

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 16: THE ETERNAL KINGDOM COMES

Firstly, congratulations to those of you who have journeyed with us along Route 66. We sincerely hope and pray that it has given you new and exciting insights as to what God has revealed to us in the landmarks we have stopped at. And that what you have learned will encourage you to revisit them or even look for others. Tonight, we come to the last stage of that route, and there is no point in denying that for Christians and non-Christians alike, the book of Revelation makes very difficult reading. Specialist and non-specialist theologians and students of the Bible at all levels have tried to give a definitive interpretation of its contents. But when even its literary genre is hotly debated, problems inevitably arise. From the disagreements about literary character alone, particularly the ancient apocalyptic genre, choices have to be made as to what to take literally and what is to be taken symbolically – numbers are a key example. Depending on what viewpoint you take on this, it is easy to see why so many, often diverse, interpretations emerge giving so many differing theories about events depicted in the book. That is why it is even more necessary to mention at this stage, that there is one major condition needed if Revelation is to make any sense at all, and to give some degree of certainty about its message. That condition is the backdrop to apocalyptic literature – the history of God’s dealings with the world. In other words, a working knowledge of the rest of Scripture, which is what this Route 66 programme has aimed to give. Depending on how the calculation is done, there is a minimum of 200 and up to 500 references to the Old Testament alone in the 22 chapters of Revelation.¹ That is before the references from the New Testament are added. Expecting to really get to know and understand this book without having fulfilled this condition is tantamount to expecting to be able to give a performance of a Mozart piano concerto without first having learned to play the piano. And that isn’t an exaggeration.

That is why for this final stage of our route I have chosen landmarks which I hope you will find familiar, but more importantly, are the ones that will still be standing tall and dominating the landscape when all that is happening in Revelation has happened, and the dust, as it were, has permanently settled. Justifiably, it can be said that Revelation is the answer to the prayer – Thy kingdom come - because Revelation depicts the coming of the eternal kingdom of God.

Revelation 21:3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying “Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

This is the final Day of the Lord expected by Old and New Testament writers. The final irrevocable and irreversible order of God’s universal creation. All the prophecies in the Old about the perfection of what God has prepared for His people; and what Jesus preached and taught about the kingdom of God in the New Testament, reach their climax in the visions of Revelation. The One who is, was and is to come is the “God (who) is the origin and goal in all history. He precedes human history, has the first word in the creation of human history and will have the last word in the new creation, when human history comes to an end.”² The concept of the kingdom of God in Revelation therefore leads us to landmarks which assert that one day God will establish on an eternal basis His sovereign rule over all creation.

Our first landmark takes us back to where we started in Genesis, the supreme sovereignty and sacred holiness of God. By John’s time, however, a new structure of sovereignty has come into being. Sovereignty is now shared between God and His Messiah and the Holy Spirit.

¹ See talk on ‘The Climax of Prophecy’ on website, which gives some of these references.

² Richard Bauckham. The Theology of the Book of Revelation. P27

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Revelation 1:4-6 (NIV) Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Revelation is considered to be the most theocentric book in the Bible because it is the most explicitly Trinitarian. The word 'trinity' is not found in the Bible and John's audience would have had no understanding of such a doctrine. Yet, here, in these first verses after his introduction, John clearly states the source of the greetings he is sending. The eternal God is mentioned first. Then the 7 spirits which is a term used of the Holy Spirit, 7 being the symbol of perfection. Then the mention of the Lord Jesus Christ in His capacity of being witness to the coming of the kingdom, His resurrection from the dead and the firstborn of those who will be raised to eternal life in that kingdom. That He is also termed the ruler of the kings of the earth is confirmation of His rule on earth which we saw in the epistles last week. Following the reference to Jesus as ruler is mention of His followers being a kingdom of priestly servants of God the Father. And when it comes to how those three divine Persons are described, the readers of Revelation are left in no doubt of their transcendent, glory, majesty, holiness and power.

