

A Theology of the Book of Revelation
Session #7 – Christology in the Book of Revelation (Continued)

Review

What is God portrayed as doing in the book of Revelation?

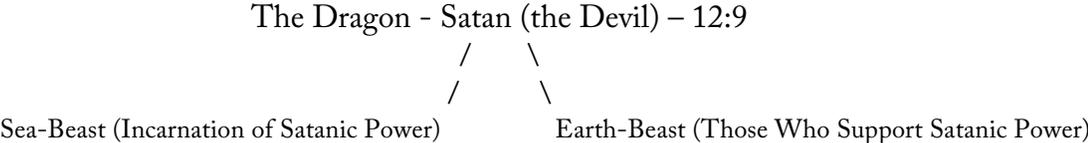
He is establishing His kingdom on earth through Christ and His church. The story of this triumph is being told by means of three images: A Messianic War led by the Davidic King that leads His people out of oppression in an Eschatological Exodus by being the Faithful and True Witness unto Death. “Fundamental to Revelation’s whole understanding of the way in which Christ establishes God’s kingdom on earth is the conviction that in his death and resurrection Christ has already won his decisive victory over evil.” (73) The language that we consistently see throughout the book of Revelation is language about conquering. The plans for how the Lamb and His people will conquer are seen in the Unsealed Scroll, first mentioned in Revelation 5. The details of the scroll are expounded upon in Revelation 10-11, where we see Christ and His church remaining faithful in the midst of persecution and trial in order to conquer over the evil that threatens them. It is not by escape that Christ and the church conquer, but by faithfully testifying to the truth in the midst of the trial – “by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony.” So who are these enemies that we see throughout the book of Revelation that threaten Christ and His church? And how are these enemies defeated?

Defeating the Beast

The promise to conquer is fundamental to the book of Revelation. Each of the seven messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation conclude with promises about conquering (2:7, 11, 17, 28; 3:5, 12, 21). These promises serve to “enable the readers to take part in the struggle to establish God’s universal kingdom against all opposition.” The promise, even as we saw this morning in Hebrews, empower obedience in the midst of trials. In a sense, this is the purpose of the book of Revelation. The visions that we encounter are not simply relevant for the future, but they are relevant for the present. The visions provide orientation to the followers of the Lamb right now! As Richard Bauckham wrote, “The visions that intervene between the seven messages to the churches and the final vision of the New Jerusalem are to enable the readers to move from one to another, to understand what conquering involves.” And, to be fair, this shouldn’t be a surprise for us, right? Are we not told in Ephesians 6:12 that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places?” Spiritual warfare is real, and the Christian who is not engaged in it, is already losing the struggle! So, the book of Revelation teaches us how to conquer! It teaches us how we wrestle with rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers” as members of the army of witnesses! But it not only equips us, it reveals to us how the battle goes and who will be victorious!

As we began this section, I asked the question, “Who are these enemies that we see throughout the book of Revelation that threaten Christ and His church?” Revelation 12-14 gives us a glimpse of these figures, the satanic trinity that threatens the church and opposes the advancement of the kingdom of Christ – The Dragon or Serpent (who is the primeval, supernatural source of all opposition to God), the Beast or the Sea-Monster (which represents

the imperial power of Rome), and the second Beast or Earth-Monster (which represents the propaganda machine of the imperial cult).



Michael Gorman notes that “most interpreters of Revelation would identify the first beast, from the sea, as the Roman Empire, the emperor, or imperial power. The second beast, from the earth, is then seen as those who promote the imperial cult, perhaps local government and/or religious officials in and around cities like Ephesus and Pergamum. The mark of the beast might be an imperial slogan, seal, or image.” (124) This, of course, does not mean that such imagery no longer has relevance for modern readers. For, there will always be incarnations of satanic power among us and those who support satanic power, calling us to pledge our allegiance to the dragon. While such incarnations might not take the form of a totalitarian government like Rome, even in our day and age we see expressions of such evil in the world. Christians are called to stand against all incarnations of evil, whether they exist in the form of a government or not. In other words, while Rome may no longer be standing as an imperial force, other forces exist in our day and age. They may take the form of a cult that leads people away by perversion of the truth, like Mormonism. Or it may take the form of a false, theo-political religion like Islam, that maintains no separation between faithfulness to a state and faithfulness to Allah. It could take the form of Radical Hindu governments in the Far East. Or it could take the form of a nationalistic, militaristic nation like Russia. Or, it could even take the form of aspects of our American culture that are expressly materialism, hedonism, and paganism, especially in regards to the way that we often see wealth and sex worshipped and valued in our own country. Christians are called to conquer such evil in the advancement of the kingdom of Christ.

So, we have to ask, what does it mean to conquer such evil? Well, from a Christian perspective, to conquer means to be a faithful witness in the face of opposition. It means to be willing to suffer for the sake of faithfulness to Christ, regardless of what happens to us. Now, that is what is interesting about Revelation 12-14. At one point, we see the followers of the Lamb overcoming the world by His blood and the word of their testimony. At another point, we actually read of one of the beast conquering these followers on the earth, which makes sense when you reading the book of Revelation in its original context. What was happening to John’s original audience? They were suffering for Jesus’ sake. They were being persecuted. They were going through all sorts of tribulations and trials. Yet, they were remaining faithful. To the Roman empire, it looked like they were conquering the followers of the Lamb by killing them and dispersing them throughout the Empire. But was Rome winning? According to their rules, yes; but Revelation is not written from the perspective of the rules of Rome. It is written from the perspective of the rules of heaven. As Christ’s follower faithfully laid their life down in obedient witness to Christ, they were actually conquering evil! They were not letting evil win! Evil wins when we turn away from Christ because it is too hard and choose the disobedience of sin. Sin is always easier than obedience, but John had a greater vision for what it meant to conquer. We conquer evil through faithful obedience and witness, even to the point of death.

While from an earthly perspective, things looked grim for the Christians who died for their faith, from a heavenly perspective, they were receiving the victor's crown! In other words, the faithful witnesses, the martyrs are the real victors. As Richard Bauckham wrote, "The perspective of heaven must break into the earth-bound delusion of the beast's propaganda to enable a different assessment of the same empirical fact: the beast's apparent victory is the martyrs' – and therefore God's – real victory" (91).

So, then, given John's vision in Revelation 12-14, does this mean that all faithful Christians will die a martyr's death? Under the Roman Empire, it would almost seem as though the answer would be, "Yes," but that is not the case. We know the promise of God, that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church of Jesus Christ. Suffering, sorrow, trials, and tribulation will come and go throughout the life of the church here on earth. Some will have more difficult circumstances than others. This is especially true of those Christians who live under totalitarian governments like Iran or North Korea. Yet, if Christians remain true to their calling to be faithful witnesses against the false claims of the beast, "they will provoke a conflict with the beast so critical as to be a struggle to the death." If you are going to Christ, you must die to yourself. You must renounce your claims to your rights for comfort and ease. While America may afford you such luxuries, you must realize that being a Christian is not about maintaining a certain standard of living and freedom in this world. We pray for peace and hope that our government will still uphold ideals that are rooted in the truth, yet if there ever comes a day when we have to pick between being a law-abiding citizen or a faithful Christian witness, the answer must be clear. The book of Revelation was written to help you give that answer if the time comes for you. The time came for the audience to whom John was writing, and the vision that John gave them was one of a Lamb that conquered through death, not revolt, military coup, or propaganda. He conquered through laying down His life and taking it up again that we might be confident in following Him wherever He calls us to go.