

Book of Revelation

Week 4 — The sovereign exposes the rebels (Revelation 8 – 13)



Introduction

Last session we took our time to savour the amazing gospel presentation in Revelation 5 – 7, where the Lion promised in the Old Testament turns out to be a Lamb who receives the throne by giving his life. The Lamb breaks the evils that have bound up God’s edicts, evils such as conquest, war, famine, death, even the death of his followers. He shakes the powers, terrifying the current rulers. He receives authority and marks his citizens. All God’s people are present and accounted for—everyone, from every tribe. But it ends being an innumerable multitude from every tribe and nation, serving the heavenly sovereign in his holy place.

We’re going to speed up now, briefly surveying Revelation 8 – 14 in this session. The theme is the same—about the Lamb taking authority over the earth. That’s very threatening to the people who currently claim to run the world: it means they lose their power, and that’s about the worst thing that could happen to power-hungry rulers!

Remember the exodus, when Pharaoh claimed the Hebrew people as his slaves? The heavenly ruler sent Moses his messenger with a counter-claim: “Let my people go!” (Exodus 5:1; 6:11; 7:2, 16; 8:1, 20-21; 9:1, 13; 10:3 etc). Pharaoh refused to acknowledge YHWH’s authority as ruler, so it came down to a battle—not a battle with weapons, but a battle over creation. With ten plagues, YHWH demonstrated his authority over the creation, and Pharaoh’s impotence. Pharaoh’s claim to power was shown to be ineffective, and he was forced to release God’s people out of this grip.

This exodus story underlies this whole middle section of the Book of Revelation. In the Exodus, it worked like this:

- a) Moses **proclaimed** God’s authority (“Let my people go!”).
- b) God **demonstrated** his authority (ten plagues).
- c) **Pharaoh’s claim** to power was **broken** (exposed as a sham).
- d) **God’s reign** over his people was **restored**.

In summary:

proclamation (of God’s rule)
 + **demonstration** (of God’s rule)
 => the powers are broken i.e. **God’s reign** restored.

What God did for Israel in the exodus, he does for the whole creation in Jesus.

Proclaiming God's reign (Revelation 8 – 11)

When there's a big announcement to make in our world, people call a meeting, invite the press, and it's broadcast live on television and over the internet. In the ancient world, it took longer for the announcement to reach people. A messenger would carry the proclamation on foot (or on horseback), and when he reached a town he would blow a **trumpet** to call people together in assembly.

We've already seen that the news behind these trumpet calls is that evil is broken and the Lamb is reigning. While that's wonderful news for God's creation, it's not very good news for those who currently claim to rule the world, for they lose out. And it's even worse news for the evil powers that back those rulers.

(This is similar to the message of the OT prophets. Good news for God's people, was often bad news for their enemies.)

Six trumpets announce the fall of evil (Revelation 8-9)

The Lamb has broken the seals and exposed as fake the claims to kingship by the earthly rulers. Their claims are based not on any genuine authority, but on doing evil: things like conquest, war, famine, and death. When the final seal is broken, there is silence (8:1). There's no argument with God's authority. God's people requested that God finally sort out the injustice of the way they've been treated, so God prepares to bring justice to the world (8:2-5).

Angels are the messengers of the heavenly king. They are sent out with trumpets to make the proclamation that God's justice is to be restored. This is radical. The whole creation is affected: the trees (8:7), the sea (8:8), the rivers (8:10), the heavenly lights (8:12), and the earth itself (8:13).

As God removes the injustice, not everything is destroyed, but a significant portion. The greater part has always remained in God's hands, but the smaller part (one third) has been so corrupted that it must be removed (8:7-12).

In God's original design, the heavenly lights were to be *signs* of God's reign over the earth (Genesis 1:14-18). But even they are pictured as not doing their job. The smaller portion (one third) of them need to be "cast down" from their position of authority. It seems that the rebellion against God's authority has not only happened on earth, but also in heaven. One third of the heavenly powers are cast down as well. And among them, is one particularly notable "star" who is committed to the bottomless dungeon (9:1).

Opening the dungeon exposes even more evil that you could not see previously. It's like a cloud of smoke, like locusts that devastate crops and leave people starving, but worse: they have a sting in their tails, like scorpions (9:2-4). The evil that drives these insects has made life unbearable for ordinary people (9:5-6).

Their evil has infected the powerful rulers—rulers who mount armies to force people under their power. These rulers deceive people: they look like they have crowns, they look human, they appear to be glorious, strong, and forceful (9:7-9). But they're infested with evil. They crush people. They're under the domain of the arch-rebel against God's authority—the destroyer of everything (9:10-11).

