

A Peek Between the Covers of Revelation

The Controversy over Worship

Study Notes

Recap:

- The book is about Jesus. That means it's about grace.
- There's a war on. Sin began with the angel closest to God. Satan believes that he should be worshiped. He slanders God in order to win our worship.
- The only way to sterilize the universe from sin is to allow Satan an opportunity to prove his case. At the end of that demonstration, every being will be convicted of the righteousness of God. Then the wicked can be destroyed, and the righteous will love God with no possibility that they will ever rebel.
- God must deal with sin in an orderly way to defeat Satan's charges of corruption. This orderly framework is called the covenant. It is was delivered in written form at Sinai, and is described in the messages to the churches.
- Revelation 4-5 describes the coronation of Jesus, the Worthy King who wants us with Him. In it, He receives the scroll of the covenant, which He alone is worthy to enforce.
- The Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls are a symbolic survey of how the Call of Grace, Warning of Judgment, and Judgment work in this sinful era.

The interludes in the Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls all gave recaps of the series in which they are found. Together they present a larger series, and it has an interlude: The Controversy Over Worship in Revelation 12, 13, and 14. And nothing can be more important. Satan's original rebellion was over worship – he wanted it in place of God. This issue is replayed on earth as Satan tries for our loyalty.

Revelation 12

This interlude begins with a great “sign.” This word – *sema* – refers to a symbol, and echoes the opening verse of the apocalypse, where John reveals that the prophecy is “conveyed by means of symbols.” This symbol is the “woman.” She is a pure woman, in contrast to the whore we will see later. This woman is “clothed” with symbols from Israel's past, including the stars from Joseph's dream. She is the mother of a child who is clearly Jesus.

At this point, we discover that the symbol of the woman is larger than Mary, Jesus' earthly mother. This is because later on she represents the true church, which was driven into “the wilderness” during the persecutions of the Dark Ages. Thus, the woman represents true Israel of all ages.

The woman's opponent is the dragon. This great red dragon is Satan, and is pictured with seven heads and ten horns. This same beast appears in chapters 13 and 17. Putting all the pictures together, it is clear that this beast is an amalgam of the four beasts of Daniel 7. Since those beasts represent human government from the time of Daniel until God sets up His eternal kingdom, the dragon represents Satan as the power behind secular human government.

When the dragon tries to destroy the male child, that is an echo of Herod trying to kill the baby Jesus. But it is also an echo of Satan's attempt to destroy Jesus by tempting Him in the wilderness. We see through this that the symbols convey a meaning that is larger than a single point.

It is of particular importance to see that Satan is called the “devil.” The Greek word here is *diabolos*, and it literally means “slanderer.” As we discussed in the first week, Satan’s rebellion was based on slandering God. Satan began this slander in heaven, and Revelation tells us that a third of the angels fell with him.

Satan is expelled from heaven, and a woe is pronounced on those who live on the earth. We should contrast this with the description of the saints, those who live in heaven. The terrible things that Satan brings are targeted at his people, not the saints. At the same time, the church is driven into the wilderness, where God’s people spread the gospel under extreme duress. And this brings us to our key focus. This portion of the Conflict over Worship looks primarily at the saints, those who have accepted God’s gracious call. They love Him and therefore keep His commandments. And in this, it becomes a recap of the Seals.

Revelation 13

As we discuss this chapter, a key thought must be held. Revelation 13 talks about the “Beast,” his “mark,” and his “number.” Many Christians are afraid of somehow receiving the mark of the Beast. They want to know who the beast will be so they can avoid the mark.

All this is a result of a misplaced focus. The Beast is the opponent of the Lamb, our Savior Jesus Christ. As long as we know Jesus, there is no need whatever to worry about the Beast. Everyone who knows Jesus receives the Seal of God, and they *cannot* receive the mark of the Beast.

The Beast in this chapter is the same one we saw in chapter 12. It has seven heads and ten horns, combined from the four beasts of Daniel 7. It represents sinful human government. The blasphemous names on its horns emphasize that human rule is in opposition to God.

In Revelation 17:9-10 we find that the heads of the beast symbolize specific kingdoms. 13:3 tells us that one of the heads was “wounded to death.” 13:14 says that this wound was “of the sword.” So the deadly wound is a historical event by which a kingdom ends. The beast is said to recover from this wound, not the head. So in a manner of speaking, the beast itself suffered the deadly wound and recovered, but the head doesn’t. Putting this all together, we have a picture of a world-dominating government being conquered, but no immediate successor appears. Shortly a central power emerges, and the entire world treats this successor as sovereign.

