

The Good, The Bad And The Ugly

Revelation 12-14 (The Various Personages and Events)

The Good (Revelation 12:1-6)

The Woman and the Dragon

A 'great sign' points to a genuine reality which, though symbolic, will nevertheless take place. In the course of this passage we can see the spiritual reality and meaning of events in our historical experience, such as the birth of the Messiah, together with satan's continuous attempts to destroy Him before He completed His redemptive work, and His exaltation, followed by the resultant persecution of His church. Knowing that they share in His victory will enable His people to endure patiently any future afflictions.

So firstly we have a woman and she is giving birth to a son. The Woman represents the faithful remnant of God's people Israel (denoted by the garland of 12 stars – an echo of Joseph's dream as recounted in Genesis 37:9, perhaps). She gives birth to a child who History has revealed to be the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour of the World. Verse 5 states that He *will* rule the nations with a rod of iron. His is the victory, completely and utterly.

The Bad (Revelation 12:7-17, Revelation 13)

The Dragon

While she is in the process of giving birth – at her most vulnerable – another sign takes place in heaven: a great, fiery red dragon (identified as satan in verse 9) with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. The seven heads (seven denotes spiritual wholeness and means wholeness or completeness) represent intelligence and cleverness but not wisdom. Ten represents earthly completeness and the horns are a symbol of physical or political strength. The seven diadems represent political authority. So this figure has complete political authority bestowed upon him and possesses complete physical/political strength in the earthly realm.

We see here his total opposition to God and His purposes in verse 4 when the passage states that, *'his tail drew a third of the stars of heaven* (this is a symbolic representation of angelic beings) *and threw them to the earth.'* We see how he is obsessively opposed to God working out his plans through the woman – the messianic community – and her child, the Messiah.

However, the Child is born and *'caught up'* (which can be translated as 'snatched away' and denotes force) to heaven to be seated on His throne.

Now the woman – whose identity as the messianic people is now the church – flees into the wilderness where she is nurtured by God (in an episode reminiscent of the Israelites emerging from Egypt and being shaped by God in the wilderness).

Then we have a full-on war between satan (identified as the dragon remember) and his hordes of angels and the archangel Michael and his angels. This mention of Michael is pretty significant really as he only gets 4 mentions in the Bible and in each one spiritual warfare is implied.

[Daniel 10: 1-4, 12, 13, Ezra 8:21-23, Mark 11:20-24]

However, as we could have told him from the beginning, satan and his angels do not prevail and are defeated by the total event of Jesus Christ, as we hear a loud voice declaring:

'Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.' (again their testimony would, by necessity, include reference to the blood of Jesus and His atoning work in their lives).

So victory has been won, satan has been cast down to earth with his minions, and God's kingdom has been established on earth. Please note that this kingdom is *NOT* an earthly politically- or geographically-defined kingdom but it is a kingdom 'not of this world' that is defined by peoples' steadfast loyalty and devotion to God. We can illustrate this in the way that as a British subject a person's loyalty is 'to the crown', ie the Queen.

So the great news and encouragement is that the devil is beaten, all his efforts are, ultimately, futile and without success. He is fighting a losing battle

and the church's, that is the believers', persistence is paramount and ultimately rewarded by God.

In the following verses we see that the devil now turns his attention onto the church and uses all his efforts to destroy her. We see that he sends floods, which symbolise the peoples of the earth, and yet God protects His people with 'the earth' – using His creation as one of His resources.

Now in his failure to destroy both the Messiah and His community he seeks to make war with individual members of the witnessing church.

The Beast out of the Sea

Now the tricky bit. The beast with lots of heads and horns and crowns.

This time the beast has seven heads and ten horns (with ten crowns) – whereas the dragon had seven diadems on his (seven) heads.

This suggests that this beast is a system of human government (the ten horns – symbol of physical/ political strength – have ten crowns). John was given to recognize that the beast was a composite of the 4 beasts that Daniel saw in his vision (chapter 7:2-7) referring to different historic empires culminating in the Roman Empire. This obviously resonated with the audience at the time as the Roman Empire was the dominant political force in the region.

However, what is interesting is that the Roman Empire is not something dead and long gone... it is to exist until the end of time in some form or another. (If

you look at our western world, I think you can see how true that is. Every nation of the western hemisphere was settled by a member nation of the Roman Empire. We are Roman to the core; the whole western world is Roman in its thought, philosophy, and attitude). Just think. When did you last write something? I assume you used the *Roman* alphabet.

One of the heads of the beast has been wounded but appears to have been healed and this can be taken as some kind of parody of the Lamb – a counterfeit miracle, if you like. But it is enough for the world which marvels at it and follows the beast and they worship the one who gave the beast its authority - satan. He now starts blaspheming and is given authority, by God, over the people who dwell on the earth (which does *NOT* include the church! – whom he proceeds to make war with). Note that Revelation 13:7 elaborates on this with ‘every tribe, tongue and nation.’ and so it must be some sort of global system of government. These people, whose names are *NOT* written in the Book of Life will worship the beast. Note that this appears to be a 2-way transaction: the beast has authority over them *and* the people worship him.