Revelation 5:5-6 (NIV) See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." 6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders

Revelation 4:8 (NIV) ... Day and night they never stop saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,' who was, and is, and is to come."

Revelation 5:12-13 (NIV) Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" 13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

The vision of the exalted Christ, the Son of Man, dominates the first chapter. Some of what is said here is repeated in Jesus' description of Himself when He addresses the churches in chapters two and three. Then we enter the throne room of God in chapters 4 and 5 where Christ and the Holy Spirit are also present. Time does not permit going into details about either scene, but it seems fair to say that John has extended his command of language to its fullest extent in describing what he saw in these visions. What perhaps can summarise them for us is that all the inhabitants of heaven unite in extolling the holiness and worthiness of God and His Christ to receive praise, honour, glory and power.

That is the theme of worship in heaven. It is echoed by the redeemed from the earth who sing it chapter 14. The new song has 4 themes. It is sung to God for what He has done for us in Christ. It lauds the salvation that has come through the shedding of Christ's blood. It praises His redemptive work which is universal for it is given to every tribe, tongue, people and nation. It triumphs in the fact that the work of redemption has enabled the establishment of God's eternal kingdom. And we would also be justified in seeing this as a picture of what 'Hallowed be Thy name' really means.

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So, the throne thus becomes Revelation's major symbol for conveying God's royal power and authority over every realm of creation, including the time of its existence – a matter determined from before its very foundation. Whatever way the images in the throne room scenes in Revelation are interpreted, the overriding picture is that of the transcendent majesty and magnificence of the sovereign power held by the eternal Alpha and Omega. Add to these graphic images of divine sovereignty the titles given to God and Christ scattered throughout the book, and we are left in no doubt that God's future kingdom will come exactly according to plan.

Leaving this landmark takes us to a second one. It takes us back into the world and the nature of that world that has existed from the Fall. We saw last week in Colossians that through Christ, we have been rescued from the darkness of the realm of Satan into the light of the domain of God.

And it is in these two spheres that the sovereignty of God and Christ is going to determine who finally enters God's eternal kingdom and who will be excluded from it. Revelation again gives us very graphic images of the four principles that govern this judgement. Starting with the realm of darkness there are many examples of what constituted rebellion against God in John's time. In fact, the account starts with forms of rebellion even within the church as shown by Jesus' rebukes to the churches in chapters two and three. These include, an on-going forsaking or lack of love for God in Ephesus (2:4) which has led to laxity in faith and/or practice; and the toleration of false teaching and sexual immorality in Pergamum (2:14-15) and Thyatira (2:20). Apathy to the point of being dead and indifference towards God characterises the church in Sardis (3:1), while Laodicea is rebuked for its arrogant indifference to the things of God (3:15-17).

It is in chapters 13, 17 & 18, however, that we have a very penetrating picture of the state of the realm of darkness.

POLITICAL – The Beast from the sea

Revelation 13:1-7 (NIV)The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. 6 It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven.

RELIGIOUS – The beast from the Land

Revelation 13:11-14 (NIV) Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived.

SOCIAL – PERSECUTION

Revelation 17:6(NIV) I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus

ECONOMIC – MATERIALISM & GREED.

Revelation 18:11-13 (NIV) "The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore— 12 cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble;

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13 cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves.

The nightmarish descriptions of the beast from the sea and the beast from the land, unfortunately, are not an exaggerated reflection of the evil anti-God regimes that have existed through time and the false religions that have been spawned by them. All the anti-God -isms and -ologies that have existed through the ages are encapsulated in these images of the political beast supported by its religious establishment. In chapters 17 and 18 we are given a picture of a prostitute, which throughout the Bible is a symbol of unfaithfulness to God. Reading the images of rampant materialism and greed together with the image of being drunk with the blood of the martyrs makes you wonder if anything has really changed in the last 2000 years, especially when the media is still reporting modern human slavery.

Although the rebellion against God is pictured in horrific images, we cannot deny their accuracy.

