

Book of Revelation

Week 5 — God's government replaces beastly government (Revelation 14–18)



God's government established (Revelation 14–16)

Previously we saw how the dragon (Satan) fights God's people. It's the power behind the earthly powers—the beast that rises to claim authority over the earth (13:1-10). In John's day, that beast was Rome.

God alone is the rightful ruler of the earth. When Rome claimed to rule the earth, its claims were treason against the true ruler. The titles the Caesars claimed were blasphemy against our true sovereign. The throne belongs to God: he rules the world (Rev 4). The Lion/Lamb shares the throne: he restored the earth to God's authority (Rev 5).

All competing claims to the throne are **blasphemy**:

- The beast's titles are blasphemous names (13:1).
- The beast utters haughty, blasphemous statements (13:5).
- The beast's claims to power are blasphemies against the true ruler, blasphemies against his authority and his territory (13:6).

The beast in John's day was Rome, but the same is true of any empire that claims God's power. For example, 722 years before Christ, the Assyrian Empire swept down from the north, conquering country after country. They destroyed the towns of Israel. King Hezekiah closed Jerusalem's gates to make a stand. The Assyrians tried to dishearten Jerusalem's soldiers with their blasphemous propaganda:

2 Kings 18 ¹⁹ The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah: 'This is what the great king, the king of Assyria says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours?'... ³³ "Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? ³⁴ Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? ³⁵ Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"

The Assyrian claim to power was blasphemy. So was Pharaoh's:

Exodus 5 ² Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."

The first beast in Revelation 13 is the state—the rulers who claim power that belongs to God. Now, there is a balance here. God has permitted human government: without it the strong win and the weak are slaughtered. That kind of violence precipitated the Flood (Genesis 4:22-24; 6:5-11), and that's why God authorized communal authority (Genesis 9:5-6). Christians are not anarchists (Romans 13). Our goal can never be the destruction of the state.

But neither can we be proponents of the state as if it is the answer to the evils of the world. That would be to proclaim a false gospel. The second beast in Revelation 13 is the false prophet—people in the church who proclaimed Rome's propaganda so that people would worship Caesar and believe in Rome. Some may have done this to avoid suffering. Such people are dangerous. They're double-agents—traitors to the Lamb.

And yet the Lamb has his true soldiers.

The Lamb and his soldiers (Revelation 14:1-5)

14:1 pictures our ruler (the Lamb) standing in the place that represents God's reign: Mount Zion (Jerusalem).

Standing with him are the true servants of God. We met the 144,000 in Revelation 7:4. They represent the true people of God—the ones God knows and has marked as his own. They don't carry the mark of Rome but the mark of the Lamb and his Father, i.e. they represent the true sovereign (14:1).

The vision of the Lamb leading his people to Zion assumes we know the exodus story. In Moses' time, God delivered his people from oppression by the Egyptian state and its ruler Pharaoh. Moses led them to the Promised Land, but they were too fearful to enter. It was another 40 years before they entered Canaan, and even longer before David subdued their enemies and made Jerusalem the capital.

But now, in John's vision, God's new people (represented symbolically as 12,000 from 12 tribes) have reached Mount Zion (the place of God's reign) under the leadership of the Lamb (Jesus).

Remember how the Lion of Judah became king—as a slaughtered Lamb? What kind of army is led by a *Lamb*? What kind of weapons do they use? What characterizes soldiers of the Lamb?

- a) The Lamb has a powerful voice, like a waterfall or thunder (14:2). His forces sing—a powerful new victory song that ordinary soldiers cannot imitate. It's the song of honour to the true ruler who holds the throne (14:3).
- b) In the wars of the Old Testament, Israel had to remain ritually pure. That included sexual abstinence while on duty (Deuteronomy 23:9–10; 1 Samuel 21:5). Figuratively speaking, the Lamb's servants are also pure. They are radically different to earthly soldiers whose very existence depends on doing evil (violence), and who often rape those they conquer (14:4).
- c) Ordinary soldiers may follow their leader, even to their death. The Lamb's soldiers follow him wherever he goes—even into

death. But like the Lamb, we're not seeking to kill our enemies, but to redeem them under our true ruler (14:4).

- d) Truth is the first casualty in war. Earthly wars are fought on disinformation. But the soldiers of the Lamb speak of his authority. It's truth: no lie, no blasphemy (14:5).

The Lamb's soldiers speak the truth that God has appointed Jesus as earth's king. Jesus' kingship was the truth he came to declare—even when it cost him his life (John 18:33-38). Truth is the foundational garment for the Lamb's soldiers too. We wear the same armour Jesus' did—God's armour (Ephesians 6:14, as in Isaiah 59:15-17).

