



## REVELATION 12-14: BEHIND THE CURTAIN

### HOME GROUP NOTES

We're in our fifth week of Revelation today! I hope we're beginning to welcome Revelation as this wondrous gold mine I suggested in week 1, revealing in such vivid and surprising ways the glory of Jesus and His intended destiny for us.

Because, if you recall, we've seen John encounter the glory of Christ to open the book in dramatic fashion. Then the One whose eyes blaze turn to the seven churches John serves to examine their life and faith together and motivate them to faithful witness and worship.

John is then whisked away to see God's kingdom in heaven, overpowering a disturbing memory of Caesar's claim to rule, and then witnesses the future with Christ establishing the Father's will on earth.

John is suddenly taken back to the present to undergo two cyclical journeys to see how the world is now, facing evil and suffering, along with how it could be if God responds in judgement alone. In both cycles, however, the end is depicted as not despair, death, and judgement but worship for Jesus' vast salvation in the world.

This is some book, heh?!

And it dawned on me this week, as I watched a time-travelling TV programme on Disney+ called *Loki*, that if John's revelation came instead to our digital generation, there's some remarkable source material for a gripping TV series.

**Q: Having explored the dynamic adventure John goes on with receiving Jesus' revelation, what TV show, film or book might you compare it to?**

**Q: Does that comparison make Revelation seem more accessible?**

The sheer creativity of Revelation continues now as we cover three chapters today in Revelation 12-14. Here, Jesus answers why 'Lamb power' - the church's loving service which affects an unimaginable change for the nations in the end - encounters such tribulation in the present. And then He gets us to calculate how we're living in these difficult times.

Jesus does this by taking us behind the curtain of history to see the unholy trinity of the Dragon, the Beast, and the false prophet who currently rage against God's world.

This unveiling of evil is presented creatively through Jesus' remake of a remake of a Greek drama and as He invites us to play a contemporary code game involving an infamous set of three numbers.

So, let's begin by reading some of this revised play about a woman, a dragon, and child in Revelation 12:

## REVELATION 12

*A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. <sup>2</sup> She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. <sup>3</sup> Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. <sup>4</sup> Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. <sup>5</sup> She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.”<sup>[a]</sup> And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.*

<sup>6</sup> *The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.*

<sup>7</sup> *Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. <sup>8</sup> But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. <sup>9</sup> The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*

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### **Q: Any thoughts or questions from this passage?**

This story, which continues in verses 10-17, was originally a popular Greek drama about the dragon Python who attacks Leto, the mother of the child Apollo, the son of Zeus, who in turn sets off to slay the creature.

Over time, the Roman Empire re-scripted this play to reinforce their shifting worldview to claim the dragon represents the forces of chaos, the woman as the goddess Roma, and the saving child as Caesar.

But in Revelation 12, Jesus challenges this changing cultural script with his true retelling of the way the world works, to say:

“‘Yes’, there’s a chaotic force in the world but it’s Satan, yes there’s a beautiful woman — some say is Eve, others Mary, but more often is viewed as the beautiful people of God, ultimately protected yet under persecution for a limited time, from whose lineage this child descends — and yes, there’s a saving son - but it’s me!

Through my victorious resurrection and ascension to heaven, Satan and his forces have been removed from having any access before God to accuse you day and night (as verse 10 says).

Yet, as a defeated foe, they now furiously seek to inflict as much chaos in the world as they can, knowing their time is short. This is why you have suffered so much so early into your life together.”

### **Q: In retelling this story, Jesus essentially asks the churches and us today to calculate: which script of reality are we primarily acting from?**

Let me say, Jesus is not wholly against culture. Certainly not. Jesus’ surprising usage of this play, and its story, is his affirmation of human culture as the creative and diverse contribution of humans in governing God’s world, as His image bearers.

In fact, as we learn later in Revelation 21, such culture that expresses God’s good purposes will be honoured by Him in a remarkable way in the age to come.

