

REVELATION: WEEK 4

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Monday, March 12

Revelation 11:1-19

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, “Come and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there,² but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months.³ And I will grant my two witnesses authority to prophesy for one thousand two hundred sixty days, wearing sackcloth.”

⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.⁵ And if anyone wants to harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes; anyone who wants to harm them must be killed in this manner.⁶ They have authority to shut the sky, so that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have authority over the waters to turn them into blood, and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire.

⁷When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them,⁸ and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.⁹ For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb;¹⁰ and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and those who saw them were terrified.¹² Then they heard a loud

voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here!” And they went up to heaven in a cloud while their enemies watched them.¹³ At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

¹⁴The second woe has passed. The third woe is coming very soon.

¹⁵Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord

and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever.”

¹⁶Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God,¹⁷ singing,

“We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty,
who are and who were,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.

¹⁸The nations raged,
but your wrath has come,
and the time for judging the dead,
for rewarding your servants, the prophets
and saints and all who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying those who destroy the earth.”

¹⁹Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Points of Interest

- Where are we again? Since chapter six, we’ve been reading a coded historical review – John’s perspective of God’s perspective on history. It’s been portrayed as a written announcement with seven seals and an oral proclamation of seven trumpets.

- “the temple” – The chapter begins with John measuring the temple and ends with him finding the ark of the covenant inside, which is confusing because Jerusalem Temple 2.0 was destroyed by Rome a generation before this and the ark was lost when version 1.0 was destroyed by Babylon centuries earlier. But the temple always symbolized God’s presence with God’s people on earth. To me, this sounds like John is saying that all is well. God is still here, still with people that love and wait for God.
- “forty-two months” – Various versions of three and a half years and three and a half days are all over the middle of Revelation. It’s half of John’s number of perfection and means something like “feels like a long time, but it’s only a little while.”
- “two witnesses” – We don’t know who these two witnesses are that speak for God. Jewish law and culture required two witnesses for any trustworthy statement. These could reference lots of Old Testament prophets. The best scholarship I’ve read is that this may be Jesus and the church of Jesus. The rest of this review has been threats of plagues and suffering if people don’t shape up, and we saw in 9:20 that punishment doesn’t work to change hearts and minds. So, near the end of this section, we see God taking another strategy – speaking truth, dying, and rising again. This is to be the pattern of Jesus’ church in the world too – speaking and living the truth in love, even to the point of suffering, and trusting God for resurrection.
- “the seventh angel blew his trumpet” – We’re ready for the final beat in this long historical review. More punishment, more suffering, more plagues, right? Wrong. There’s a surprise coming. Death and resurrection leads to a new community, a new way of God on earth, and a different kind of victory.
- “the kingdom of the world” – This is radical stuff. In John’s time, the kingdom of the world was the Roman empire, looking like the mightiest force the earth had ever seen. John says it’s breathing its dying gasps. The kingdom/Empire/country of God is just beginning.
- “destroying those who destroy the earth” – Scripture teaches that God’s deepest ways are grace and mercy. But there’s a form of karma in God’s ways as well. People and empires that destroy will themselves be destroyed, if we don’t call out to God for mercy and start to change. That looks like wrath when it happens, but really, it is justice.

Spiritual Exercise

This week, we’ll respond to the idea of judgment by practicing critique and truth telling – noticing places in our own contemporary American consumer empire that overpromise, lie, or do violence. Is there a distraction or pleasure that culture promotes that you’ve hoped will shield you from suffering and pain? Ask God for the courage to let it go, and trust God to comfort and deliver you from pain.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your church’s witness in your city, that your church would remind people God is with us – not as another destroyer of the earth, but as one who has died and risen to establish a better community and a better way of life.

Tuesday, March 13

Revelation 12:1-17

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.²She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.³Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.⁵And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne;⁶and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

⁷And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back,⁸but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.⁹The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,

“Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God

and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
¹¹But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.
¹²Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!”