In Old Testament times, the north-east border of the Promised Land extended to the Euphrates River (Deuteronomy 11:24). Not until King David's time did they actually defeat enemies in this direction (1 Chronicles 18:3; 19:16-19). It was from this direction that their enemies ultimately came and destroyed the country: Assyria took most of the land in 722 BC, and Babylon took the rest in 587 BC. The prophets saw these invasions as God's judgement against his unfaithful people. All that history and emotion is behind the proclamation that the armies from the Euphrates are being released and will kill people (9:13-19).

These "plagues" (9:18) expose as a sham the claims to power of the earthly rulers, just as they did with Pharaoh. But people don't see it: they're seduced by the promise of power and wealth and pleasure held out by the human rulers—rulers who are actually just masks for the evil powers behind them (9:20-21).

It's not over: John to keep on proclaiming (Revelation 10)

A mighty angel comes to take authority on earth and sea (10:1-3). But there are things we can't yet hear (10:4-7).

John is asked to take the ruler's scroll and eat it. After what the evil rulers have decreed, the edicts of the heavenly ruler are sweet to proclaim. But as John digested what the message, he realized its implications—turning the powers upside down, so evil loses its grip and God's purposes are fulfilled. It turned his stomach (11:8-10).

Nevertheless, John is told to keep announcing the message of the heavenly king not just to Israel but to all the nations of the earth (10:11).

Given that John is recommissioned here, we should not assume that the content is sequential. The following chapters may repeat the same theme, the message of the Lamb receiving authority and the powers (earthly and evil) losing theirs.

The proclamation of the two witnesses (Revelation 11:1-14)

When Babylon invaded Jerusalem, people like Ezekiel were taken into exile. There in Babylon, Ezekiel heard the message that God would sort out the evil powers that had destroyed God's city and temple. Israel had ceased to exist as a nation; they were part of the Babylonian Empire. Israel had died; they were nothing more than a pile of sun-dried bones on a battlefield. Yet, God would resurrect his people from those dry bones (Ezekiel 37). God would restore his nation, under his government, with his house among them. Ezekiel announced that Jerusalem would be measured up for a new temple of God among them (Ezekiel 40 – 48).

Ezekiel's imagery reappears in John's vision (Rev 11:1-3). God's city has been trampled by the evil rulers. God permitted it for a time. But God is measuring the worshippers—the people who acknowledge his authority.

Even though God's authority is under threat, he has his witnesses—people who acknowledge and declare his authority. According to the Torah, one witness was not enough for a serious case; there had to be two (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15). The people who witness to God's authority do so with great power. Remember how Elijah called down fire from heaven? Remember how he prayed for no rain to bring Israel to her knees and stop her submitting to foreign gods? Remember how Moses turned the Nile to blood, and struck the earth with plagues (11:4-6)? The people who witness to God's authority have that kind of power.

But being a servant of God did not guarantee immunity from the effects of evil rulers. Remember the prophets who were put to death by the evil rulers of Israel and Judah? The apostles were probably dead by the time John received these visions, and most of them were killed for their faith. What about Jesus? Wasn't he also put to death by the evil rulers who refused to submit to him because they wanted to keep their power? In killing Jesus, the rulers of Jerusalem demonstrated that they were no better than the rulers of Sodom who could not be brought back under God's management, or the rulers of Egypt who would not release the Hebrew people from oppression. Jerusalem's rulers acted as Satan's servants (11:7-8). Evil rulers continue to attack and even kill God's servants. Evil rulers will try to celebrate their victory (11:10), but resurrection trumps death! God's martyred people will be resurrected. And that's the ultimate testimony that evil has lost its power (11:11-14).

The seventh trumpet announces God's reign (Revelation 11:15-19)

When the final seal was opened, there was silence: no evil emerged, no voice resisted God's reign. It's like that again as the final trumpet announces God's authority. There's no opposition; just the declaration of God's reign over earth, through his anointed ruler Jesus:

11 ¹⁵ 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."

That's what it's all about, folks. The world rebelled against God's authority, claiming the dominion that should have been in God's hands. But the uprising failed! The coup is over.

The humans who acknowledge God's authority join in (11:15). His reign has begun (11:17). He has stopped angry war-mongers in their tracks, and resurrected those. Their power—which was based on killing and destroying each other—has failed (11:18).

Once evil is destroyed, God's kingly palace (temple) is opened to humanity. We can see this throne, or at least the footstool (ark). Unlike pretentious human rulers, he has the forces of nature in his hands (11:19).