The good news (Revelation 14:6-13)

The people who dwell on earth (14:6) have been oppressed by the beasts who claim to rule them (such as Rome). Suddenly they hear an announcement from heaven. It's *good news*: all the peoples of earth have been liberated by the Lamb into God's reign! It's the freshest news ever. In another sense we've always been under God's reign, so it's "the eternal good news" (14:6).

The heavenly messenger therefore requires the earth-dwellers to acknowledge their true sovereign. That's what it means to *fear God*, and to *give him honour* (14:7).

The messenger explains that the sovereign is about to set right what is wrong with his world. That's what *judgement* means: the King makes a ruling about what's been wrong, and sets it right. That's especially troublesome for the traitors, those who have claimed power that belongs to God. They need to change allegiance, to submit to God.

Consequently, a second messenger flies over to announce that *Babylon* has lost her power (14:8). Let's give some background.

In the Old Testament story, Babylon was the biggest threat to God's people. Remember the Tower of Babel when people tried to take over God's authority over the whole earth (Genesis 11)? God blocked them, but how did he plan to restore his authority over the nations? The nations had their own rulers, God established his own nation through Abraham in order to show the other nations what they were missing—the blessing of divine rule. Israel struggled with this calling. They split into two. The Assyrian Empire wiped out the majority of the nation in 722 BC, leaving only a little remnant (Judah). 135 years later, Babylon wiped out what was left. God's nation no longer existed: Israel was part of the Babylonian Empire. It felt like God's project of restoring his reign over the nations had failed and Babylon had taken over. All the nations seemed to be seduced by the pleasures

and riches of Babylon, intoxicated by her power, capitulating to Babylon—to be her mistresses and slaves.

But the Babylon beast did not have ultimate power. Other empires destroyed her, each in their turn promoting their blasphemous claims to rule the world. Israel began to understand that their real enemy was Satan, the dragon behind this Babylon-like succession of beasts: Persia, Greece, and Rome. Rome was the Babylon-beast of John's time. "Babylon" became a symbol for the enemy of God's authority, any power that claims to run the world.

The first angel announced good news of the Lamb's reign; the second angel announces the corollary: Babylon no longer reigns (14:8).

The third angel therefore announces what this means for earth-dwellers. It's a warning message. The true sovereign is about to sort out what's wrong (the oppression caused by the Babylon-like powers). Anyone who is aligned with Babylon will be treated as a traitor against the true ruler. Those who were intoxicated by Babylon's fake promises of power will get some real wine: *the cup of God's anger* against those who attempted the coup against him (14:10).

Wine is an apt image. It's something inherently good, provided by God. Yet people abuse it, to their own destruction. They are addicted to its intoxicating feeling, until it takes over their lives and destroys them. The good that God provides becomes our destruction when misused. The good grapes become the cup of God's wrath against those who abuse what he has provided.

In the same way, God has provided a good world, but the intoxicating craving for power drives people to destroy themselves and each other: wars, assassinations, political back-stabbing and conniving, ... Power is as addictive as wine, and just as destructive. The wine of God's wrath is an apt description for how those who grasp his authority destroy each other.

This isn't a new image. It's the language of the OT prophets against the nations that claimed God's power over his people:

Jeremiah 25 ¹⁵ This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this **cup filled with the wine of my wrath** and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.

In OT times, the nations drank the wine of God's wrath when their claims to power were shown to be meaningless (because they were invaded). Babylon crushed Assyria. Persia crushed Babylon. Greece crushed Persia, and so on. Each time, the invaders would set fire to the city they invaded, so it's claims to power literally went up in smoke:

Isaiah 34 ¹⁰ It will not be quenched night or day; **its smoke will rise forever**. From generation to generation it will lie desolate; no one will ever pass through it again.

In John's vision, Babylon is pictured as sacked and burning. Those who aligned themselves with Rome lose everything (14:11).

In the meantime, it is the Lamb's soldiers who must endure suffering (14:12). At times it can feel as if those who've already died are better off than those who are still suffering persecution (14:13).

The harvest (Revelation 14:14-20)

In Daniel's vision, four beastly empires claimed authority over God's people, ruling abusively, until our ancient ruler (God) gave authority to someone who was like a human (not a beast). God's everlasting kingdom was given to "one like a son of man" (Daniel 7:13-14).

Jesus has been crowned as earth's true ruler, so the earth belongs to him. It's his vineyard, and God should finally receive the harvest he intended from the beginning (14:14-16).