Revelation 16:14-16 & 21 (NIV) They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.....16 Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.....From the sky huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, fell on people. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible.

Revelation 20:11-12 (NIV) Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

Revelation 21:8 (NIV) But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Revelation 22:15 (NIV) Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

And given the extent and nature of all the evils of the world orchestrated by Satan via his human agents, we should not be surprised to know that one day there will be a final judgement and retribution. Chapter 16 lists the 7 bowls of wrath poured out on the earth. Anyone with knowledge of the plagues of Egypt would see a similar picture here. The saddest thing about the chapter comes in verses 14-16 and 21. Humanity in the realm of Satan, like Pharaoh, prefer to wage open warfare against God and instead of heeding His warnings and turning to Him in repentance, they curse Him. The great white throne speaks of the certainty of adverse judgement on the unrepentant, while the lake of fire imagery depicts eternal torment as punishment. Also tragic are those who will be excluded from the New Jerusalem, for this exclusion is permanent. There is no more intense form of tribulation or judgement than that verdict.

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In terms of judgement, it is no coincidence that Babylon is a prominent image in Revelation. In terms of the warnings to repent, God's people in the Old Testament failed to heed all the warnings for centuries, till in the end Babylon destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its Temple, when the Ark of the Covenant also disappeared. The tangible symbols of God's presence with His people were destroyed. That is why Revelation depicts the final confrontation between God and Satan as Christ's war against the earthly Babylon and its allies. This battle is commonly referred to as Armageddon.

Revelation 16:14-16 (NIV) They are demonic spirits that perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.....16 Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

Revelation 17:14 (NIV) They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.”

In view of the uncertainty engendered by the very diverse interpretations, and in respect of the differing, but sincerely held views of the sequence of end time events held by many Christians, it seems best to concentrate on what will definitely happen when that time comes, rather than speculative theories about how and when the end will come. What is absolutely certain is that there will be a final confrontation between God and Satan, good and evil, light and darkness. It can also be said that when the final confrontation with the kingdom of darkness takes place, the imagery in Revelation shows that it will be fought by the combined kingdoms of God in heaven and earth. In other words, as far as God is concerned, the kingdom we are now in on earth is already established in heaven. It's a case of the war between God and Satan, symbolised by the kingdoms of light and darkness has already been won, although there are some battles on earth that still have to be fought until that final decisive battle will occur. As Revelation 14:1 and 17:14 tell us, the Lamb and His chosen and faithful followers will triumph over Satan, the demonic forces of evil and their human agents called 'the kings of the whole world.' The twice mentioned designation of the leader of the Godly forces as the 'Lamb' indisputably implies this will be the actual manifestation of the symbolic victory won on the cross by the 'Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' who was the One worshipped in heaven in chapter 5. From this final victory He emerges as Lord of lords and King of kings. The ultimate goal of God's kingdom could now reach its grand finale. As a result of this victory the decisive separation of all that is of God and all that is of Satan. The separation is eternal. Never again will the two realms come into contact. The graphic portrayal of retributive punishment stands in sharp contrast to the rewards of repentance when God restores a pristine creation in the form of the New Jerusalem.

Those who are citizens of the kingdom of God on earth through repentance and acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ's atonement for sin are given different designations in Revelation according to the context of the passage in which they occur.

Revelation 4:4 (NIV) Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

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Revelation 7:2-4 (NIV) Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. 3 “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” 4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

Revelation 14:12 (NIV) This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus.

Revelation 21:27 (NIV) Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

They are the overcomers in the churches in chapters 2 and 3. They are the 24 elders in 4:4 and 5:9 who represent the combination of saints from the 12 tribes of Israel and saints receptive to the message of the 12 apostles. The 144,000 sealed in chapter 7 is another image of the 24 elders. They are those who overcame Satan by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony in 12:11 and those who endured in keeping God’s commands and remaining faithful to Jesus in 14:12. They are also those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life (21:7). It is hard to imagine, but that is the image that heaven has of the present kingdom of God on earth. All of these concepts are reflected in other teachings in Scripture. For example, in God’s blueprint, according to Paul in Ephesians 1:13-14, we are already sealed by the Spirit; and seated in heavenly realms with Christ in Ephesians 2:6. These are the people who will receive all of the promises made to the churches in chapters 2 and 3.