¹³So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.¹⁴But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.¹⁵Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood.¹⁶But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.¹⁷Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

Points of Interest

- “a woman clothed with the sun” – Have you seen *Mother*, the Darren Aronofsky/Jennifer Lawrence horror movie? This scene reminds me of that film. An innocent woman is pregnant, and everything in her world conspires to ruin her idyllic life and destroy her baby. It’s an old symbolic story, as John’s writing here evokes the ancient story of Isis and other Egyptian and Greek myths told in first century Western Asia.
- “a great red dragon” – In John’s retelling of the myth, the woman and her baby are up against an impossibly powerful and evil force. This is David and Goliath, this is itty bitty house churches trying to pursue faith under the watch of a hostile Roman Empire, this is baby Jesus at the mercy of a cruel world, hell-bent on wealth and power and rarely kind to innocent, vulnerable love and truth.
- “rule all the nations with a rod of iron” – Almost every time you read something strange in Revelation, it’s because John is living in a literary, symbolic universe that you don’t know about. That’s both the challenge and the delight of this odd book. Here John is quoting Psalm 2, which

had become famous by John's time as speaking to a human leader who'd double as God's leader on earth: God's Messiah, or in Greek, the Christ. So John says this vulnerable human, protected by God and born to rule the earth, is Jesus.

- “the great dragon .. who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” – In Revelation's universe, the world a battlefield. In one corner, the mighty forces of human Empire, who rule through violent force and deceptive propaganda. The spiritual force behind that is called Satan. In the other corner is the beauty and wisdom and goodness of God – immensely powerful but visible on earth only through a Christ born as a baby and crucified like a lamb, and through communities gathered in Jesus' name that struggle to live faithfully, rather than getting caught up in the world's ways of greed, violence, and false worship of money and sex and security.
- “Now have come the salvation and power” – John's witness is to say that though the odds look bad, God's way of love works. Resurrection follows death. The crucified Jesus looked like a symbol of defeat but was in fact a victory. The ancient church called this “Christus victor” – Christ in his death defeated the power of evil, submitting to it only to defeat it in resurrection, liberating his followers from fear.
- “Then the dragon was angry” – This is John's serious realism within his symbolic universe. Just because Jesus wins doesn't mean a life of faith will be easy. We live in a hostile world, where humility and love and kindness get crushed sometimes. John encourages us: hold on, it's temporary.

Spiritual Exercise

This week, we'll respond to the idea of judgment by practicing critique and truth telling – noticing places in our own contemporary American consumer empire that overpromise, lie, or do violence. Think of a force in our society that uses power and violence to oppose good for the vulnerable. Pray for Jesus' help for the vulnerable in this scenario.

A Direction for Prayer

For your six, that God will help them be alert to the stakes of the times we live in and give them the opportunity to serve God's purposes in our generation. Pray for their protection from evil and harm as well.

Wednesday, March 14

Revelation 12:18-13:18

¹⁸Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore.

¹³¹And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. ²And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. ³One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. ⁴They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

⁵The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

⁹Let anyone who has an ear listen:

¹⁰If you are to be taken captive,
into captivity you go;

if you kill with the sword,
with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

¹¹Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹²It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. ¹³It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; ¹⁴and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; ¹⁵and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

Points of Interest

- "I saw a beast" – Great: the devil dragon has friends. Announcing the rise of the sea beast and the land beast! In a chapter full of parody, we have a demonic trinity.
- "a beast rising out of the sea" – This looks a lot like Asia's experience of Rome, rising out of the Mediterranean in their powerful ships. They had known seven Roman emperors (seven crowned heads). John unmask these powers as selfish, exploitative liars.
- "They worshipped the dragon" – And yet people buy the lies of empire. When they weren't being crushed by Rome's armies, the world celebrated the peace and victory of Rome. Did you know that much of the world reads this material in Revelation and doesn't think of Rome but of us? Over the past century, the United States has been the dominant force in the world: economically, culturally, in politics and in military force. Our calling card has been freedom, democracy, and prosperity, but that hasn't consistently been people's experience of our power, to put it mildly. Much of the world has a love-hate relationship with America. That's always how it is with power and wealth – we think we want it and we worship it but the costs to our lives and our souls are high.
- "It was allowed to make war on the saints" – Empire's war against the innocent powerless is part

of its demonic liturgy. In Rome, think crucifixions and brutal lion attacks against Christians. In all times and places, think of public executions and the loud cheers for death of the enemy in war.

