

March 21, 2010
The National Presbyterian Church

The Grand Symphony III: Judgment and Hope

Revelation 17:1 - 20:5

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We're studying together the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. It's a book to comfort people that live in the midpoint of the first century who are under a lot of stress. At the heart of the book are two songs that are sung. They're almost like two great towers that the whole book swings upon. The one in Chapter 4, the Song to God the Creator, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, who will be and all things were made through him and by his will everything exists" (Revelation 4:8); this amazing song of the dignity of the earth because of the creation by God. And then the song to God the Redeemer, the Lamb. He can take the scroll, the scroll which is a story of our lives, sealed with seven seals; he can open the scroll, he can make sense of it. He has the right, that song is the song to the Redeemer. He's the one who redeems the brokenness in the story.

Chapters 6 through 22 of the book of Revelation follow those two great songs. I think of these chapters as symphonic movements, in a sense more to be felt and experienced than to be fully interpreted, because many of the parts of Chapters 6 through 22 are mysterious. They're even terrifying. The first symphonic movement is a series of sevens. Seven becomes a key number, a buildup as the seals are opened, one to six become more and more dangerous, more and more terrifying. But then when the seventh seal is opened a great song is sung to God the Redeemer. It is a song of comfort to each of us about God's faithfulness and his love. Then another series of

sevens, seven trumpets that are blown, again the buildup of danger and terror until the seventh trumpet and then, once again, a song of triumph, a song of comfort, God's faithfulness, his love. So that's the first symphonic movement.

In the second symphonic movement, we meet the devil. He's called the dragon. He's called the accuser, Satan and he's the tempter. He is the one who endeavors to destroy the woman and her son that we meet in the beginning of the second symphonic movement. That woman and her son are Mary and her son Jesus. But the devil cannot destroy them, in fact he is defeated in a battle in heaven. The Archangel Michael defeats him. Again, this rich symbolism of the battle, the cosmic battle between good and evil, that's the second movement. It also ends with triumph and the word spoken by our Lord, "Finished." The same word that Jesus our Savior said on the cross.

Then there is a third symphonic movement, which we'll look at today. The end of the second movement encouraged us as readers to figure out the symbolism. We're told that the evil one, the devil has an ally on earth. Well, who is this ally? We are encouraged to try to figure it out. We're told that it's a human name, and the name is 666. And many people have wondered what does the number 666 refer to at the end of the second symphonic movement? The numbers may point to Nero Caesar. Most interpreters notice that. If it is a reference to Nero, the emperor at the time this book is written, that could be true. But also even if it isn't, the number six is less than seven. The number 666 was not meant to strike terror in the hearts of these Christians who were receiving this letter, but actually hope. Because whatever six is, you could have a thousand sixes, but they're still less than seven. And seven is the number that belongs to the triumph of God.

So we meet this strange name, but now we move into the third symphonic movement and we meet the nation that he's a part of. Once again, symbolism is used. We were told that Babylon is an ally of the evil one. Well, Babylon is the ancient civilization under Nebuchadnezzar II that invaded Jerusalem 586 years before Christ. The Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem and killed the remaining king, Zedeciah. The people were carried off captive for 70 years of captivity in ancient Babylon. Babylon is on the Tigris-Euphrates River; where modern Baghdad is today. But in 538B.C., Babylon itself was destroyed. So why is Babylon mentioned? Again it's a code word. Babylon is destroyed by the Persians. It's over. And yet it represents one of the gravest and most terrifying moments in Jewish history,

586B.C., the destruction of the city and the leveling of Solomon's temple.

