

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Revelation 20:13-15, ESV.

¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

And the Sea Gave Up the Dead.

Wendy and I recently went to Berkeley, California, for a wedding celebration for her niece. We flew in and out of San Francisco. I'm from southern California, and so one day, we went out to the ocean. I remember standing on a rise, watching the waves and the choppy water beyond them. It reminded me of the hundreds of times that I went into the ocean as a kid, and I thought about the first time a friend of mine tried to teach me to surf. After a couple hours of trying, I could finally stand on the board for a few seconds on a modest wave. We were not very far out, and we were careful to choose a place with no rip currents. But at one point, I got tossed off the board and thrown into the wave – hard. As I tumbled in the cold, rough water, I remember losing track of up and down, worried that I wouldn't find my way to the top before I ran out of air.

The Book of Revelation begins with letters written to seven early churches in Asia Minor, or modern Turkey, including Ephesus, the author's home city. These letters tell these churches that while they have done many good things, they have some problems, some evil beliefs and practices that they need to correct. Then there is a vision from Heaven where Jesus, the Lamb of God, is seen as sacrificing himself for all humans. Next, seven seals are opened. These seals present some powerful symbolism, in the form of horses of various colors. This part essentially tells us that horrible plagues will attack humanity because of its corruption. Next, there are seven trumpets. Each of these is a plague. Then, there is a woman, a dragon, and a child. Importantly, dragons were a common literary artifact of ancient Jewish and pre-Jewish literature. The dragon is probably Satan, and it is at war with the people of God. Then there is a Beast from the Sea. This beast has seven heads, perhaps representing seven major emperors of Rome – who have received their authority, not from God, but from Satan. Next comes a statement that Babylon – which is perhaps a reference to the Roman Empire – will be attacked by God. This message is delivered by three angels. After this, there are seven bowls filled with the wrath of God. These bowls represent God's final judgement against evil and maybe against the Roman Empire. Then the whore of Babylon, which we suspect is Rome, is symbolized as a

beast with seven heads. Next, Babylon falls. There is rejoicing in Heaven. A rider on a white horse arrives. This is Jesus Christ, who has come to conquer evil. Satan is then cast into the lake of fire for a thousand years, which really means infinity. All people, including all who have ever died, are judged – and the books that have been written about each of our lives are read aloud. Now there is a new Heaven and a new Earth, which are purified. We see a New Jerusalem in all its glory. Sin has been erased. God has destroyed evil, and all the faithful will receive an amazing reward for all of eternity. We will be citizens of the glorious Empire of God, the New Jerusalem. I don't expect you to remember any of that.

But here's the bottom line: Revelation is about spiritual warfare between God and Satan. Jesus is victorious over evil, but we are told that the struggle will not be complete until his Second Coming. The Book is filled with symbolic language and lots of numerology. We've talked about the use of numbers in the Bible. Revelation can be read on two levels. One is about the destruction of all that is sinful and the ultimate emergence of a world with no pain, and where everyone has an intimate relationship with God. It can also be read as a disguised criticism of the Roman Empire and the author's belief that ultimately, Rome will be crushed. By using abstract language, the author might have been trying to

avoid the Roman authorities from seeking to punish him. Probably, the book is about both, as at the time, Rome was the epitome of evil.

The Book of Revelation was written by a man who identifies himself as John. He was exiled to the Island of Patmos in the Aegean archipelago. The Aegean Sea is a body of water that is connected to the Mediterranean Sea and sits between Turkey and Greece. Patmos is off the coast of modern Turkey, what was then Asia Minor. Patmos is shaped like a seahorse looking to the east. There is a church tradition that the author of Revelation was the same John who wrote the Gospel of John and the letters of John, and who was one of the Apostles of Jesus. But Revelation represents a different form of literature than the Gospel. And the Book of Revelation is written in far less literate Greek. There were probably at least three Johns who were authors of these Bible Books. When Revelation was written, Domitian was the emperor of Rome and he initiated a program of hunting down, imprisoning, killing, and exiling Jews and Gentiles who were followers of Jesus Christ. That's why John was on Patmos.

Patmos is a volcanic island with an area of about 13 square miles. It had long been inhabited. The Aegean islands were often used by Roman Emperors as a place to exile political prisoners. There were two kinds of exile in the Empire. The first was to be permanently exiled with total loss of civil rights and personal

property. The second kind of exile was temporary, without the loss of citizenship or property. Apparently, John was exiled in this second fashion, as Revelation states that it was written after John returned to the mainland and his home city of Ephesus. John was not sent to Samos or Gyaros, which were uninhabited islands where it would have been very hard to survive. The implication is that he was a well-known person in the Jewish-Christian community, and so the Romans were nervous about killing him. John was a leader of the faithful with a powerful message to convey in what he would soon write – the Book of Revelation.

