

Understanding Revelation Part 27

What Goes Around

Revelation 17:7-18

How many of you like jigsaw puzzles? I hate them...

They're addictive, and I already have too many bad habits.

But those of you who indulge - how do you start?

Do you do all the edge pieces first, or do you sort them by color?

Are you a purist, not even looking at the picture on the box, or do you take every advantage you can to figure out what you're doing?

There are as many ways to put together a jigsaw puzzle as there are ways to interpret Revelation. Especially the deliberately mystifying passages like this one.

Remember that John received this Revelation when he was on exile on the island of Patmos, off the coast of what is now Turkey, probably during the time of the Emperor Domitian, somewhere in the 90's.

Domitian's reign was one of the worst for persecution of Christians, who were accused from everything from disturbing the peace to gross immorality, from atheism - since they didn't worship the local gods - to treason, since they wouldn't sacrifice to the emperor.

So when John wrote down this letter, which was going to be circulated widely around the empire, he had to be really careful about what he said. Or at least how he said it.

Remember I gave you the **Cliff's notes version of Revelation?**

Point 1: God is in charge

Point 2: we live on a battlefield,

Point 3: Jesus wins in the end.

There are some other things to remember as we work our way toward the end of this most mysterious and most easily misunderstood book of the Bible.

First, this was written primarily to encourage Christians to stand fast.

Yeah, there are scary bits in it

The message for John's audience, was to sit tight, keep watch, and stay faithful, because the cavalry would show up in time and the bad guys would get theirs.

So there are a lot of things in this passage which are clearer than they look, because the bad guys in those days were the Romans.

Last week we talked about Babylon as being the generic title for cities founded and run in defiance of God.

Using Babylon as a code word for Rome, John could then be just as blunt and graphic as he liked about the evil of the empire and its eventual destruction without giving the authorities grounds to put believers to death for spreading anti-government propaganda or inciting riots.

Well, this week John gets even more explicit.

Now, last week's passage ended with Babylon (that is, Rome) getting drunk on the blood of the prophets.

John was astonished, because although Christians were having a rough time of it, they weren't actually getting killed yet at anywhere near the rate they had been under Nero.

And maybe he started wondering if maybe he'd read the signs wrong.

But the angel interprets the vision for him, and he obediently writes it down and sends it out.

And at this point the symbolism becomes so clear than even non-Christians reading it would immediately recognize John and his followers as enemies of the state

Let's refresh our memories, shall we.

John sees "*the woman, and ... the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her...*" *"This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings."* [v. 7,9]

The seven mountains are a clear signal that the woman - that is the false religion - is at least nominally in charge of Rome, because Rome was built on seven hills.

So the seven mountains are obvious.

The seven kings are less so.

Some see in this an allusion to Daniel, but as scholar G. B. Caird writes, seven is one of John's symbolic numbers, and the kings would remain at seven no matter how long the actual list happened to be.

Remember that seven is the number of completion.

And so one thing the beast with seven heads is telling us is that **whenever you see false religion allied with a godless king, they both really belong to the beast, who represents Satan, the enemy of God..**

Look again at this.

The woman is seated on the beast - this suggests that she thinks she is in control.

But just you wait. That won't last.

And the heads are kings, and so of course as all kings do, they think they are in charge. After all, isn't the head always in charge of the body?
But look and see what really happens. When one is lopped off, another one takes over. They are pretty much interchangeable, and the beast just continues to do his thing. And besides, there are ten horns, which are also kings of a sort, which are just waiting in the wings for their turn.
This tells us that all these illusions of power which the enemies of God imagine they possess are just that - illusions.

Yet people still pursue it as if power is either permanent or satisfying.

Now, we could spend weeks arguing over what is meant by the statement that the beast "was and is not and is to come." {v. 8]

We could also speculate on exactly who the kings are - "five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come." {v. 10]

A lot of people see in this a reference to Nero, and it's not at all difficult to find a pattern of rulers that accommodates this idea.

But it's not really helpful to us, is it.

Remember one of the principles of understanding prophetic writings is that there are usually three layers of meaning operating at the same time.

There's the immediate meaning, for the hearers at the time of writing.

There's the final meaning, for how things will wind up at the end of history.

And there's the part that's always true, that can guide and encourage Christians no matter where they are in God's grand design.

So I don't think that being able to line up Roman emperors against John's timeline is going to help us much.

Nor do I think that it's useful to try to identify current rulers as one king or another as if we knew that this was the end of the line and we could see the pattern clear.

No, what I think we need to do with these kings, and the beast, and the woman, is to try to discern what is always true, no matter how far we are either from John's day or Jesus' return, and no matter what - or who - looks scariest in our own day.

And the key to that, in my opinion, is not in giving them names, but in understanding how they interact with each other.

And once we shift our perspective and start looking at their relationships instead of their identities, the picture becomes a whole lot clearer, like a jigsaw puzzle piece suddenly makes sense - after you've turned it around a hundred times - and finally get it rightly connected to the other pieces.