Code language is used and so we ask the question, "What does Babylon refer to?" And now we come to the third symphonic movement and we find out. Once again we're told to use our heads and figure out the symbolism. You might ask the question, "Why this code language?" Why not just say that Nero is an ally of the evil one? It may be because John is writing his book from a Roman prison camp, the island of Patmos. If the letter is intercepted (and it probably will be intercepted by people who read it as the letter goes out from the island), if he just mentions Nero by name, if he mentions the Roman Empire by name, will his letter ever get to the church in Ephesus? It could be that. It was like the invasion of Europe during D-Day; the code language for the invasion of Europe was not spoken of in plain English so that the invasion of Europe could remain a surprise attack. The code word was "Operation Overlord." Code language was used because the French underground had to know that something was happening but they couldn't know the exact date and they couldn't know when it was, where the invasion would occur. It was therefore called Operation Overlord.

Now here also code language is used, Babylon is used. What does it refer to? Well, let's see as we move to the third symphonic movement. The third symphonic movement is Chapters 17 through 20 of the book of Revelation. And at the beginning of Chapter 17 we meet a woman that is sitting on a hill and she's dressed with gorgeous apparel. A very wealthy woman with jewels, pearls and holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and impurities. She's not a very nice woman. On her forehead is written a name, a mystical name, Babylon the Great. Well, who is that?

Now down at verse nine the writer tells us. "This calls for a mind that has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated" (Revelation 17:9). Everyone in the first century knew that Rome was called the city on seven hills. It's still called that, the city on seven hills. By the way, Seattle is too. We're a city on seven hills. We're a better city though than Rome, believe me. So this calls for a mind that has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated. Also, there are seven kings of whom five have fallen, one is living. I don't know if you're an expert on the Roman Caesars but let me tell you the story of the Caesars. They started with Julius Caesar, then after Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus who was the Caesar during the birth of our Lord. Then Caesar Tiberius who was the Caesar during the death of our Lord. Caligula, Claudius, are you counting? Five, Nero six. So is that a clue as to the sixth, Nero? But then the text says but there's one that'll be a short time, maybe some people wonder

if the book of Revelation was written right at and around the death of Nero in 68A.D., just before the fall of Jerusalem in 70A.D. And there was one emperor who was very shortly the emperor, and then two other emperors within one year, and then finally Vaspasian who is the one that destroyed the city of Jerusalem. So anyway, these numbers are used of whom five have fallen, and one is living. That would be Nero, he's the sixth. And the other is yet to come. That would be this short term. Anyway, that is the definition then of Babylon. Babylon is Rome, for sure.

Well, the big question we have when we come into this third symphonic movement is that, we're meeting Rome, the immensely powerful Roman Empire. There was nothing to match it. They had control of the entire Mediterranean world. It was called the *Pax Romana* because that peace of Rome was a peace that was maintained by sheer power and organization and the terror of severe reprisal against any rebellion. It was maintained by the overwhelming military force they had and the ability to keep people in total subjection. It's a terrifying reign, especially at the time these Christians are hearing this book because Nero, after the fire of Rome in 64A.D., did outrageous tortures of the Christians who were selected as scapegoats for the fire of Rome. They were called arsonists. They weren't the arsonists; Tacitus the Roman historian makes that clear. But they were persecuted for this reason in other cities of the empire, and especially in the city of Rome.

So this book is written to Christians who know there's that great stress. And they're asking two questions. What's going to happen to Rome? Is there justice in the world and is there cosmic justice with regard to the power of the devil? We already know now that the devil's been defeated though he still tempts us. But is there justice on earth with this ally of the evil one? Is there justice? What's going to happen? And then one more question: What's going to happen to us? What is our destiny? What is our role? What role do we play? It seems to me in this third symphonic movement, especially with the songs that are sung and the amazing song when the white horse appears with Jesus Christ on that horse, and on the hem of his garment are his names, "Lord of lords," "King of kings." As you know George Friedrich Handel put that very phrase into the "Hallelujah Chorus" and next Sunday evening on Palm Sunday we have a chance to hear our great choir sing the Easter portion of Handel's *Messiah* with those marvelous words. So we know about the triumph of Christ.