Of course, there's a whole history behind this event. In OT times, Israel was regularly depicted as God's vineyard. The problem was that Israel, like the rest of the nations, grasped at God's power for themselves instead of showing the rest of the nations what a wonderful harvest would come when God ruled. That's why God allowed them to be trampled by Babylon. Instead of bringing God a joyful harvest treading out the grapes, they were trampled as a result of God's anger. The horrific imagery of 14:17-20 recalls Isaiah 5.

Yet in John's vision *the winepress was trodden outside the city*. Is this referring to Jesus taking the suffering of God's people on himself, suffering for us, so his blood cleanses the earth?

Hebrews 13 ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.

Could the blood that flows from outside the city for 300 kilometres (14:20) be referring to Jesus' cleansing blood?

Seven angels with seven plagues (Revelation 15–16)

Exodus 15 is the first song in the Bible. When God lead Israel out of the oppression of human rule, drowning Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea so that Israel could no longer be pursued, they burst into song. This great deliverance from evil rule was the founding moment of their nation, a kingdom under God—the reestablishment of God rule. And the culmination of their song was this:

Exodus 15 ¹⁸ "The LORD reigns for ever and ever."

What God started in Moses has now been achieved in Jesus. God has released not just Israel but the earth from the tyranny of human rule. It's the same song: *the song of Moses is the song of the Lamb* (15:3).

The rest of Exodus is filled with the story of Israel building the tabernacle—the tent for their heavenly sovereign to live among them. From the beginning, that was always the goal: the heavenly sovereign living among his people. Since the world was defiled, the sanctuary had to be cleansed for God to live there; it had to be a Holy Place. When they had completed the tabernacle just as God had specified, the cloud of God's presence filled the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38).

And that's what John sees in his vision. Angels cleanse *the sanctuary of the tent* (15:5), and then *the sanctuary was filled with the smoke from the glory of God* (15:8).

But what about the defiled world? Doesn't that need to be cleansed too? Absolutely: that's why the angels pour out plagues (15:8) to cleanse the world too in John's vision.

What they're doing is pressuring the rebels into submission to the true ruler. The ten plagues served the same function in Moses' day: to pressure Pharaoh into releasing his grip on God's people. But like Pharaoh, hard-hearted humanity refuses to repent (turn from resisting God's authority) and acknowledge God's kingship (16:7, 11).

Since they keep resisting God's authority, it comes to a final showdown. In Moses' day, God's people were stuck at the Red Sea, but God opened a way through the Sea. Since then, Assyria and Babylon—kingdoms bordered by the Euphrates River—had advanced against God's people and destroyed God's nation. It's as if God opened up a way through the Euphrates River for their enemies to advance against Israel because Israel resisted God's authority (16:12).

Babylon interpreted this as the failure of Israel's God, as if Babylon and not YHWH ruled the nations. These blasphemous claims were the dragon's message (16:13-14). Because they seemed to win, they were emboldened to try to take the whole earth from its true king.

So, all the anti-God powers—all the nations of the earth who claim to rule in place of God—combine forces to take over from the one true ruler! In Old Testament prophecies, these attacks always came against Jerusalem, but in John's vision they focus their attack somewhere else: **Armageddon** (16:16). We're told it's a Hebrew name. In Hebrew that would be Har Megiddo—the Mountain of Megiddo.

Megiddo was a juncture of north-south and east-west roads, a strategic location. The mountain of Megiddo is man-made: it's a *tel*. One civilization would capture and destroy it, and then build on top of the ruins. Archaeologists have identified 23 strata in Tel Megiddo:

23 times, people built on the ruins of the previous ones. The mound of Megiddo is a man-made mountain, a monument to the recurring failure of human power claims.



Archaeological excavations: upper layers of Tel Megiddo.

Inset: reconstruction (model) of the Megiddo fortress.

Photos by Allen Browne, 2014.



But there's something even more iconic about the Mound of Megiddo. The last good king was killed there. Megiddo became the focus of Israel's lament, a touchstone of tragedy, where it all fell apart.

Assyria had already destroyed Israel so only Judah remained. Babylon was the growing threat, taking over the region. Egypt marched its army northwards, to help Assyria hold out against Babylon. Josiah was king of Judah—one of the best kings they ever had. He tried to stop Pharaoh Neco marching Egypt's army up through Israel. They met in battle at Megiddo. King Josiah was killed.

