Many refused to serve in the state army because they were pacifists.

When the State abuses it's power, and mixes it with religion, it is a nasty cocktail. The church in Germany supported Hitler. Very few German Christians objected. Those that did were ones like Karl Barth, Martin Niemoller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Many lost there lives for their stance. They saw that the second beast was the German gov't.

The mark the beast: all kinds of theories on this. If you bear the mark of someone, means you belong to them. As a Christian we bear God's mark Ch 7, v 3 on our foreheads. We belong to him

Numbers in Rev are symbolic, not literal. But the words "Let the reader calculate " have led many to use a Hebrew system called Gemetria where you give a numerical value to each letter. It is used in riddles puzzles , graffiti, as a way of hiding identity. You can make Nero's name to equal 666. But John wrote in Greek. All kinds of creative speculation since the first century. John is calling the reader not to speculate but to discern. 666 is not clue. It is the symbol. 6 number of incompleteness. Recurring. Number represent recurring power of the beast.

This is a call for all of us to examine our lives as we will stand before God one day. Look at what mark is on us. Mark of the cross - service, sacrifice to God or the mark of the beast. Have we given our allegiance to the power of God, or have



we been seduced by the power of beast, false systems of this world that demand our allegiance. Speculations totally miss the point.

The Lamb and the 144000 Ch 14 144,000 standing on Mt Zion. We know from past vision the symbolism of 144,000: it is the people of God. We are not literally on Mt Zion. Scripture uses this in a symbolic sense to represent being with God. The reference to purity (some translation virgins.) is not literal but is imagery of the church as a bride, pure and blameless. We know we are far from blameless but if we have committed ourselves to Jesus we are. Heb 12:23-24 Matthew 26, 28,

This is a hugely liberating message. We stand with God, in his presence, and he does not see our past. In the midst of conflict unleashed on humanity we need to know Jesus is putting his arms around his people,

The last 150 years has seen the development of rapture theology which says that when this suffering begins, Jesus will return and take his followers out of the world. No mention of it in Revelation. Ch 4:1 is used but a far more straightforward reading is that John is going to receive the book. It is convenient to believe that we will be taken out of the world before the beasts emerge but this would make no sense to Christians in Iran. They see the beast at work now and are in the tribulation now.

The three angels 14:6-13 1st Angel. It is possible that this is a special angelic visitation. But more likely this as a picture of the calling on the church to preach to every people. So why the angel? Probably because there is a divine dimension to it, not just a human Endeavour.

While cosmic battle is raging around us, our call is to preach the message. We are not to sit back and draw up endless charts wondering what is going to happen. Jesus will return when everyone has had the opportunity to respond.

2nd angel: announces the fall of Babylon. Meet Babylon a few chapters later. It is a symbol of the unjust systems of the world, that exploit the poor and weak. Call to preach the personal gospel message but also to declare God's justice and kingdom. God is deeply grieved by the plight of the poor. Hears their cries

3rd angel: announces a message of judgment. If we have sided with the beast and systems that exploit the poor, then we will face judgment.

The Harvest of the Earth This leads to the harvest of the earth. Jesus has been preached to every tribe and tongue and people. There are two harvests. First is where Jesus gathers those who belong to him. Second harvest comes. Terrible image given of a bloodbath 300 kilometers long and as high as a horse's bridle. Symbolic not literal. If you live under an oppressive regime this is of huge comfort. One day justice will be done.

The Victory is Won. Ch 15:1-4 The vision ends like the others with a celebration in heaven. Also a glimpse of next vision. Song that the enemies of God – Satan- and his manifestations of evil have been overcome. Death has been defeated.

Conclusion

1. The church is under constant attack. One way this happens is the systems, govt., and institutions can be instruments of good but also of the devil. They are beasts when they promote false values, injustice, greed, idolatry, corruption. They will keep recurring.
2. We overcome evil systems not by worldly fighting but by being confident in who we are when accused, by telling our story of what God has done and by self sacrifice.
3. We are either marked by God or marked by the systems of this world. One day all will be judged by who owns us. God, or someone or something else. Have we succumbed to the wonders promoted by the second beast.

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REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

- The church is seen as a mother in Ch12. Does this fit with your experience?
- In what ways is the State in NZ in danger of becoming a "beast" i.e. overstepping its God given authority?
- The early Christians were encouraged to be faithful in the face of persecution Ch 13:10-11. As we don't face direct persecution in NZ, what kind of response is needed in the face of each of the following
 - Pursuit of the perfect body (you can use mine as an example!)
 - Pursuit of instant gratification
 - Avoidance of suffering and death
 - Pursuit of purely materialistic goals
- Do you see a place for Christians to act in civil disobedience or protest marches in the face of misuse of state power?
- What do you think would be indicators that a person is "marked" by the beast today?
- Share examples of an organization or institution or system that fosters injustice or corruption. What can we do in the face of this? What does this passage indicate?
- How has endless speculation around "the mark of the beast" and the idea of being taken from suffering in the tribulation (rapture) affected Christians attitudes to the world around them?



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