- “If you are taken captive . . .” At the heart of the chapter, we get a grim statement of karma and a grim call to endurance. Worship empire and you’ll be its prisoner. Be empire, and you’ll die by your own violence. Trust Jesus, endure, and have faith. There’s a better way.
- “another beast that rose out of the earth” – The land beast in John’s context probably represents local collaborators with Rome. West Asian political and economic powers were eager to welcome and kiss up to their Roman colonizers, even building large temples to Rome’s gods to curry favor.
- “two horns like a lamb” – The collaborators with empire are a parody of the true faith. They look a little like the Lamb, when they’re really more like the dragon. I think of how often our churches sell out – looking or talking like communities of faith in Jesus when what we most prize is the wealth and security and approval of power.
- “It deceives the inhabitants of the earth” – Empire that opposes God’s way on earth does so through propaganda – promising much, working occasional wonders, but largely not delivering on its promises.
- “the image of the beast” – Roman coins had the faces of their emperors on them. You couldn’t participate in their economy without participating in their empire. Same for us? If you think the United States is immoral or violent or sham-religious while actually godless, do you really stop buying all consumer goods that hurt the environment or hurt global workers? Do you stop paying taxes? It’s not easy to disentangle from our collective sins!
- “Its number is six hundred sixty-six” – Ah, one of Revelation’s infamous symbols that’s made its way into our superstitions. In John’s world, this is a number of ultimate imperfection. One less than a perfect seven, magnified by three. It also, through some complicated numerology, may be code for Emperor Nero, who had been the first Roman emperor to scapegoat and slaughter followers of Jesus.

Spiritual Exercise

This week, we’ll respond to the idea of judgment by practicing critique and truth telling – noticing places in our own contemporary American consumer empire that overpromise, lie, or do violence. Reflect on places where your use of money is tied to larger injustices. Ask God where you might have freedom to lower your participation in economic injustice or propaganda.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for some of the largest companies or industries you can think of in your country or region. Pray that their activity and marketing will be more beneficial for residents of the earth, less exploitative or unjust, and more truthful.

Thursday, March 15

Revelation 14:1-20

Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion! And with him were one hundred forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ²And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. ⁴It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

⁶Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

⁸Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication."

⁹Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, "Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, ¹⁰they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest

day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name."

¹²Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus.

¹³And I heard a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them."

¹⁴Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand! ¹⁵Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, "Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe." ¹⁶So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

¹⁷Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Use your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe." ¹⁹So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. ²⁰And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.

Points of Interest

- "the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion" – The fifth of Revelation's seven worship scenes begins with the Lamb atop Jerusalem's mountain. In John's spiritual tradition, this is tantamount to saying Jesus is standing up as King of the world.
- "a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters" – Jesus' beautiful and powerful voice is mingled with the songs of the people Jesus has redeemed. While some people have been busy buying into Empire, Jesus has been buying into the songs and freedom of people.
- "they are virgins" – As with just about everything in Revelation, reading this literally doesn't do service to the text. Sexual purity is used extensively in the Bible and in apocalyptic literature as a symbol for devotion to God. The worshippers aren't buying the lying seduction of Empire, be it the

gods of Rome or the promises of Western consumer capitalism.