Eating of the tree of life in the paradise of God. A new name carved on white stone. Sitting on thrones having authority over the nations. Pillars in the temple of God. Names written for all eternity in the Lamb’s book of life, clothed in white robes and wearing golden crowns. Time does not permit going into what all these symbolic promises entail, but what they do add up to is the very privileged status of believers in the New Jerusalem

Again, there is much debate as to whether this term means a place, a people or the divine presence of God. But there is no reason why we should not see all three of giving us an insight into what we will inherit when the eternal Kingdom of God does come. And it would seem that all the references from Genesis right through the rest of Scripture to this point converge in its description. First, as a place it can be viewed as a garden-city. Water, the essence of life and the fruit of the Tree of life together with the healing properties of the leaves, take us back to the Garden of Eden. Here is a picture of a natural world in its ideal state. Nature is no longer groaning for its redemption as it was in Romans 8:22. It is nature, intended by God to be in sync with humanity, and mediating its restorative blessings in the form of food, drink and healing for the redeemed eschatological community. As a city, its name ‘Jerusalem’ takes us back to all references to the earthly Jerusalem being regarded as the ‘Holy City’,(21:2) where heaven and earth met. It was the place from which God ruled His land and His people and the place of enlightenment for other nations. This heavenly city was now the ideal theocentric community where everything came from God, and God and His Christ were the focus of praise and worship. As a temple, the city was the place of God’s immediate presence, taking us back to the tabernacle where God’s presence dwelt in the wilderness and temples built in the earthly Jerusalem. The reason why the destruction of the temples was so devastating, was not because an edifice of bricks and mortar had been destroyed, but because it meant the loss of God’s

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presence with His people. As a temple, the city is the Holy of Holies because it is filled with God's presence. The mention of the city being on a mountain (21:10) takes us back to Ezekiel's vision and all the references to Mount Zion. Even the jewels, precious metals and fine linen, are reminiscent of priestly garments. Nine of the jewels mentioned adorned the breastplate of the High Priest.

As a place the New Jerusalem is the capital of the divine kingdom and combines the unspoiled beauty of nature and the harmony of nature and human culture. As a people, the New Jerusalem, represents the covenant people. The history of both Israel and the church comes to fulfillment in the New Jerusalem. The names of the 12 tribes are on its gates (21:12) and the names of the 12 apostles on its foundations (21:14). This is the realization of the saints of the ages being a kingdom of priests in the heavenly temple.

But over and above all else, the New Jerusalem will be dominated by the presence of God. This ultimately is what is new about the new heaven and earth. The presence will fill every part of the restored kingdom of God. Holiness will be its chief characteristic. That is the implication of the city needing no lights. The beauty of holiness will be seen in all its splendor. God's presence also means life for all the ills that affect mortal beings will be obliterated forever. "To see God's face will be to know who God is in his personal being. This will be the heart of humanity's eternal joy in their eternal worship of God." (Bauckham p142).

This brief overview of the place, people and presence in the New Jerusalem combine to present the image of the restoration of the world and humanity as God had always intended it to be. It is an image of a perfect, eternal kingdom which nothing can ever despoil or destroy.

Revelation 11:15 (NIV) The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

Rev 12:10 (NIV) Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah."

In summary, when that happens all that mars life on earth from the time of the Fall will be totally eradicated. All creation will be purified – all will be holy as God is holy. Then, and only then will we know life as God intended it to be. Only then we will be able to grasp the immensity of the grace and love of God for us when He sent His Son into the world to atone for our sin and enable us to enter this kingdom of eternal bliss. And only then will we see God in His full majesty and splendor. Only then will we praise with the whole of our being, the ultimate truth.

FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM, THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.