But as Jesus reveals, because corrupt forces have infiltrated this world, and our sinful desires often betray us, the shifting norms and values of society provide an unstable basis to truly comprehend reality. We need perspective, which is what His word provides.

In these chapters, He encourages us, therefore, to develop wisdom - the act of living skilfully in our day, by meditating on His authoritative word in Scripture, to detect the good and the false in a confusing and hostile age.

For a time, however, this may put us at odds with the cultural norm, and even in harm's way of the beast of the sea and the land, shown here in Revelation 13.

**Q: How does our Christian faith put us at odds with the cultural script today?**

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### REVELATION 13:1-8

*The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. <sup>2</sup> The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.*

<sup>5</sup> *The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. <sup>6</sup> It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. <sup>7</sup> It was given power to wage war against God's holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.*

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**Q: How have you interpreted this image of the Beast in the past?**

This image of a beast arising goes back to the scenes in Daniel 7 about four beasts, four puppet kingdoms of demonic control that emerge around Daniel's time to dominate the earth.

In John's day, this permutation of the beast combining the appearance of all the other beasts in Daniel, as the most powerful, is the Roman Empire and its Emperor.

The Roman society, and possibly some of the Christians in John's day, wouldn't have seen the Empire as a beast – but Jesus certainly did!

For it utters proud and blasphemous words about itself, such as Caesar claiming to be 'lord, god, and saviour'.

It's supposed eternal reign over the world, however, is for 42 months which is the equivalent to 3 and a half years (as is the earlier mentioned 1,260 days) — the half of 7 years, the perfect total number. The idea being that this rule and persecution, which extends throughout the world, will not exist forever.

Yet, until this beast is finally defeated, it continues to emerge in various forms in each generation.

**Q: Jesus therefore asks us again to read the times and calculate where we see this mutation of beastly power today?**

We can see this obviously in the:

- Entrenched warfare and destruction that we're observing on our TV screens right now
- Modern Day Slavery

Yet, may find ourselves complicit, for example, in:

- The obsessive desire to purchase goods or consume content; inadvertently sucked into the snares of Consumerism which exists to make us perpetually dissatisfied for profit because contentment is bad for business, often to the harm of the vulnerable and the environment.
- Or, for many, bound under the powerful grip of pornography

Tragically, these beastly systems in our world are assisted by other such forces.

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### **REVELATION 13:11-12, 16-18**

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon.<sup>12</sup> It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast...

<sup>16</sup> It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads,<sup>17</sup> so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

<sup>18</sup> This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.

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**Q: Any thoughts or questions from this passage?**

**Q: How have we understood the 'Mark of the Beast' and 666?**

**Q: What feelings have arisen when thinking about these ideas?**

This false prophet was something the seven churches were experiencing daily.

It goes by the name of the 'Imperial Cult' which was the whole Roman propaganda system with their temples, statues, games, plays, and ceremonies to promote worship and allegiance to Caesar.

We experience something like this with the advertising industry, which invades our daily lives on unprecedented scale by any ideological group in history, and the temple-like shopping malls to provoke devotion.

In this chapter, the beast of the land in John's day is seen to hold sway in the business sector.

For any business person, you could only trade without any restrictions if you were a member of something called the trade guild; the catch: to be part of this group you had to participate in worshipping rites to Caesar and receive, as some surmise, a mark - an actual certificate of your civil obedience.

Christians business owners were therefore faced with the question whether they worship Jesus alone and incur significant financial loss or seek a comfortable life.

Some Christians thought 'ah, it'll be fine, I can do both – worship Jesus and Caesar'. But Jesus addresses this possible response by getting them to play a common numbers game in the day called Gematria, and even gives a clue, like the Times Cryptic Crossword, to calculate the meaning of 666.

Following the rules of this particular game, the answer comes out as Nero.

Why Nero?

Nero was last around 30 years earlier and he was by far the worst emperor there had been, killing many Christians in barbaric fashion.

