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Revelation 20:11–15, ESV

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 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.

Revelation 20:4–6, ESV

⁴ Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. ⁶ Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

The New Jerusalem.

First of all, note that I am using the same Revelation Bible quotes that I used several weeks ago when I first talked about Revelation. They summarize

Revelation's prediction of the destruction of evil and the ultimate blessing of all

those who have remained faithful to God. But what is the Book of Revelation about? Many people see it as incredibly confusing, as almost unintelligible in its intense, detailed symbolism. Here is a brief overview. It 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 actions 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 characteristic 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, probably representing seven major emperors of Rome – which has received its authority, not from God, but from Satan. Next comes a statement that Babylon – which is an obvious 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 against the Roman Empire. Then the whore of Babylon, i.e., Rome, is symbolized as a beast with seven heads. Then, Babylon falls. There is rejoicing in Heaven. A rider on a white horse arrives. This is Jesus Christ, who has come to conquer Rome. 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. There is now a new Heaven and a new Earth, which is purified. We see a New Jerusalem in all its glory. Sin has been erased. God has destroyed evil and all of the faithful will receive an amazing reward for all of eternity. We will be citizens of the glorious Empire of God, the New Jerusalem.

But this is Good Friday. Why do we care about the Book of Revelation and the creation of the New Jerusalem? Let's step back. Today, we celebrate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is three days before Easter, and in three days, we will celebrate Jesus' triumph over death. There is a notion in Revelation called the "second death". Revelation tells us that all of us will indeed suffer the first death, the earthly one, but not the second death, the death that lasts for eternity. The people who suffer the second death are, in the language of Revelation, cast into the lake of fire for all of eternity. So, symbolically, Jesus suffered his first death,

as if he were only a human, so that we would not have to suffer our second death – which is a complete separation from God for all eternity. We take Easter, Jesus' resurrection, as a joyous time. We take Jesus' ride into Jerusalem, Palm Sunday, as a joyous time. But the people who cried out "Hosana!" or "Save us now" and laying down palm branches for Jesus, were begging him to literally save them now, by building a new Empire on earth, a new Jerusalem on Earth. They didn't understand that Jesus was about to die, specifically because he was going to build a new Jerusalem – but not here and now. Jesus' goal was much, much bigger. So, we should be celebrating Jesus' death like we celebrate his ride into Jerusalem and his resurrection. We see this in Revelation. I'll get back to this.

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 Turkey. As you can see from the picture I posted on our home page, Patmos is shaped like a seahorse looking to the east. There is a church tradition that he 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 there is far more Jewish symbolism and language in Revelation than in the Gospel. And the Book of Revelation is written in far less

literate Greek than the Gospel. There were probably three Johns. When Revelation was written, Domitian was the emperor of the Roman Empire 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 to his home city of Ephesus. John was not sent to Samos or Gyaros, which were uninhabited islands where it would have been much harder to survive. The implication is that he was a well-known person in the Jewish-Christian community, and they 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.

Many have wondered how this bizarre book ended up in the Bible. The official Canon of the New Testament was created long after the authors of what would be the New Testament books had died. The earliest known semi-official

canon was put together in Rome during the second century. It consisted of the Gospel of Luke and some of the letters of Paul. Soon after this, there was an attempt to make a Christian Bible by weaving the four Gospels together into a single Gospel. Around the year 200 A.D., there was a recognized collection of writings that resembles our current canon. But it wasn't until the fifth century that an official Christian New Testament came into being. It was an Egyptian bishop named Athanasius who first put the Book of Revelation into the New Testament Canon. He is believed to have lived from about the year 293 to 373. In other words, he died late in the fourth century, just as the Canon as we know it today, was being formed. He was very influential in this process. He didn't put Revelation in the Bible because it was a statement against evil or against the evils of Rome. He included it, most likely, to fight against Arianism, which argued that Jesus, while he was a holy person, was not himself God. Athanasius wanted us to remember that Jesus had a godly, not an earthly mission.

Athanasius was one of the people who worked with Constantine, the Roman Emperor who converted to Christianity and led to the adoption of the faith by much of the Roman Empire. Constantine wanted Christianity to be unified, to have one set of beliefs. It was Constantine and Athanasius who together, drove Arianism, the belief that Jesus was not divine, out of our

doctrine. Athanasius did not interpret the evil beast in Revelation, as many people have, as being Rome. Nor did he think the beast referred to evil in some general way. He thought it referred to Christians who followed heretical teachings, such as Arianism, the belief that Jesus is not God. This is why he fought so hard to have Revelation included in the New Testament. Jesus couldn't complete his mission if he remained on earth – he was God with a godly purpose.

Athanasius was very powerful in the early church. He put out an edict that declared that anyone reading apocalyptic books other than Revelation weren't really believers. He banned a number of books that were in some way similar to Revelation. Yes, there were other books being passed around at the time that were apocalyptic/revelation books. Athanasius caused these books to fall out of circulation and to be completely forgotten. But in 1945, at a place called Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt, a cache of carefully wrapped and preserved books was found. They had apparently been buried there by people who were trying to protect banned books. That cache contained several other Revelation-like books. We don't realize today that it was common among early Christian authors to write books that told us about Jesus' true, non-earthly mission.

Why am I talking about all of this? I want to put the Book of Revelation into the context of Jesus' first death, his only death, his earthly death. Of all the

books in our New Testament, Revelation is the one that has been surrounded by intense controversy. Many religious leaders involved in creating the canon did not think it belonged in the Bible. Martin Luther wanted it thrown out of the canon. And Revelation is far from unique in its nature. We incorrectly think of it as THE apocalyptic book that reveals the truth that accommodating a corrupt culture is evil, that there is a need to repent, and that Jesus, in the end, will triumph over evil, embrace true believers, and create an eternal New Jerusalem.

Revelation is actually the least original of all the books in the New Testament. If we look at it as representative of a wide class of literature written between the period of exile in Babylon – when the apocalyptic Book of Daniel was written (and which is heavily referenced by the Book of Revelation) – and the days of early Christianity – we can easily understand it. There isn't much mystery to it at all. The Book of Revelation was written during a time when Christians were being persecuted, just as the Book of Daniel was written about a time when Jews were being heavily persecuted. Christians were having to meet in secret. They were being imprisoned and exiled. The Book of Revelation contained many concealed, symbolic criticisms of the Roman Empire. If John of Patmos had written about the Empire in an open fashion, instead of concealing his comments as a religious text, he would have been re-arrested and executed.

John is telling his readers that evil has taken control of human culture. But we do not have to worry about this, he says, as long as we hang onto our faith. Being faithful might well mean that we will suffer, but we must be strong. We do not simply live finite lives on Earth. We will live for all of eternity in the New Jerusalem. It's important that we look forward to that. At this time, evil will be viciously destroyed and all of those who have remained faithful will receive a great gift. Our lives will be read out aloud. We will be rewarded for the things that we have done. It will be a glorious time when all of those who have clung to the faith despite being brutalized by our culture will join God for all of eternity.

Revelation tells us why Good Friday is a glorious day. Jesus' symbolic death keeps us from forgetting what he taught about living with forgiveness, grace, and empathy. Jesus also had to die so that people would see him leave this earth, understand that he is God, and realize that his real goal was to cast out all that is evil. Early Christians were just learning this. If Jesus had conquered the Romans it would have been only a minor, very temporary gift. When we read the Book of Revelation, we realize – as many early but forgotten Christian authors told us – that the real benefit of Jesus dying would not come in this life. We celebrate Jesus' first and only death, just as one day we will celebrate our own first deaths – so that we will live in the New Jerusalem. Amen.