

Rejoicing in Heaven and Evil's Defeat on Earth GN MJCF Mar.14, 2021

Revelation 19:1-21

We live in a world filled with both good and evil. But, sometimes it feels like there's way more evil than good around us. People cheat. Greed is widespread. It's easy to get discouraged if all we hear about are stories of people shoplifting, crimes reported in the news, murder, racism, and abuse. One of the reasons why some people decide there is no God is that they can't imagine there being a God who would allow evil to be out of control. What John writes in the book of Revelation, though, is a vision of God in control. He shows us that God's understanding is wider than our understanding. God's timeline is much larger than ours is. We may not see where God is at work right away, but we can trust that ultimately God is in control. That understanding is a great source of strength. It can give us confidence to face whatever life can throw at us. We may suffer in life, for various reasons, but God's kingdom is even bigger than life and death. God continues to work against the evil all around us. It's a cosmic, spiritual battle, and the amazing thing is that it has already been won, not through violence, but through God's word, through Jesus Christ.

As we've seen earlier, Revelation is full of contrasting images. Chapter 18 describes the destruction of "Babylon." It ends with lament on earth. Those who worshipped the beast of greed and prosperity cry over the destruction of a system that supported them. Now, in contrast, chapter 19 begins with rejoicing in heaven. They celebrate that the almighty God reigns. God has judged evil. God brings justice to the earth. The system of oppression and corruption is ended. God has made things right. Four different times the worshipping multitude shouts, "Hallelujah!" Hallelujah comes from two Hebrew words, Hallel which means, "praise," and "Jah," which means "God" – "Praise God!"

During the loud, joyous worship, they say, "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready..." The celebration of God is like one of the greatest celebrations people might experience in life – a wedding banquet. Here, the groom is described as the Lamb (symbolising Jesus), and the bride is later revealed as the "New Jerusalem" (which is symbolic of the world-wide church). In verse nine, an angel tells John to write, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." This statement is important. The importance is further emphasised when the angel says, "These are true words of God." First, the word, "invited" is in a form that means continuously being invited. It's not just a one time invitation. This represents the call of Jesus Christ to all of us. The point here is that, "You are invited! I am invited!" We are all invited to join with Jesus.

Jesus is sometimes called, "the Lamb of God." This image comes from the Israelite Passover celebration. It's a time when they remember how they were saved from death by slaughtering a lamb and putting blood marks above their doorways. Later, when Jesus bled and died on the cross, he won the spiritual battle between good and evil. Because of this, we are saved from sin through him. Facing the power of death, by the power of God he was raised to life. He defeated sin and death. He showed us that the power of God's love is stronger than any other power.

As in much of Revelation, we come to a number of sections where John begins with, "Then I saw...", "Then I saw..." Some people try to make a timeline out of Revelation to know what order things will happen in the future, but the actual Greek word used here is "kai" which actually means "and." So a direct translation would be, "And I saw..." In other words, John is not trying to give us an order of how things will happen. It's more likely he is remembering various visions. We've already seen how the different visions repeat certain themes.

The last part of chapter 19 introduces new image of Jesus. He appears as a rider on a white horse. "On his head are many diadems," crowns which symbolize royalty. In the ancient world, rulers sometimes wore more than one crown in order to show that they rule over more than one country. Jesus wears many crowns as the "King of kings." He rules over all the kingdoms of the earth. He is followed by "the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, riding white horses." Their

clothes are not what one would normally wear when riding into a literal battle. This image has a spiritual meaning. Here, white is a symbol of the purity of Jesus and his followers. In verse 19, we read that the beast and kings of the earth with their armies gather to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. How does Jesus and the army of heaven win the war? It's important to pay attention here, because I believe many people miss the meaning behind these images.

Jesus is described as one who "judges and makes war." We also read how people were killed by the sharp sword coming from his mouth, and that his robe was dipped in blood. This sounds quite violent! Many people believe that when Jesus comes again, it will not be like the first time. They say that he first came teaching and showing love, but when he comes again it will be to smash all those who oppose him. I can see how many people can get this idea from this passage but a violent Jesus isn't consistent with the rest of the book of Revelation. Yes, Jesus is the one who continually judges and makes war, but the making of war here is most likely symbolic. For example, what weapons does he use? It's the sharp sword coming from his mouth. We've come across this image near the beginning of Revelation. The sword is a metaphor for the "Word of God." Of course, this comes from Jesus' mouth. So, he makes war with his words. The war he makes would be words of judgement that may challenge, or they may be words of evangelism and conversion, but not actions of military warfare and slaughter. Jesus conquers with love and with words. This connects with Revelation 12:11 where the faithful also conquer through the word of their testimony.

When I read about this non-violent interpretation, at first I thought, "This makes sense, but what about the blood on Jesus' robe?" Well, that blood could represent his own blood, shed for us on the cross. A militarized Jesus fighting against evil is not the Jesus presented in the rest of the Bible. Before beginning his ministry, he is tempted by the devil. Would he trust and follow God's way of love? Or, would he try to take a short cut, by performing miracles to satisfy himself and to possibly scare people into following him? Jesus chooses the more difficult way that allowed people to put him to death on a cross. But, God blessed his decision and raised him to life, showing us that the power of love is stronger than the power of violence and coercion.

In this world, the easy way is often a way that does violence to others. It's tempting to physically or mentally coerce others into doing what we want them to do. As we compete for different benefits, some people get hurt. As we focus on ourselves, we end up ignoring those who suffer. On a different level, political world leaders put their trust in having more bombs and a stronger military than others. Military power is used to suppress those who oppose. All these levels of violence are what the followers of the beast and the (evil) "kings of the earth" would use, believing violence to be the most powerful force. Notice that in verse 19, even though they've gathered to fight there is no battle! We read that the beast and the false prophet are captured and thrown into a lake of fire. That's it! As spirits, they would not be harmed by a literal lake of fire. So, the image here is most likely symbolic of judgement and destruction. John would have seen the beast as representing the Roman Empire, and the false prophet as being the group of leaders who promoted the system of emperor worship. Today, the beast may represent political power that has become corrupt. The false prophet could be any religions organized in support of corrupt political systems.

Finally, the gruesome image of birds eating the flesh of the followers of the beast is in contrast to the image of the wedding feast in heaven. These two different feasts are quite the two extremes! The overall message is an encouragement for us to follow Jesus Christ, the Lamb, and to celebrate, because God does reign. God is in control, even if we don't see it all the time. God is there when we experience challenging situations. And, one day, evil will be no more. Let's pray.

Loving God, we praise your name for who you are. You reign over all the earth. Forgive us for times when we've been caught up in our own concerns, times when we've forgotten that you are in control. Forgive us for the times we forget to care for others. Lord, we don't always realise when we hurt those around us with thoughtless words and actions.

Enlarge our vision, we pray. Life's challenges all around us are sometimes overwhelming. Help us to see the work of your Spirit. Help us to see that you have equipped us with everything we need. You've already triumphed over evil and death. There is evil in our world, but thank-you that we no longer need to live in fear. We no longer need to fight so hard to take care of our needs. In your power you provide everything we need. May we grow in understanding your Word. Grant us courage to follow your way of non-violence even if it means sacrificing our own comfort to face a challenge. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, the King of kings, Amen.