In 1 & 2 Kings, the reign of each king concludes with a summary that evaluates them as good or evil. It explains how the king got what he deserved, just as Deuteronomy 28 had said. But with Josiah, this sense of divine justice falls apart. He didn't deserve to die like this:

2 Kings 23²⁵ Neither before nor after **Josiah** was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.

It's effectively the end of Israel. Egypt appointed a replacement king, and Babylon appointed the last three before the final invasion.

They've never had another king since. The death of Josiah at Megiddo therefore became a rallying point for the death of Judah:

2 Chronicles 35 ²⁴ All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for him. ²⁵ Jeremiah composed **laments** for Josiah, and to this day all the male and female singers commemorate Josiah in the **laments**.

Zechariah picked up that lament. Somehow, they had pierced God their true ruler, not only Josiah their king. Here's God speaking:

Zech 12 ¹⁰ I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. **They will look on me, the one they have pierced**, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. ¹¹ On that day the weeping in Jerusalem will be as great as the weeping of Hadad Rimmon in the plain of **Megiddo**.

Long they waited for a son of David to restore the kingdom. 600 years later, Jesus began to announce that the time had come for the restoration of the kingdom. But once again, the good king was pierced in battle. But, like Josiah, Jesus was pierced and died in the battle against evil. God's enemies had won again—the collusion of the leaders of Jerusalem and the beast of Rome.

But no! On the third day, ...! The nations had not won. They had done their worst, but Jesus was raised to life and given all authority in heaven and on earth. The massive collusion of the powers against God's appointed ruler had failed! The good king was raised out of death, and he can never be killed again. The defeat at Har Megiddo is overcome by the resurrection of the king. That changes everything:

Revelation 1 ¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Zechariah described the death of the Davidic king as God being pierced! That's a pretty amazing understanding of the Gospel—the good news of how God himself was rejected as our ruler, yet restored.

So when the final angel pours out his cleansing bowl, all the power structures of the earth are shaken, and the powers fall apart. The whole world is God's domain again, right down to the tiniest island. But the people who supported those evil structures still hate their new ruler (16:17-21).

Beastly government collapses (Revelation 17–18)

The mega-prostitute (Revelation 17)

Rome is pictured as the greatest prostitute of John's time. A prostitute takes something precious that God has given (sexuality) and turns it into a commodity. She (or he) sells herself to others for financial gain. There's always a market: people who trade their humanity for pleasure or power or money.

17 ¹ One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. ² With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

Rome had marketed herself so well that all the kings of the Mediterranean region were now in bed with her. She promised them support and peace and security—all the power and pleasure they could desire. But for her services, she charged dearly—in the form of taxes. The city of Rome had nowhere near enough food to feed the one million people who lived there. She lived off the taxes she levied on the regions that were seduced by her power.

Of course, not all the regions had submitted to Rome willingly. The Roman army was as ruthless as you could find in the ancient world. Rome was no ordinary prostitute: she was a dominatrix, doing abominable things to force her partners into submission. She seemed to get aroused putting people down through war: drinking their blood seemed to intoxicate her even more. This is the Game of Thrones of the ancient world: twisted domination, driven by a lust for power (17:4-5).

Those the Roman beast could not seduce, she had to kill. That included the followers of Jesus, who spoke of Jesus as Lord rather than Caesar, who called Jesus their Saviour instead of relying on Caesar for safety, who called on the true God as our sovereign and refused to pray to Caesar as a god. If Rome allowed these Christians to get away with this, it would undermine her power. She had to force them to bend, under threat of death. That was no problem for Rome of course. The very thought of power intoxicated her:

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

But in the end, the blood-thirsty empire with her power of seduction will not win against the one to whom authority has been given to rule:

17¹⁴ 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.

Eventually the people subjugated by the beastly empire grow tired of being her slaves and she loses her power. That's what happened to Israel's worst enemies in OT times (Assyria and Babylon). It would also happen to Rome (17:15-18).

When Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem in OT times, the prophets had proclaimed the fall of Babylon (e.g. Jeremiah 51). In John's vision, he sees the fall of Rome in just the same way. The very phrases used by the OT prophets to announce the fall of Babylon reappear in John's vision about the fall of Rome.

The mega collapse (Revelation 18)

"Babylon" is still the codename for Rome. Ultimately, evil empires collapse under their own weight. They aren't God, and they're not capable of acting as God (ruling the world) in a sustained way. The announcement that people have been released from her power is good news (18:1-3).

Consequently, it's really important that the people of the true heavenly sovereign are not in bed with the empire (18:4-8).

For those who are in bed with her, the fall of the earthly empire is their worst nightmare. The Mediterranean was full of merchants carrying cargoes to feed the insatiable appetite of the prostitute. What they trade is God-given, and yet the traders are just as hungry for money and the power it brings as the prostitute herself. She traded herself; and the merchants likewise trade human lives too (18:11-13).