- “another angel” – The rest of the chapter is structured around seven messengers of God – three angels, a Christ-like figure on a cloud, and then three more angels.
- “the hour of his judgment has come” – The message of the angels is judgment. I’d like to suggest we read these symbols of judgment less as punishment, and more as truth telling and exposure. Revelation’s purpose isn’t to threaten but to literally reveal how God is with us and how God sees things. From God’s perspective, the promises of civic religion – peace and victory for Rome, life and liberty and happiness in our time – are bankrupt. They lead us away from God’s “springs of water” and into “the wine of wrath,” away from health and toward that which intoxicates us but leaves us worse off.
- “fire and sulfur” – If you’ve ever wondered where the expression “fire and brimstone” comes from, this is the spot. Brimstone is sulfur, a long and slow-burning, nasty smelling rock. John’s vivid language is polemical, meant to scare people out of compromise.
- “Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord” – There’s a note of comfort in this passage, that people who hold to the faith of Jesus and die – whether naturally or through violence – will rest with God and be gathered to God in the metaphorical grain harvest of vs. 14-16.
- “the great winepress of the wrath of God” – The grain harvest is followed by a grape harvest, which is less comforting. John didn’t invent the phrase “blood as high as a horse” but borrowed it from common use in apocalyptic literature, to evoke the violence that comes to the enemies of God who live by violence themselves. It’s ironic that in American history, the phrase “grapes of wrath” borrowed from this passage came to be used in the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” to threaten the violence America’s armies would do to our enemies, as if a violent God is on the side of our country. This is the language and behavior of the dragon or the beast, not of God’s Kingdom.

Spiritual Exercise

This week, we’ll respond to the idea of judgment by practicing critique and truth telling – noticing places in our own contemporary American consumer empire that overpromise, lie, or do violence. Ask God if there are places in your life where you have seen God as on your side, or the side of your country and group, and cheered on harm to your enemy. Seek God’s forgiveness and a faith and mindset free of this pollution.

A Direction for Prayer

For your six, that they would have the perspective to notice false promises they have believed in. Ask God for their redemption and freedom.

Friday, March 16

Revelation 15:1-8

15 Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

²And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and 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. ³And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and amazing are your deeds,
Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways,
King of the nations!

⁴Lord, who will not fear
and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your judgments have been revealed.”

⁵After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, ⁶and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes across their chests. ⁷Then one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever; ⁸and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.

Points of Interest

- “seven angels with seven plagues” – In John’s culture, if something was worth saying once, it was worth repeating in slightly different language. The seven angels of judgment from Revelation 14 are about to come back, this time with bowls in their hand.
- “conquered” – This is in many ways the goal of this life, according to Revelation – withstand suffering, don’t buy into the false promises of violence and wealth and pleasure that harm your soul or anyone else’s, and learn faithfulness to Jesus, who is faithful to us. This is what conquering looks like.
- “song of Moses” – The hero of past Jewish deliverance joins in song with the Lamb, whose death and resurrection is for the liberation of the whole world. While this song is very short, it calls to mind both of Moses’ songs in the Old Testament, his Exodus 15 victory song over oppressive evil, and his Deuteronomy 32 song that calls people to trust God and not the many false promises of security that come our way in pluralistic times.
- “all nations will come” – The song reiterates the hope of the worship scene in Revelation 7, that people of all the nations – who have fought one another in our Beast-driven violence – will together worship God instead.
- “the temple was filled with smoke” – However we’re supposed to understand these scenes of judgment in the middle of Revelation, we’re meant to find the presence of God here. The temple filling with the smoke of incense and burnt offerings was meant to evoke God’s unseen presence. The exposure of all our society’s lies and violence, and even the exposure of our own collaboration with it all, isn’t meant to scare or harm us but to find God again.

Spiritual Exercise

This week, we respond to the idea of judgment by practicing critique and truth telling – noticing places in our own contemporary American consumer empire that overpromise, lie, or do violence. Consider anything in your upbringing that has led to you fear or resent other nations or cultures. Ask God to help you to see all the peoples of the earth as potential friends and partners in worship instead.

A Direction for Prayer

Pray for your church's journey of faith and worship, that increasing devotion to God will lead to deeper communion with people from all nations and deeper confidence that God is with us on earth.