Using this game, Jesus says if you think worshipping the current Caesar to sustain a comfortable life is fine, it's not - it's as bad as things were during the time with Nero. 666.

This is not a number we need not fear – as many do with this phobia I cannot pronounce: Hexakosioihexekontahexaphobia – but using this number Jesus calls us again to soberly calculate where we compromise today.

**Q: Where do we feel the pressure to take the easy road in our Christian faith?**

To motivate us even more, in the final chapter of this section, Revelation 14, Jesus provides us a vision of the destiny of the faithful along with this whole beastly system that Christians were tempted to compromise with.

One is glorious.

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#### **REVELATION 14: 1,4-5**

*Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads.*

*They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among mankind and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. <sup>5</sup> No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.*

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We learn earlier in Revelation 5 that Jesus purchases the church throughout time, but they are only the firstfruits.

Such an idea recalls the work of a High Priest during Israel's annual festival of First Fruits and later the Harvest, better known as Pentecost. This link asserts that the church is Jesus' first offering and sacrifice of praise to the Father for his sheer goodness in creation.

In verses 14-16, Jesus then gathers in the remaining harvest of the vast majority of the nations which far supersedes the number of the church throughout history – as His final offering of worship, where He presents the Kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15:24). This is the destiny that Jesus wants the seven churches and us to remain tethered too with how we live in the present.

**Q: What do you make of this idea that the church throughout time is only Jesus' the first offering of praise to the Father?**

Whilst this future is glorious, the other is disastrous.

In verses, 17-20 we see another type of harvesting but of grapes destined to be squished between God's feet. This beastly system that mutates in each generation is to be utterly crushed. And so, Jesus – through some of the most dramatic language and imagery in Scripture (including verses 6-13), calls the churches not to tether themselves instead to this doomed system.

Such an honest word to God's people is not unusual. We see throughout the Bible that God holds a high account for His people, rather than the nations, because we should know better – we are privileged to know the Lord and therefore much more is expected of us. Jesus wants us, therefore, to heed His word so we enjoy the fulness of His blessing rather than face His judgement.

As this section concludes, to then head into the last cycle depicting evil's demise, we are called to:

- calculate the script we are operating from
- calculate the beastly powers at work in our day
- and calculate our own complicity to these by responding with wisdom now to enjoy His glorious inheritance.

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## Prayer Time

Let's pray for one another to live with wisdom in our confusing age. If we find we struggle and compromise in certain areas, let's pray for the Holy Spirit to empower us to fruitful living.

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## Extra Resources

If you would like to continue your own exploration of Revelation through these weeks or in the future, here are some helpful resources worth looking into.

For an overview of the whole of Revelation check out these fantastic videos from the Bible Project.

Part 1: <https://youtu.be/5nvVVcYD-0w?feature=shared>

Part 2: <https://youtu.be/Qpnlrq2bKo?feature=shared>

The Bible Project have also released a creative video on how to read Apocalyptic Literature:

<https://youtu.be/UNDX4tUdjIY?feature=shared>

If you want to go in a bit deeper, a good place to start is NT Wright's commentary, *Revelation for Everyone*, which explains the meaning of each chapter of Revelation in bitesize portions. A more devotional book, beautifully written, is from a hero of mine, Eugene Peterson, called *Reversed Thunder*.

A little more complex but great nonetheless are the books, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* by Michael J. Gorman which debunks a lot of unhelpful stuff we bring to this book and draws into sharper focus what the book is about. Then *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham is possibly the best book on Revelation I have read. It's a small book covering the major themes of Revelation, it may keep you own your toes as it is quite academic, but it led me to worship more than any other book on the topic I have read! There is also a commentary called *Revelation and the End of All Things* by Craig Koester which is very helpful in exploring the meaning of each chapter in greater depth than say NT Wright's book.

Lastly, if you want to explore the book word-by-word check out *Revelation (Anchor Yale Bible)* by Craig Koester or Ian Paul's *Revelation (TNTC)*.

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### **Revelation 1:3**

*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it...*