**Revelation 17-19 The triumph of the Lamb will come**

**Introduction**

In 410AD prominent early church leader Augustine Bishop of Hippo wrote a book called *The City of God*. The earthly city of Rome had just fallen to the combined forces of the Barbarian tribes from outside the Roman Empire that eventually became too strong to hold back and, eventually in 410AD the unthinkable happened, and the city of Rome was sacked to the shock and horror not only of its citizens but to many other people in the Mediterranean world. What had been responsible for the apparently invincible city at the heart of the greatest empire of the past half millennium falling to its enemies? Pagans who still comprised a significant minority of citizens of the Empire were insistent that it was a punishment for the rejection of the old pagan gods, whom they claimed had been responsible for the rise and continuance of the Roman Empire over its several centuries. What response would or could the Christian Church give to these claims? There may have been other responses made, but one author in particular, in his classic text, *The City of God,* was adjudged to have given the best Christian response to these questions or accusations. Augustine stated that the adoption of Christianity had saved the city and its people from complete destruction. The loss of the empire and the fall of the city was due to moral decline in the nation. Augustine, at the heart of his thesis speaks about the two groups of people in history, those following God’s way and those who choose to go their own way. ‘The City of God’ and ‘The City of Man’ or of ‘the World’ represented belief and unbelief in the living God. For Augustine, history of the present era is book ended by the two comings of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem in the most humble surroundings to live amongst us as a model human being and to die in our place on the cross, and then to return at the end of the age in power and majesty as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Life in this world has its disappointments and disasters and ultimately death, but equally it has encouragements and successes and supremely leads to eternal life for those represented by the City of God. The powers of evil can at times appear to be overwhelming at times, but these empires rise and fall as did the iron curtain of communism in 1989 and earlier in 1945 its twin evil of fascism. It is important to note that other idols, other ‘isms’ are available and are also not comparable or as durable compared with the kingdom of God. To people in the Western world the idols of materialism and capitalism are also unable to bear the weight of the aspirations of humanity, because God has placed eternity in our hearts. As Ecclesiastes 3:11a states:*He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart.* At the heart of the message of Revelation is an invitation to step back and see the bigger picture of what life is all about. What is it that is really important in life? What is it in my life or in life in general that is merely temporary and will pass away? On the biggest stage of all is what is it that will last for eternity? The answer John in Revelation invites us to acknowledge is that being a part of God’s eternal kingdom where Jesus will reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is where we ought to centre our focus, our goals and our priorities.

1. **The Roman Empire like others before it is not invincible!** (Revelation17)

The context in which John received these visions, as a prisoner of the Roman Empire on the small island of Patmos off the coast of Western Turkey, is vitally important. Rome appeared immovable and totally invincible. The Church of Jesus Christ at that time was tiny in numbers with small congregations scattered around the villages, towns and cities of the Empire. The vast majority of the Christians were either enslaved people or desperately poor and marginalised theoretically free citizens who struggled to make ends meet day by day, like the majority of their fellow citizens. There were a few Christians who were better off and who owned their own homes in which the congregations met Sunday by Sunday for worship services, with even a literal handful of converts amongst the upper classes, but they had no power to effect any changes in the governance of the Empire. The literary form, in which Revelation was written, although familiar and easily understood by first century people of Jewish background, was much harder to understand by those brought up in cultural and religious contexts like our own. We are used to the close reading of texts where the details of what is written may be important to understand the meaning of the whole document. However, with this book of Revelation we need to stand back and see the bigger picture and broad-brush strokes that John is using to communicate his message about the purposes of God in history in relation to the first coming of Jesus in humility to be our Saviour and Servant-King (See Philippians 2:1-11) to His return in glory and power as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Absolutely nothing will get in the way of that being accomplished.