And that's the point! The seven trumpets have been announcing the restoration of God's rule over the earth.

The rebels fight back (Revelation 12 – 13)

The defeat of the dragon (Revelation 12)

Read Revelation 12:1-6. Is this an uneven fight: a woman trying to fight off a dragon, while in the throes of childbirth? This fight has been going on as long as humans have been on the earth. Eve (mother of humanity) was told in Genesis 3:15-16:

- There would be enduring conflict with the serpent.
- The serpent would attack her children.
- In this conflicted world, childbirth would be more painful.

The dragon/serpent wants power. The dragon is a symbol of power, as are heads, horns, and diadems (12:3). We still use *heads* as a term for those in power. Animals use their *horns* to gore their opponents, and rulers who behave like beasts do too (e.g. Daniel 7:7-24). *Diadems* are crowns—symbols of power. God is the true ruler to whom everything belongs, but *the dragon wants to grasp God's power*.

Particularly, the dragon wants to destroy the child of the woman—the one to whom God has promised the right to rule the nations (12:4-5). It's a reference to the Messiah, the son of David who is also the Son of the heavenly sovereign, the one chosen by God to rule the nations:

Psa 2 ⁷ I will proclaim the LORD's decree: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have become your father. ⁸ Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. ⁹ You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery."

The dragon did seek to kill Jesus, and it looked as if it succeeded. But Jesus was raised up from the dead, and taken into heaven (12:5). Remember the picture of the Lamb on the throne?

But we (humanity) are still here on earth, battling the old dragon. It's a very real battle, but we are being cared for and protected as we make our journey, just as Israel was as they made their journey from Egypt to the place God prepared for them (12:6).

The battle against the old dragon has been played out not only on earth but in heaven as well. It managed to sweep one third (the smaller part) of the heavenly hosts under his control (12:4), but the faithful angels defeated it, so Satan has no authority in heaven (12:7-9). Consequently, it's only a matter of time until it loses its power on earth as well. Earth is God's kingdom now:

12 ¹⁰ 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. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.

¹¹ They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

What does it mean to say that God's people have conquered Satan by *the blood of the Lamb*? Does this mean that we have a magic formula, that we just say those words and Satan will go away?

The blood of the Lamb is a reference to Jesus' death. Remember the "lamb standing as though it had been slain" (5:6)? Although it looked as if Jesus had been defeated, his death ended up being the means by which he became our ruler, freeing humanity from the domain of evil into the reign of God:

5 ⁹ You are worthy ... because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

That's the story of the blood of the Lamb! That's the story we tell: evil has lost its grip and Jesus is Lord. That's what *the blood of the Lamb* and *the word of their testimony* means: as we tell the story of the death of the Lamb, the evils of the current world system is exposed as fake, and God's true reign through his Son is shown.

So, the world belongs to God once again, and Jesus is the rightful ruler, but the old serpent still grasps for power. It still wants to crush humanity under its power. The only way it can hurt Jesus now is to attack his people:

12 ¹⁷ Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

Just as the Lamb gave his life, we may need to do the same. It may cost our blood too. We are not "to shrink from death" (12:11).

Vanhoozer says. "There are a lot of beautiful scenes in Scripture. But there's an odd beauty, of course, a strange beauty. It's the odd beauty of the Cross—and the odd beauty of the cross-bearing troupe who progresses across the stage, performing the drama of salvation for the healing of the world."¹

A beast from the sea, and a beast from the earth (Revelation 13)

Beasts have always inspired epic stories. They still do. J. K. Rowling plans to release five new movies on "Fantastic Beasts."²

Originally God entrusted the care of his world to humans (Genesis 1:26-28), but humans (influenced by the serpent) rebelled and tried to take God's power. History is the story of the resultant wars. When people grasp power and dominate each other, we behave not as humans but as animals—wild beasts, tearing each other apart.

Daniel saw a vision of the empires of the ancient world. They looked like *beasts*—a *lion*, a *bear*, and a *leopard*, and a terrifying beast with ten horns. They rose out of the sea (Daniel 7:2-8). They were the empires that fought against God's people.

So, when John sees *a beast rising out of the sea* (13:1), he knows what this is. He's not surprised that it's like a *leopard*, a bear, and a *lion* (13:2). It's the fourth beast of Daniel's vision, the one with "ten horns" (13:1, compare Daniel 7:7).

¹ Wesley Hill, "Drama King," *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 2015), 61.