The section concludes with encouraging words exhorting the faithful to endure their persecutions with patience and to remain faithful to God.

Just a minor point, but to clear up any confusion, blasphemy is irreverent speech that calls what is human ‘divine’, what is evil ‘good’ and what is good ‘evil’. So the beast speaks in this way about God, His character (this is what the Bible refers to when it refers to ‘His name’), and the Church.

The Beast out of the Earth

This beast is identified as the False Prophet and completes this unholy-trinity. It is like a lamb – a symbol of the priesthood of the imperial cult, enforcing the worship of the Emperor. What emanates from within is dragon-like. Its character is satanic but the great signs deceive those who live on the earth.

Now he also tells the inhabitants of the earth to set up an image of the first beast – the political system that is in place over them and the people are to worship this image. OK, so this is a biggie: would this sort of thing really happen these days? OK, so people worshipped the Emperors in Roman times (even a couple of them when they were still living) and of course in Daniel's time Nebuchadnezzar set up a gold image and ordered his subjects to worship it but would people do that sort of thing these days? We're far too advanced aren't we? Aren't we?!?

Are we? Has anybody heard the term 'personality cult'? Has anybody heard of a fellow called Kim Jong-il?

This diminutive character (5'11" in his boosted shoes, 5'6" in his socks) is North Korea's leader, sorry that should be 'the dear leader', 'the peerless leader', 'the great leader', 'the fearless leader', 'Dear Father', or even 'the great successor to the revolutionary cause'.

On the intellectual front, he's credited with having extended Kim Il-sung's (his father's) personal philosophy of Juche, or self-reliance, which has been the guiding light for North Korea's development. (Which is rather an optimistic term for North Korea's relentless slide into famine and abject poverty).

His other feats include writing six operas in two years, and personally designing the huge Juche tower in Pyongyang.

The cult surrounding Kim Jong-il extends even to his birth. He was born in Siberia in 1941 during Kim Il-sung's period of exile in the former Soviet Union. But according to official North Korean accounts, he was born in a log cabin at his father's guerilla base on North Korea's highest mountain, Mt Paektu, in February 1942. The event was reportedly foretold by a swallow and marked by a double rainbow, and a bright (new) star in the sky.

Defectors have been quoted as saying that North Korean schools deify both father and son. He is often the centre of attention throughout ordinary life in the DPRK (Democratic Republic of North Korea). His birthday is one of the most important public holidays in the country. On his 60th birthday (based on his official date of birth), mass celebrations occurred throughout the country.

Now maybe this is genuine love and adulation, and it would appear that it is from some quarters, but I think it would be fair to say that a lot of the adulation of the people is also out of fear of punishment for failure to pay homage, though of course North Korean government sources say that it is genuine hero worship.

But surely that is how the enemy's rule over the earth (for a limited time) will be ... it will be a bondage. That's what he specialises in, but it will be something that is deceptively attractive to start with.

I also have a shocking example of this from modern-day Europe no less. In 1990, so 18 years ago, I went to stay with a family in Germany to learn German and the first few days that I was there I was on a walk with the parents who must have been in their mid-40s/ early 50s, so born just before or during the second World War, I would say. And there we were walking in S. Germany (the Berlin Wall had come down the previous December) and we could see a small town – a large village really – in the valley below us and it had this MASSIVE outside swimming pool in it. Seriously, I think it would have been a 50-metre pool. Anyway, it was so big that I commented on it to my hosts and said, 'Goodness, that pool is really big for such a small town. How come it has such a large pool?' and they said, 'Well that was built while Hitler was in power. He did a lot of good things.'

OK, now I know Basil Fawlty famously told his staff 'don't mention the war!' but I couldn't let this lie and so I said, 'But, erm, what about the Second World War? That wasn't good. And neither was the... erm... Holocaust.' (Well, in for a penny, in for a pound that's my philosophy) and they replied, 'Well, yes, that also happened.'

So, here we have two educated people, living in a democratic society reminiscing about the sporting policy ('Ooh, he did put on a nice Olympics in Berlin!') of one of the most violent, genocidal megalomaniacs ever to walk the earth while they ignored the devastation of Europe and the wholesale

slaughter of 6m innocent men women and children simply on the basis of their race not to mention the other barbarities he and his cohorts inflicted on the human race.

I was pretty shocked by that. So, food for thought.

The passage goes on to say that anybody who does not worship this image will be put to death which would suggest that the worship will be, at least in part, out of fear.

And now the 'Mark of the Beast'. I know that this is very emotive and people have all sorts of theories but I am not going to talk about those. Instead we are going to look at this at a more conceptual level and I think that will present us with the real gravity of the situation.

Let's read this bit, Revelation 13:16-18.

¹⁶He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, ¹⁷so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

¹⁸This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.