 Yet, if this book and its Revelations appeared in the 90s AD, as is commonly understood when the power of Emperor Domitian was at its height; or alternatively in the 60s AD when Emperor Nero was causing devastation with the mass killings of Christians, including Paul and Peter and any other Christian leaders he could eliminate, it seemed fanciful and absurd to most people of that day that the followers of the crucified Jew who self-identified with God could have any realistic hopes for the future. In the early twentieth century, well-known Cambridge classics scholar T.R. Glover, imagined the apostle Paul commending his epistle to the Church in Rome in the days of Emperor Nero and declaring: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile* (Romans1:16). The politicians and intellectuals of Rome would have laughed at such a notion, but says Glover, history records that today parents are more likely to name a son ‘Paul’ and a dog ‘Nero’. The followers of the crucified Jew were mocked and humiliated then, but now in 2024 with Christian Churches spread across the globe and more and more of biblical prophecy and history confirming the story they proclaimed of the return of the coming King, the message John presents here rightly calls us to respond to what he is presenting to us today.

(a)**The context of the prophecy** (Revelation 17:9)*‘This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits.* In World War Two at Bletchley Park, a secret location in the south of England, a few hundred man and woman spent all their time seeking and succeeding in breaking the code used by Hitler’s Germany. It would allow Allied Forces a crucial advantage in the later years of the war to anticipate how the more powerful German forces would act in the different phases of that war. They did not fire a single gun, but they grasped something of the bigger picture of what was happening in the war. Allied political and military leaders were able to utilise effectively the intelligence reports passed on to them.

The book of Revelation was in effect written in a kind of code that was not broken or understood by the Roman censors. The message of this book was that the Roman Empire would not last forever, and that the power of the Emperors would be broken. It would have been viewed as treason in Rome. Revelation 17:9 is the clue that points to the political power that in these visions represents the forces of the evil and the evil one arrayed against the Church of Jesus Christ in that day. Rome was the physical large city built on the seven hills. Two thousand six hundred years earlier, it had been a literal Babylonian Empire that wiped out the small kingdom of Judea and swept many of its citizens into slavery in the country we today call Iraq. Yet that literal Babylonian Empire fell, as will all subsequent human empires. In our day people will think of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council as immovable, but history teaches us that like Rome of old, one day they too will fade into lesser significance. In this vision of John, the woman symbolising the political power of the day, allied with ‘the beast’ the symbol or representation of evil forces opposed to the people of God, will do their worst, that at times will include the persecution and mass killings of followers of Jesus (Revelation 17:6). Many people who are not professing believers will buy in to the wonderful claims such political and spiritual leaders make and give their wholehearted support to whatever these leaders want to do (17:8). It is not difficult to visualise this reality, given how, for example some American people, even some professing Christians, are enthusiastic supporters of Donald Trump or the speeches of loyalty to Vladimir Putin by the Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill in Moscow. Everyone places their hopes or aspirations in someone, even if it is only in themselves, but if our hopes and faith is placed in anyone but the Lord Jesus Christ, we are destined to be disappointed. Babylon here represents all the political and spiritual forces over human history that has claimed our allegiance, instead of pointing us to put our ultimate trust in God. Who are you putting your faith and trust in today?

(b) **The history behind the prophecy** (Revelation17:7-18) In Matthew chapter four, there is the account of the temptations of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness. One of these temptations is recorded in Matthew 4:8-9: *Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.****9****‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.* The catch of course was that these kingdoms did not belong to Satan in the first place. We live in God’s world that He created for us to steward and appreciate and enjoy. It is likely that the imagery here reflects that of the vision of Daniel chapter seven in the Old Testament where the great empires of the ancient world are portrayed as different ‘beasts’ that rise up and fall. What will follow after these empires have fallen? Daniel 7:13-14 states: ***13****‘In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence.****14****He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.* In this vision of the eternal kingdom of the heavenly figure, the Son of Man, there is pictured something else in Daniel7:26b-7: *his* [the beast representing earthly powers opposed to God’s kingdom] *power will be taken away and completely destroyed for ever.****27****Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. His* [Jesus’] *kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey Him.”* Here in John’s vision in Revelation17 these other powers and earthly kingdoms will make their claims and call for people to follow their leadership, under the malign influence of the evil one. *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* (Revelation17:14). The final defeat of those who oppose the Lamb and the building of His eternal kingdom is assured. It is only a matter of time before it happens. As a member of this congregation mentioned to me recently, it is like sitting down to watch the video of a football cup final while knowing the final result. You may not know any of the twists and turns of the game, but when you know that you are supporting the winning team, the significance of the events that unfold are viewed differently compared to watching the same game without knowing the end result. In the book of Revelation we get enough glimpses to know of the triumph of the Lamb and His eternal kingdom.