But what about these believers? What's going to happen to them? The question is a question in our time too: What are we supposed to do in the time when we live? Maybe you live in a stressful time. What are you supposed

to do in this stressful time? How are you supposed to live your life in your stressful time? And what does the future hold? So that's on their mind and I think the third symphonic movement will help us. I think it will be a word of comfort for those folks but maybe for you and for me as we live in our era as well.

First, there is going to be judgment. The judgment of God, God's justice is going to win out against this Babylon, this new Babylon. Listen to what it says. It says, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon". This is now Chapter 18. There's a lot of verses on the judgment of Babylon. It would be depressing to read all of these verses of judgment. "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. It has become a dwelling place of demons" (Revelation 18:2). You'll notice it's interesting, in this beginning the fall is happening from within it. It's a haunt of every foul spirit from within it, every foul bird from within it, every foul and hateful beast. It is drunk from the liquor of these inner flaws within the Roman Empire itself, and that becomes a part of its judgment.

Then take a look at verse nine. "Alas, alas, the great city of Babylon" [now it's actually Rome that is identified as the city Babylon, the 'mighty city,' it's called the mighty city of Babylon] "for your one hour of judgment has come." That's present tense. And a little later in the next chapter, future tense will be used. "A mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, threw it into the sea and said with such violence that Babylon [the great city, once again identified that way] will be thrown down." And so you have this again terrifying picture of Babylon and its destruction. There's an interesting line, it starts with verse 11 in that 18th Chapter where Babylon is described in terms of its grandeur.

Listen to this. "The merchants of the earth are weeping and mourning for her since no one buys her cargo any more. Cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple, silk. [The Silk Route was open to Asia. The Roman Empire was a great trader in the silks from Asia.] Scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh and frankincense." Remember at Christmas time I made a comment when we noted that the wise men gave frankincense and myrrh to the Holy Family and I told you then, that was a very practical gift to give to a young couple that are about to make a flight into Egypt and try to get away from Herod because those are very expensive fragrances and they can be sold just like cash? Notice they're listed here as a part of the wealth of the Roman Empire. "Frankincense and myrrh, olive oil, choice flour, wheat, cattle. [Now it's going to become very sad.] "Wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, chariots, slaves and human lives" (Revelation

18:11-13). Those are the treasures that Rome exploited and made use of and harmed. And that's why they're judged.

So the answer to the first question, what's going to happen to Rome - what's going to happen to the Roman Empire? It will be judged by God. It's going to be judged because we live in a just universe. Justice finally wins. And that's very important. When people are suffering it's important to know that the oppression of injustice is not the last word. Our suffering is not the last word, tyranny is not the last word. There is a judgment that will come. A justice that will come and that's what the word really means. A justice will come, and that's affirmed in the book of Revelation. It's affirmed in this third symphonic movement.

Now what's going to happen to us? What about us? There are two fascinating lines in the middle of all of this description of the might of the Roman Empire. "I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, in her iniquity'" (Revelation 18:4). Right in the middle of all this might and wealth and everything wrong that's being described in the Roman Empire, the Christians are signaled from God to not buy in to that evil. Hold your integrity. Stay faithful. Stay faithful to the truth, stay faithful to the Gospel, even in the midst of this terror. If you're around people who are mean-spirited, don't buy into their meanness. If you're around people who are cynical, don't buy into the cynicism. If you're around people who are despairing, don't buy into the despair. Hold your faith and stay faithful.

This has been a theme that we saw in the previous symphonic movements; we saw it in the seven letters of the seven churches. We now see it repeated again. I'll read it again. "I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Do not take part in the sins, so that you will not also share in those plagues'" (Revelation 18:4). Don't go that way, keep your integrity. But there's still more. As this text uncovers all the judgment that's coming, John himself offers a lament. John in his dream is walking among all of the destruction in the city. Remember, I read the line,

With violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down. And there will be found no more the sound of harpists or of minstrels or of flutists or trumpeters, they'll be heard no more. There will be no more traders there. There will be no more merchants there. The magnets of the earth will no longer be there. Those that you deceive with sorcery were led astray. (Revelation 18:21-23)

As John walks around, perhaps he's in the great stadium where people were

thrown to lions and were so badly treated by Nero. Maybe he's walking in the midst of it and he says this of Rome: "And in you was found the blood of prophets and the saints and all who have been slain on the earth" (Revelation 18:24). He sees and realizes that as he's walking among the ruins that many of the martyrs were martyred there and as he walks he sees bloodstains in the sand.