But why did he write Revelation? Was it just to talk about the End Times? He had much more practical reasons. By the time he was exiled on Patmos, the Jewish people had rebelled against Rome, and in the year 70 A.D., the Roman Army destroyed Jerusalem, along with the Second and last Temple. Then, the Christian Church began to expand. This drew the attention of the Roman government, which turned on the Christians. A wave of persecution began. Because of the destruction of Jerusalem, the center of the Church had moved to Ephesus, which could be seen from Patmos, and Ephesus was the home of John of Patmos. John was writing to the spiritual home of the Church, trying to help his people understand the greater context and power of God in a world that showed them nothing but violence and chaos. John of Patmos wrote this book based on

visions that he had while he was exiled on that rocky island 35 miles off the coast of Asia Minor. He had long days to do nothing but stare at the ocean and think.

Here is the first verse of Chapter 13 about halfway through Revelation:

13 *And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads.*

The beast symbolizes evil powers that oppose the will of God. Specifically, it represents the political and military forces that chase down and persecute those who follow the ways of God. The beast is all that is evil on Earth. Notice that the beast rises from the Sea. In Revelation, the Sea symbolizes the home of the turbulent chaos that confronts all believers in Christ. This is rooted in Old Testament language, where the Sea sometimes represents all that is wrong with the world. Here is verse 13 of Psalm 74, praising God for destroying evil:

13 *You divided the sea by your might;
you broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters.*

Here is the first verse of Isaiah 27, where the prophet predicts God's ultimate victory over evil:

27 *In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.*

Leviathan is a sea monster that represents the chaotic forces of evil. We see that John of Patmos, in his vision, is influenced by the fear that ancient people

had of the powerful, seemingly unending Sea, which flooded coasts, sunk ships, and delivered violent storms. The Sea is the source of so much danger, and so it represents the mass of humanity from which evil governments and armies emerge. One of those major secular forces was, of course, the Roman Empire.

Near the end of Revelation, in Chapter 21, we read about the emergence of that New Jerusalem, the new Heaven and Earth:

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Notice that for the New Jerusalem to be created, the old Earth had to die away – and we are told that the Sea will disappear forever. In that glorious new Heaven and Earth, there will be no Sea. That might be bad news for my buddy who was trying to help me ride a board; he was quite gifted and surfed all summer long. But it underscores the symbolism of the Sea in the Bible.

But the Sea is also seen as a source of incredible beauty in the Bible. In Psalm 104, we celebrate God's creation of the Sea:

*24 O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom have you made them all;*

the earth is full of your creatures.
²⁵ *Here is the sea, great and wide,
which teems with creatures innumerable,
living things both small and great.*

In Genesis, in fact, we are told that God created the Sea and made sure that it was good. God filled it with beautiful creatures and put other animals in the air above the ocean. This is from the first chapter:

21 So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

Here is something from Chapter 20 of Revelation:

¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Many ancient people, fishing and sailing in tiny wooden boats, died in the Sea, and so it was indeed a dangerous place. Once God has finally dealt with all that is evil, the people throughout history who have been lost to the Sea will rise - and those who are innocent will enter the New Jerusalem. Now, remember that what the Jews called the Sea of Galilee is really a lake. They mixed the terms Sea and Lake. All evil will thus be thrown into another Sea: The Lake of Fire.

Here is a verse from the 15th chapter of Revelation:

²And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

The Sea of Glass represents the divine goodness of God, and the fire with which it is mingled is God's determination to seek out and destroy evil.

We see the dual nature of the Sea in the Bible. It is a beautiful, but dangerous place created by God and created to be good. Evil can exist in the Sea. We also see that the Sea represents the power of God to not only create, but to seek out justice, to deal with those who are unrighteous. The Sea can be the powerful arm of grace and the chaotic arm of punishment from God.

The adventure of my first surfing lesson did not end dramatically. I bounced around for a while, remembering to stay calm, knowing that my inner ear would help me discern up from down, and knowing that the buoyancy of my body would rise me to the surface. I was gasping when I broke the surface, but I was fine. So was my board; I rode it back to the shore. My buddy was relieved; he had been prepared to swim out for me.

That recent day in northern California when I was looking out at the water, I thought about growing up near the ocean. I thought about the beauty and the danger of the ocean. I also began to think about the Sea in the Bible, and specifically, the Book of Revelation, which has 26 references to the Sea. The Sea

is a dominant image in Revelation, and it makes sense, since John apparently had two or three years to gaze out at the Sea and have the visions that led to his famous apocalyptic writing. Remember that in the New Jerusalem, John tells us that there will be no Sea. That seems like a great loss to someone like me. But the big lesson of Revelation, and we can sum it up simply, is that this world is not our permanent home. John's writing was symbolic. He did not know how the world would end or what the next world would look like. People who have taken the book literally are missing the point. It's not a blueprint for the End Times and the new Heaven and the new Earth. It's an affirmation that God is in charge, that we have nothing to worry about, that we are here as genuine Christians who want only the best for other people, and that this Earth, with its oceans, is not our true home. Our ultimate home awaits us. In the meantime, we should remember that the symbolism of the Sea as a thing of beauty and a thing of danger is meant to tell us that this temporary home is a chaotic place. We are here to enjoy it. We are here to honor God and all those made in God's image. But we also must be aware that it is difficult to remain spiritually safe in this stunning but chaotic world. Revelation tells us to enjoy life, live as sincere faithful people, people of love and forgiveness, but to also be constantly alert to the moral dangers of living here.