2. **They think it is all over – it is- for Babylon (Rome)** (Revelation 18)

Revelation chapter eighteen is a kind of lament for the demise of the things of this world and the kingdoms in which people had placed their hopes and aspirations apart from in the Lord Jesus Christ. Investing all our energies in things that will not last seems so foolish. Revelation 18:4 states: *Then I heard another voice from heaven say: ‘“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;* ***5****for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.* The people of God are urged to prioritise putting the Lord first in each area of our lives. In practice, what we may be doing in our workplace, or in the other activities we engage in day by day, may be very similar to other people around us, but the crucial difference is our perspective on the significance of our lives. We are called as believers to do our work well, supremely to honour the Lord and give Him glory through the utilisation of the gifts given to us. We may please our manager or boss with work well done or earn the favour of a satisfied customer, but our ultimate motivation in each area of our lives is to earn God’s commendation as a good and faithful servant for Him. When we view our work or our socialising, even our relationships with others in our family, and not just in our local church in this way, it gives a different perspective on life. In whom or what is your identity today? People around us are placing their identity in the job they hold or in their sexuality or in their relationships, their hobby or something else? The follower of Jesus is called to be ‘in Christ’ and view the whole of our lives through that lens. As Paul put it in Philippians1:21: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* How would you finish the statement: ‘For to me, to live is…? It is of central importance in shaping your priorities in life. Examples are given in Revelation18 of legitimate lawful careers, for example, those working in the travel industry that was overwhelmingly by rivers and seas at that time. Revelation18:17b: *Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea…* The contract for food supplies for the vast population of Rome of that day was with a shipping company that brought numerous ships from Alexandria in Egypt to ensure people got fed. The biggest focus was on the merchants.Revelation18:11-14a: *The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore –****12****cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble;****13****cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves.* ***14****‘They will say, “The fruit you longed for is gone from you….*But it also referenced the world of entertainment, for example in Revelation18:22: *The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again.* One day we will leave all the things of this world behind us, apart from what was invested in God’s kingdom. In Matthew chapter six, Jesus invited His followers to view their lives in a different way: ***19****‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.****20****But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.****21****For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also….* ***1****So do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?”****32****For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.****33****But* ***seek first His kingdom and His righteousness****, and all these things will be given to you as well*(Matthew 6:19-21, 31-33). What are you and I seeking first in our lives today? What we do on a daily basis may not change, but grasping what God is communicating to us through John’s visions might give us a more profound insight into the weighting of what is most important in our lives

3. **The heavenly celebration** (Revelation19)

A week last Saturday, I was travelling by car to Edinburgh to take part in a Christian conference. For approximately a fifteen mile stretch of that trip after Perth, as a result of the snow falling and lying on the ground, the travelling conditions became quite difficult for some hours and I was so glad I made it safely to my destination. Going through the book of Revelation and arriving at chapter nineteen is a little like that journey! Suddenly we get a bigger glimpse of the glorious future that awaits the people of God. For you, it might be some other experience in life that you are longing to get through, something much more difficult to handle than a short drive in winter weather. It can be dealing with health troubles, broken or strained relationships or it can be work pressures or big disappointments of various kinds, but one day they will be over. Revelation chapter nineteen points us to that glorious future God has in store for us. What is being communicated in this chapter?