You see exactly the same attitudes in the stock markets today. Traders buy and sell stocks as the prices rise and fall, to make a killing. Then, in a single moment, the stock market crashes as it did in 2007, and the merchants are wiped out. It's so familiar:

18¹⁹ They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: "Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! **In one hour she has been brought to ruin!**"

Of course, computers make these crashes even more volatile. For example, on 7 October 2016, the British pound lost 10% of its value within seconds, and no one knew why:¹

¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-07/pound-slump/7912382> accessed 7 October 2016.

Flash crash: Pound plunges 10% in seconds

Source: Thomson Reuters



Ultimately, the government of the world that resists the government of God will fail. It will be a huge collapse: the bigger they are, the harder they fall. The injustice against those who spoke for God (prophets) will end (18:12-24).

Conclusion

From the very beginning, God has been earth's true ruler. He commissioned us to rule over the animals, not over each other. As soon as humanity grasped at God's power, we began to use it to kill one another (Genesis 4), resulting in unsustainable violence (Genesis 6). God authorized human government (Genesis 9) so nations could exist (Genesis 10), but he refused to allow the empires to take over the whole world (Genesis 11). Through Abraham, he created a nation under his own rule so the other nations would see what they were missing—the blessing of divine rule (Genesis 12).

But the nations continued to yield to God. Drunk with power, they destroyed the nation of Israel and kept dominating God's people. They did the same to the Messiah—killing him to keep their power.

But in the end, beastly human rule will fail, and God's government will be reinstated. We are not anarchists, seeking the destruction of human rule: that only creates a power vacuum that will be filled by evil again. The only solution is the government of Jesus replacing the beastly government of the world.

Consequently, we follow the Lamb. Like him, we put our lives on the line when necessary. Don't be seduced by the prostitute's propaganda, her promises of wealth and pleasure and power. Keep your heart pure as a servant of the one true ruler who is the hope of the world.

Memory verse

Revelation 18:4 (NIV)

Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues

Take home exercise

Can you imagine a world where Christianity was a minority religion, and people were suspicious of because they didn't understand it?

The numbers of Christians were still very small. Estimates from sociologist Rodney Stark:²

Year	Christians	Comment
AD 40	1,000	Ten years after Jesus' death and resurrection.
AD 100	7,500	Shortly after Revelation was written.
AD 150	40,000	
AD 300	1,200,000	
AD 350	34,000,000	Christianity became the state religion in AD 312.

Less than 20 years after the Book of Revelation was written, the Roman governor from Bithynia (Turkey) wrote to ask Emperor Trajan how he should handle Christians:

For the matter seemed to me to warrant consulting you, especially because of the number involved. For many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are and will be endangered. For the contagion of this superstition has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms.³

In the early 200s, Minucius Felix wrote a defence of Christianity. It consists of a conversation between Octavius (a Christian) and Caecilius who finds Christianity quite foreign. See if you can understand how Caecilius thinks about Christians:

Behold, a portion of you—and, as you declare, the larger and better portion—are in want, are cold, are labouring in hard work and hunger; and God suffers it, He feigns; He either is not willing or not able to assist His people; and thus He is either weak or inequitable. ...

Do not the Romans, without any help from your God, govern, reign, have the enjoyment of the whole world, and have dominion over you? But you in the meantime, in suspense and anxiety, are abstaining from respectable enjoyments. You do not visit exhibitions; you have no concern in public displays; you reject the public banquets, and abhor the sacred contests; the meats previously tasted by, and the

² Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.

³ Darrell L. Bock et al., *NT176 The Gospel Message in the Early Church*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

drinks made a libation of upon, the altars. Thus you stand in dread of the gods whom you deny. ...

Thus, wretched as you are, you neither rise again, nor do you live in the meanwhile. Therefore, if you have any wisdom or modesty, cease from prying into the regions of the sky, and the destinies and secrets of the world: it is sufficient to look before your feet, especially for untaught, uncultivated, boorish, rustic people: they who have no capacity for understanding civil matters, are much more denied the ability to discuss divine.⁴

Now take some time to consider the kinds of objections that people in our culture might have towards Christianity. Does it help us become more understanding of others when we consider how our faith looks to them?

In preparation for next week, please read the final four chapters (Revelation 19 – 22).

⁴ Minucius Felix, "The Octavius of Minucius Felix," (Minuc., Oct. 12) in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts et al, translated by Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 4, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 179.