I believe that the KEY principle of this passage is that it is one of loyalty. In the same way that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 1:11-14:

¹¹In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹²in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Now let's read: Deuteronomy 6:4-8

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

And now, let's read Matthew 6:24:

²⁴"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

The section that we just read in Revelation 13:16-18 speaks of loyalty, but loyalty to the Beast. People who worship God are sealed by the Holy Spirit and their lives start to reflect (hopefully in increasing measure) his indwelling, his influence in their lives. This is an echo of the passage from Deuteronomy which tells the Jews to symbolically bind God's word to their head and hands to remind them to live (in thought and deed) according to God's Word. (At some point in time the Hebrews started putting this passage into leather cubes on straps - called phylacteries – and binding them on their left hands and on their foreheads during morning prayers). Now, of course, we live under the new covenant and so the Word lives *in* us. The Holy Spirit is sent to enable us to live Godly lives.

People who worship the Beast are also sealed. But they are sealed with *his* mark – 666. Now, let's not get too "halloweeny" about this, OK. One explanation is that since neither the Hebrew nor Greek languages contained numerical systems the letters of their alphabets carried numerical value. So the symbolic number of the beast is the sum of the numerical values of the separate letters of his name.

It is interesting that when Jesus talks about the 2 masters that we have to choose to serve he chooses God and Mammon (or money) and these are the two allegiances that are presented in this section of Revelation.

Either way, the people who have this seal will have entered into this 'contract' with the beast knowingly – as will Christians who have chosen to follow the

Lord. Another point to note is that it appears that those without the seal will be marginalised in society (unable to buy and sell).

The Ugly (Revelation 14)

The Lamb and the 144,000

And now things get nasty, well at the end of chapter 14 anyway. We start by seeing a Lamb (Jesus) with 144,000 (symbolising all the faithful saints) with God's name on their foreheads (their seal). The new song is a song of redemption that only the redeemed can understand. They are spiritually pure who have remained faithful to the Lord and are blameless because they are in Christ and thus an acceptable sacrifice.

The Three Angels

And now things get a bit sticky. The first angel has the gospel which is everlasting which is good news to those who respond but judgment to those who refuse it. So he sets the scene.

The second angel now follows stating the situation, namely that Babylon, which in Old Testament times was a centre for idolatry, and so for our purposes, the World in every generation is done for. Finito. Kaput. All the peoples who have followed the ways of the world in the past have had to 'drink the maddening wine of her adulteries' or, as the New King James Version says (Revelation 14:8):

'she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.'

The price of idolatry, or the worshipping of the beast, is the drinking of the cup of God's wrath in judgement and now, it is revealed, all those who have the mark of the beast will also have to drink of this terrible cup. (Could this be the cup that Jesus refers to in the garden of Gethsemane just prior to his crucifixion? Jesus had to pay the price for the sins of the world – he had to drink the cup of God's wrath for the sins we have committed).

Anyway, we see the absolute torment of those who do have this punishment meted out upon them in verse 11. This reality of judgment shows the need for our patience and endurance in the midst of the trials we face, and in verse 13 we read how the saints are granted rest from their labour which is in stark contrast to the fate of those who followed the beast.

The Harvest of the Earth

Now we have the Final Judgment: first of believers (the first reaping) and then of unbelievers (the second reaping).

Firstly, Jesus (prompted by an angel – perhaps to reinforce his claim that he did not know the day nor hour of the Final Judgment) reaps the harvest. The word used for ripe here really means 'dried' and so it suggests a harvest of wheat. We are not told what happens to this harvest in this chapter.

Then an angel with a sharp sickle gathers the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine. This is foretold in Joel 3:13:

¹³ *Swing the sickle,
for the harvest is ripe.*

*Come, trample the grapes,
for the winepress is full
and the vats overflow—
so great is their wickedness!"*

These grapes are full, juicy grapes. And we see what happens to this terrible harvest in Isaiah 63:3-6:

³ "I have trodden the winepress alone;
from the nations no one was with me.
I trampled them in my anger
and trod them down in my wrath;
their blood spattered my garments,
and I stained all my clothing.

⁴ For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and the year of my redemption has come.

⁵ I looked, but there was no one to help,
I was appalled that no one gave support;
so my own arm worked salvation for me,
and my own wrath sustained me.

⁶ I trampled the nations in my anger;
in my wrath I made them drunk
and poured their blood on the ground."

The fact that the winepress is outside the city suggests retribution for those who forced Jesus to suffer outside Jerusalem's walls. And the image of the enormity of the judgment of unbelievers is truly astonishing.

Conclusions

As God's people we need to continually evaluate our steadfastness, our patience, our unwavering loyalty to God. We see from this passage that God is merciful. His grace is sufficient for us. He is permanent, victorious, true.

We see that the enemy, on the other hand, is proud, rebellious and deceitful seeking to lure away as many people from knowing God that he can and ensnaring them to ultimately share in his fate. As believers we have a responsibility to:

- follow God as closely as possible, with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength,

and,

- share our testimony with as many as possible who don't know Jesus.

When we read of the fate of those who refuse the Gospel then we have a challenge set before us.