Look again at what's going on.

We have the woman and the kings - two sets, represented by heads and horns, and the beast.

The first group of kings need the alliance with the woman - the false religion.

Together they manage to bring the world - or at least their part of it - under control.

Both kinds of power - political power and religious power - are operating under the illusion that they are in control, but both are actually being empowered and supported by the beast, for his own purposes.

When he doesn't need them any more, he discards them like so many worn-out puppets.

"The ten ... kings who have not yet received a kingdom ... are to receive authority as kings for one hour [and] are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast..."

And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. {v. 12-13,16]

As soon as the beast brings in the second group of kings, he doesn't need the screen of legitimacy provided by the false religion, the great harlot.

And he doesn't even allow those kings the illusion that they are in charge.

The beast is now wielding his power without intermediaries.

So what does this tell us?

It tells us that sometimes evil is easily recognized as such, and sometimes it is not.

Sometimes God's enemies feel so secure in their power that they no longer bother to disguise their hatred of Jesus Christ.

When that happens, the gloves come off and even dedicated, life-long, head-in-the-sand ostriches begin to recognize the conflict that has actually been going on all along.

See what happens when the ten kings take center stage, that second group who are openly working with the beast and who help him ditch the aging harlot: *"they will make war on the Lamb."* Let me say that again: *"they will make war on the Lamb."* {v. 14a]

But what else do we see?

Remember what Jesus said, that Satan is “*a liar and the father of lies.*” [Jn 8:44]

The beast - Satan - is not faithful.

Satan doesn't keep his promises.

Or to be more precise, he keeps them - but with a twist.

Rather like the way some of our courts interpret the constitution - they can make it read whatever they want.

Not even Satan's allies and servants - he doesn't have friends - win out in the end.

There are no winners on that side of the field.

Satan cannot keep his armies together, because faithlessness begets faithlessness.

Lies give birth to betrayal, and both give birth to defeat.

As Mark tells us, “*If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.*” [Mk 3:26]

How many of you are familiar with the story of Faust? It's actually based on a real 16th century Dr. Faust who lived in Weimar, Germany - which reminds us of another man, Hitler, who also sold his soul to the devil. The earliest version of the story goes like this:

Although Faust often lacked common sense and understanding, at an early age he proved himself a scholar, mastering not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the sciences of medicine, mathematics, astrology, sorcery, prophesy, and necromancy. These pursuits aroused in him a desire to commune with the Devil, so--having made the necessary evil preparations--he repaired one night to a crossroads in the Spesser Forest near Wittenberg. Between nine and ten o'clock he described certain circles with his staff and thus conjured up the Devil. Feigning anger at having been summoned against his will, the Devil arrived in the midst of a great storm. After the winds and lightning had subsided the Devil asked Dr. Faustus to reveal his will, to which the scholar replied that he was willing to enter into a pact. The Devil, for his part, would agree:

1. to serve Dr. Faustus for as long as he should live,
2. to provide Dr. Faustus with whatever information he might request, and
3. never to utter an untruth to Dr. Faustus.

The Devil agreed to these particulars, on the condition that Dr. Faustus would promise:

1. at the expiration of twenty-four years to surrender his body and soul to the Devil,
2. to confirm the pact with a signature written in his own blood, and
3. to renounce his Christian faith.

The pact was drawn up, and Dr. Faustus formalized it with his own blood. Henceforth Dr. Faustus' life was filled with comfort and luxury, but marked by excess and perversion. Everything was within his grasp: elegant clothing, fine wines, sumptuous food, beautiful women--even Helen of Troy and the concubines from the Turkish sultan's harem. He became the most famous astrologer in the land, for his horoscopes never failed. No longer limited by earthly constraints, he traveled from the depths of hell to the most distant stars. He amazed his students and fellow scholars with his knowledge of heaven and earth.

Shortly after midnight on the last day of the twenty-fourth year, the ailing Dr. Faustus heard a great commotion. First came the sound of a ferocious storm and then the shouts--first terrifyingly loud then ever weaker--from their mentor. At daybreak a group of his students ventured into his room. Bloodstains were everywhere. Bits of brain clung to the walls. Here they discovered an eye, and there a few teeth. Outside they found the corpse, its members still twitching, lying on a manure pile. His horrible death thus taught them the lesson that had escaped their master during his lifetime: to hold fast to the ways of God, and to reject the Devil and all his temptations.

The moral of this story - both the story of Faust and John's Revelation - is that the temporary attractions promised by Satan, whether it's wealth, or power, or pleasure, never pan out. Habakkuk cried out to God for justice, for evildoers to be called to account, and was answered: “*there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.*” [Hab 2:3-4]

Remember the third lesson of Revelation: Jesus wins. “*The Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings.*” [v. 14b] The only sure bet is Jesus Christ. If we are faithful to him, he is faithful to us, faithful to “*those [who] are called and chosen and faithful.*” [v. 14c]