(a) **The marriage of the Lamb** (Revelation 19:1-10) How do you describe the indescribable future that is more wonderful and glorious than anything we have so far experienced in our lives? We do it utilising the language and experiences we already enjoy. In the lives of ordinary people of the ancient world, weddings were community celebration events, probably the only highlight of extremely tough lives each year. It is natural to use this imagery magnified on a greater scale. In II Corinthians 2, Paul references the big celebration event in Rome when a conquering military hero returns from a war with enemy captives following behind him. He is awarded a triumphal procession in his honour through the city streets, to describe God honouring us as we honour Him. Again, it is the biggest most glorious picture of celebration envisaged by the recipients of his letter. ***14****But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere* (II Corinthians 2:14). Evil empires are fading from the picture into the background as the glorious eternal kingdom of King Jesus comes into view. ***6****Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns.* ***7****Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.* (Revelation19:6-7) Are you ready for the second coming of Jesus? Are you trusting Him as your Lord and Saviour? The people celebrating here are ready, because their future is taken care of. You can take that step today. *Then the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ And he added, ‘These are the true words of God’* (Revelation 19:9). A wedding invitation offered but not acted on might be sad on earth, but in eternity it is infinitely more serious. The invitation for salvation to become a follower of Jesus is available to you today? If you have not done so already, will you take that step today?

(b) **The majesty of the Lamb** (Revelation19:11-21) ***11****I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice He judges and wages war.****12****His eyes are like blazing fire, and on His head are many crowns. He has a name written on Him that no one knows but He Himself.****13****He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and His name is the Word of God.****14****The armies of heaven were following Him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.****15****Coming out of His mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron sceptre.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.****16****On His robe and on His thigh He has this name written: king of kings and lord of lords.* In the vision in Revelation 4:1, John recorded: *After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven.*It is aglimpse of glory for the future, but not yet. Now it is not a glimpse into the future, but the present reality of Jesus’ return. *I saw heaven standing open…* On that day the choices we made previously concerning Jesus will be confirmed when Jesus returns. Are you ready if He returned today?

 The focus here in the second half of chapter nineteen and in the following chapter twenty is on His victory over the devil and those who do his bidding. Here in chapter nineteen there is a clear image of triumph over the enemy. The white horse is a symbol of righteous victory. The imagery of crimson-stained robes almost certainly is reflecting Isaiah 63:1-6, where the imagery is of God the Father’s righteous victory over the enemies of God’s people in Edom. His angelic hosts are likewise pictured as acting in just judgement on the enemies of God’s righteous rule. The last part of chapter nineteen covers the final fall and judgement of those on earth who follow the evil one and oppose God’s plans for His people and the rest of creation. The visual imagery is very dramatic, but we remember that the style of literature used in Revelation is closer to the imagery of films in the cinema than a serious documentary approach in communicating the underlying message of the book. What is being communicated here loud and clear is that no matter how bad things get on earth, with the impression at times that evil is rampant, but we must rest assured that God is still on the throne and that the final defeat of the enemies of the Lamb is certain. Like the people of Augustine’s day, in early fifth century Rome, we too can struggle to process or make sense of events going on in the world today. However, with Augustine we affirm that the ’City of God’ will stand. We rejoice in the ending of suffering and persecution that fellow believers in other lands have endured, often over lengthy periods of time. We join with the heart cry of Charles Wesley, who in his hymn ‘Love divine all loves excelling’ wrote:

*Finish then Thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see Thy great salvation
perfectly restored in Thee:
changed from glory into glory
till in heaven we take our place,
till we lay our crowns before Thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise* Amen

**Questions for Reflection**:

1. What are you and I seeking first in our lives today? Jesus said: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness…*

2. Are you ready for the second coming of Jesus? Are you trusting Him as your Lord and Saviour?

**Song for Reflection**: ‘Love divine all loves excelling’

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGGcqhKShQ8>