² <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-14/fantastic-beasts:-jk-rowling-reveals-there-will-be-five-movies/7932056>

Which empire is it? The people to whom John addresses this book would have known. The people of the seven churches were suffering persecution because they would not worship the emperor; they would not call him their lord. The empire oppressing people in John's day was Rome. The Roman Empire is the beast they faced.

But it's not just Rome: there's a power behind the earthly powers:

13² ... The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.

The Roman army was the best killing machine in their world. Rome had so much power that it seemed pointless to even try to fight it: "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?" (13:4)

The real issue is that God alone is the ruler of humanity. Anyone or any empire that tries to take over the world is trying to take over from God. To claim God's power for themselves is to blaspheme:

13⁶ It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven.

And yet, for a time, God permitted these empires to hold power. Rome was hurting God's people (as they had done to Jesus):

13⁷ 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.

Rome hurt God's people—even killing some of them as they had done to Jesus. God's people must keep trusting God's authority (13:10).

But there is a **second beast** that speaks for the first one:

13¹¹ Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon.

¹² It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast ...

This beast is deceptive. It appears to be like the Lamb, but its message is the dragon's. Its goal is to get people worshipping the magnificence of the Roman Empire, as if Caesar was a god. It's a false prophet: it pretends to be following the Lamb, but it is actually leading people to worship the world's political system instead of the Kingdom of God.

Greg Beale (from Wheaton College Graduate School) explains:

This beast from the land has been variously identified as Satan, Antichrist, the Roman imperial priesthood, the Catholic Church (so the Reformers), and false teachers. The beast has primarily a religious role since it is later

repeatedly called “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). Whereas the true prophet was to lead people to worship God, this prophet leads them to worship the state. ... Though the beast professes to represent the truth and appears harmless as a lamb, his inner Satanic nature is revealed through his speaking with the authority of the dragon, reflecting the alluring, deceptive speech of Satan, the dragon, that led to the sin of Adam and Eve (cf. 12:9).

Therefore, this imagery and background suggest deception within the covenant community itself.³

Within the seven churches, there were false prophets who claimed to be followers of the Lamb, but they were actively seeking to get Christians to worship the emperor. They were deluded into believing the propaganda of Rome, that Rome was the wonderful empire that would save the world. This propaganda is a false message, declaring the current political system as the answer to the world’s issues.

The people within the churches who proclaimed this message seemed to back it up with miraculous signs showing how wonderful and powerful Rome was to save the world (13:13). They set up an image of the emperor (13:14), and promoted the rumour of Emperor Nero coming back from the dead (13:15).⁴



Temple of Domitian, Ephesus (photo by Allen Browne, 2014)

³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 707–708.

⁴ See Richard Bauckham *Climax of Prophecy: Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2000), 429-431. [Pages 429-431 relate to Revelation 13 and 17.]

As you walked up the hill into Ephesus, a temple for worshipping Emperor Domitian crowned the hill, and statues of the Caesars lined the street.

Christians who claimed Jesus as Lord and refused to acknowledge Caesar as Lord were treated as bad citizens. You were expected to perform the rituals of worshipping the emperor, burning incense to him, offering sacrifice to him, or praying to him. If you refused, you showed you cared nothing for the communal life of your city. You would face pressure from your peers, who may refuse to trade with you. You may even face formal sanctions excluding you from trading.

It still happens. ABC News reported this on China in 2016:

The Communist Party has just enacted much tougher laws that criminalise Christians if they do not pledge loyalty to the state.⁵

That's the picture of 13:16-17. In John's vision, people received a mark to indicate they have performed their social obligations to the emperor, and only those who could produce the evidence could trade.

Remember 7:2-3 where the true heavenly ruler knows his people who are marked as his? Rome also knows who are under its control and it limits the rights of those who do not give it their allegiance:

The "mark on the forehead," which is "the name of the beast" and "the number of his name" (so v 17), is the parody and opposite of the "seal" in 7:3-8, which is the divine "name written on the foreheads" of true believers (14:1; so likewise 22:4; 3:12).⁶

The final symbolism is a number assigned to the beast:

13¹⁸ 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.

What does this number mean? A few ancient manuscripts read 616. If it's a man's number, then is the man someone like Nero? People have tried to solve the puzzle by adding up the values letters of names and/or titles to make it refer to Nero, or the pope, or whomever they wish.

Using this approach, you can make it mean whatever you want. The Caesars used Latin; John wrote in Greek, and some have offered solutions based on Hebrew. If you start with any title that suits you, and play with the numeric values in three languages, it's not too hard to find a match.

⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-08/chinese-communist-partys-crackdown-on-religion/7912140> accessed 8 October 2016

⁶ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 716.

Just to show how you could do this in English, say we assigned to each letter a value of six times its position in the alphabet, so A=6, B=12, C=18, and so on. The letters of Santa Claus add up to: 666.

But perhaps the symbolism is not about maths. Instead of *it is the number of a man*, verse 18 might be better translated as *it is the number of man*, i.e. *it is a human number*. In case you hadn't noticed, 7 is a key number in Revelation: it's the number of completeness / perfection. But humans never manage to reach the perfection of God, the completeness of his governance. Consequently, human government tries to paint itself as a 7, but constantly falls short. The three-fold repetition underscores that the best of human attempts is always 6, always 6, always 6. It never can reach 7. Caesar can pretend to be God, but he never can be God.

S	114
A	6
N	84
T	120
A	6
C	18
L	72
A	6
U	126
S	<u>114</u>
	666

Beale says:

The number seven refers to completeness and is repeated throughout the book. But 666 appears only here. This suggests that the triple sixes are intended as a contrast with the divine sevens throughout the book and signify incompleteness and imperfection. Furthermore, if the number of 144,000 saints in the next verse has the figurative function of signifying the complete number of God's people (see on 14:1), then the intentional contrast with 666 in the preceding verse would refer to the beast and his people as inherently incomplete.⁷

If that's right, the vision means that no matter how grandiose or magnificent human rulers may present themselves as being, they cannot be God: they always fall short.

Conclusion

God alone rules the earth. The powers that seek to rule are beasts backed by Satan, the arch-rebel. But as violent as the old dragon seems to be, and as unfair the fight with the human woman in labour, she bore a child! Jesus is the hope of the world, the one who brings the world back from under the reign of evil into the reign of God.

⁷ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 721–722.

Memory verse

Revelation 12:10 (NIV)

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 brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night,
has been hurled down

Take home exercise

Can you think of any cases in recent history where people have effectively worshipped political rulers? Stalin in Russia, or Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) in China, perhaps?

What about Germany in the 1930s? Following Germany's humiliation in World War I and its aftermath, Adolf Hitler inspired the youth with promises to make Germany a glorious state once again. The restoration he promised was just what crushed people felt they needed, and they worshipped him as the ruler (the god) who could save their world.

Few of the churches spoke out against Hitler. The Führer promised them what they wanted, so many Christians were caught up in fervour for the Nazi party. Only a few (such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer) spoke up against the "good news" promised by Hitler and the Nazis as a false gospel.

In this moment of history, Hitler was "the beast from the sea" speaking proud words, promising restoration. His words were blasphemies, i.e. he spoke as if he were god, and it was his right to rule the world. Hitler received his power from Satan, the ancient serpent who leads people astray to believe in human rulers as our deliverers, our saviours, instead of our true ruler, the living God.

Within the German church were many deceived people, promoting Hitler and the agenda of the Nazis. They were the second beast: the beast from the land, the false prophet. By encouraging people to join Hitler and the Nazis, they were not only deceived: they became the voice of the deceiver! They were the false prophet, promoting Satan's agenda (including the war) instead of the Lamb's agenda.

That was seven decades ago. Fast-forward to the present. What voices do you hear today promising people what they want to hear so as to gain power? Donald Trump? Hillary Clinton? The Australian Labor Party is not the answer to Australia's ills. Nor is the Liberal Party. Or the Greens. Or any other group. Don't become a false prophet declaring the answer to Australia's problems through these powers.

Now we do need political leaders. Without them, society would become unsustainably violent. The bullies would win, and the weak would always lose. But at best, our leaders hold evil in check. They can never solve the evil of the world, or restore justice for everyone. Only Jesus can do that. His vision for human society (the kingdom of God) is for all nations to submit to our heavenly ruler: to live in obedience to him, caring for each other as the expression of the way our heavenly sovereign cares for us.

Jesus' means for reaching that goal were radical. Whereas human rulers regularly fight and destroy their enemies and anyone who stands in their way (using war if necessary), the Lion of Judah achieved his goals by becoming the Lamb—laying his life down for his people. He calls us to do that same. It's a non-violent revolution, of submission to Jesus as Lord.

So don't become a false prophet, promising the world through human politics. Promote the agenda of Jesus instead. The hope of the world is the restoration of God's reign, and it's achieved by a) Jesus breaking the control of evil, and b) people recognizing and willingly submitting to God's reign.

In preparation for next week, please read Revelation 14 – 18.