Fitting this together isn’t hard. Beginning with Babylon, each government that fell was replaced by a conqueror. The last one was Rome. And Rome fell for good in 476AD. But it wasn’t replaced by anyone. Instead, there was fragmentation and chaos. What had been an empire became a large number of small warring states. This is the deadly wound.

A few years later, in 508AD, Clovis, King of the Franks, ceded land to the Pope. Within another thirty years, the Roman Catholic Church became the glue that held the “Holy Roman Empire” together. (It didn’t get that name for a few centuries...) Every crowned head of state in Europe looked to Rome for legitimacy. This is “wondering after the beast.”

The authority of the beast, with the Dragon as the power behind the throne, is limited specifically by God. And this brings us to a key point in language. The authority “was given” to the beast. This is the “divine passive,” and allows John to avoid writing the name of God. No observant Jew would ever speak that name, since it was too holy. So “was given” becomes a code-word substitute for “God gave to him.” We will see this several times in the book, so it is good to understand its meaning.

The authority that the beast has is “to act.” This means that the beast power has control over the world for the extended period of “forty-two months,” which roughly represents the Dark Ages. He can “overcome” the saints, and every people group will look to Rome for authority. At this point, another key phrase comes up.

“All who dwell on the earth” will worship the beast. This phrase identifies the wicked in contrast to “those who dwell in heaven” (12:12). All through the book there are contrasts. The righteous city and the wicked, earth-dwellers and heaven-dwellers, the chaste woman and the harlot. Each one is designed to catch our eye so we can see the difference.

Perhaps the greatest combination of these contrasts is the picture of the “second beast.” This creature combines the appearance of a lamb – Jesus true appearance – with a voice of blasphemy (Dan 7:20) – Satan’s true voice, to paint a picture of a wicked ruler. But he deceives the earth-dwellers – the wicked – not the saints.

Finally, the “mark” is in the hand and forehead of the wicked. This is again a parody of a command from Torah. The Israelites were commanded to bind God’s words on their foreheads and hands. This was a symbolic statement to keep God’s commandments in what they thought and did. Some Jews took it literally, and wear tefillin and phylacteries, but this is not what God intended. Today, most prophecy interpreters make the same mistake, and take the mark as a literal mark. But they miss the point with their literalism. The mark is a description of what people believe and do, just like it was in ancient times.

In summary, this chapter describes the war of the wicked against the church, and the woes that come from rebellion against God. These woes are foreshadowings of greater woes that will come at the final judgment. Thus, this chapter is a recap of the Trumpets.

Revelation 14:

We begin in verse 14, after the three angels. Jesus, the Son of Man, is seated on a cloud, with a sharp sickle in His hand. A messenger from the Temple, the throne of the Father, tells Him to reap, and the harvest of the earth is reaped. This is the redemption of the saints. Then the second command comes to harvest the clusters of the vine of the earth. This harvest leads to a gathering of the wicked who are thrown into the great winepress of the wrath of God and destroyed. A simpler, more direct recap of the judgment presented in the Bowls would be hard to imagine.

Three Angels:

The first angel has the eternal gospel. This good news is one of judgment. The only way that judgment can be good news is if it is judgment *in favor* of the saints. This is the atonement! Through that judgment they are declared clean forever and can enter the presence of God. It is also good news because in it the oppressors of the saints are removed. The call to “fear God and give Him glory” is the call of grace. The first angel thus recaps the Seals.

The second angel warns that Babylon, the home of rebellion, is fallen. This is a warning to leave the doomed city. Run away from its error! This is a recap of the Trumpets.

Finally, the third angel declares that any who follow the beast – Satan – will receive the wrath of God. This wrath – before the millennium – will be a torment that is like a great fire. Its torment is that of the Bowl plagues, giving the wicked no rest. The “smoke of their torment” a figurative expression describing the result of the fire that burned the adulterous daughter of a priest (cf. Lev 21:9), “rises forever and ever.” This visual directs us to the column of smoke, so that we see it rising out of sight. It’s doesn’t describe how long the fire burns. This is an image in space, not time. The Third Angel recaps the Bowls.