But then by surprise he hears a sound. Chapter 19. "And after this I heard what seemed to be a loud sound of a great multitude in heaven and they were singing, 'Hallelujah!'" And now we hear the "Hallelujah Chorus." Hallelujah! "Salvation and glory and power to our God for his judgments are true and just. He has judged this great city of Babylon and he's avenged the blood of his servants." And then he continues, "Hallelujah, Amen. Praise our God, all you his servants and those who fear small and great. Hallelujah, for the Lord our God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice, exalt and give him glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come" (Revelation 19:1-7).

Now there is a shifting to joy in the text. There's something good that stands ahead. "The marriage of the Lamb, his bride has made herself ready and to her it's been granted to be clothed with fine linens and preparing for the marriage of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:7-8). And then the great song appears in the text. "Then I saw heaven open and I saw a white horse and I saw Jesus Christ on that great white horse" [He's called the Word of God. He's the faithful one, the true one, he's on the horse.] "There are other great horses behind him and on his garment are written these words, Lord of lords, King of kings" (Revelation 19:11-16). Then a great judgment occurs. And that is in that 20th chapter. After the judgment it's interesting to me that the last judgment of all is that death itself is judged. Death itself is ended. This is the last line of the third symphonic movement, "Then death and Hades were themselves thrown into the lake of fire, into final judgment" (Revelation 20:14). And that is the final word of the third symphonic movement.

I wrote a commentary in 1982 on the book of Revelation and I wrote these words of reflection at that ending: "One has the picture in this 18th chapter of a grieving John because he grieves as he sees the stained blood on the sand where those martyrs had died, and a grieving John walking among the now silent wasteland of human arrogance, everything has collapsed in the crashing sounds of Chapter 18. The lamps are out, the voices are silent, the flutes, the minstrels are no longer playing. The scene is stark and hopeless. The city was powerful, it was rich, it was cruel, and now it's all come to this." And then I quoted T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Man." He ends his poem "The Hollow Man," "This is the way the world ends, this is the way the

world ends, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang, but a whimper.”

And then finally when death itself is destroyed I wrote this. “This moment is a very serious and awesome moment as even death itself is ended by the judgment of God. But it’s a good moment too, because God is the judge.” The third symphonic movement ends with this scene of the holy decision about the destiny of every living thing. And it’s quiet; it’s a quiet moment but the good news is that Jesus Christ is the judge. The One who loves us, the One who died in our behalf, the Lamb, is the one who has the last word. And that is the word of comfort. In the book of Revelation itself, but certainly in this third symphonic movement, the Lamb has the last word. That’s good news. That’s why that word to us: don’t buy-in to cynicism; don’t buy-in to meanness; don’t buy-in to despair; hold your faith, hold on. Trust that a good day is coming of the fulfillment of justice and of hope and of God’s love. And that love of God is the last word, the Lamb is the last word.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this great text. It takes our breath away, there’s much about it that’s mysterious that we cannot fully understand. And yet it becomes clear that we live in a just universe and we live in a time when the last word belongs to the Lamb. The Lamb who gave his life in our behalf and on behalf of the world, and Father we’re grateful that that’s the last word and that the final enemy, death itself, is defeated. We’re grateful for that too. In Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

1 Palmer, Earl F. *1, 2, 3 John, Revelation: The Preacher’s Commentary*. Thomas Nelson, 1982.
2 Eliot, T.S. “The Hollow Man” from *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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