

Time Before and Time After Revelation 7

John the Revelator

To understand Revelation we must understand the heart of John
John was the last of the disciples.

From what we know of historical documents

All the other apostles had been martyred.

The church was being persecuted heavily and some even faced death.

It is possible that he took Jesus' mother, Mary to Ephesus.

The founder of the Ephesian church, Paul had been beheaded by Nero.

Paul's trusted protégé, Timothy, had also been killed.

John steps up the pastor the church

only to be hauled away to a concentration camp on a penal island.

The situation for Christianity on the one hand was dire.

They were hated, hunted, discriminated against, misunderstood, accused.

In face of this they were taught to love their enemies, to pray for them.

How can love be greater than hate?

How can forgiveness overpower misunderstanding and fear?

Here were two kingdoms finally meeting.

The kingdom of Jesus and the kingdom of the world.

It is in this struggle that John finds himself a prisoner.

I dare say that the conflict of these two kingdoms is still being waged.

The kingdom of the world around us and represented by the selfishness within

Is being over-run by the kingdom of God.

Those of us who are with Christ sometimes grow weary and tired.

We are tempted to give in, give up and lay down.

We struggle to believe that love will defeat hatred,

that forgiveness is greater than fear.

We lose hope.

John remembers very well how Jesus treated him with love.

John saw Jesus in ministry, in death, resurrected and ascended.

In the misery and loneliness he must have felt he receives a visitor.

It is that familiar friend and yet he is different.

John sees Jesus in a way he has never seen him before on earth – glorified.

Imagination

It is Jesus who tells John to write a letter to the believers

and we only have time to visit chapter 7 and what Jesus reveals.

May it suffice for us to look at the two pivotal images of hope presented here.

And here I must say something about vision and imagination.

I must tell you something important.

All great theology demands not only intellectual acuity,
but requires a sanctified imagination.

It is one thing to know about God and play at Christianity.

It is another thing entirely

to hear the voice of Jesus, to see him, to be loved by him.

When we think of imagination we think of fiction and falsehood.

But good theology requires an active and engaged imagination.

It is through the faculty of God-given imagination,

The ability to see what is not physically present,
That we draw close to him.

Does not Hebrews 11 say that Faith is being certain of what we do not see?

Faith is the place where revelation takes place.

And Faith is tied to the Spirit led imagination and intellect.

One other thing I must comment on regarding visions is this.

They are not always linear.

It is the nature of our hearts and minds to fly, not plod or crawl.

Often, John's images are neither linear nor chronological.

They work together more as a collage of images and scenes at times

Showing a form of unity and progression,
requiring one to see the whole and not just the parts.

Many mistakes are made when one image is isolated from all others.

Revelation also draws from all other parts of Scripture,

Taking all the images of the past and weaving them together anew.

The symbolism of Revelation can only be understood
through all that goes before it.

So with these caveats,

We begin.

The Seal of God

Much of what happens here is in the throneroom of God. (Chapter 4)

There are seven seals on the scroll that only the Lamb, Jesus can open. (Ch. 5)

The first four seals bring the riders of the apocalypse, as they are known

The next two reveal the martyrs and the day of wrath. (Chapter 6)

But then there is a break – It tells of a time that was before all the trouble.

It speaks of a holding back of the four winds of destruction?

An angel from the east, the rising of the sun, of hope, of Christ.

This angel calls a halt to the four angels, the four riders of the apocalypse?

He must mark the servants of God.

The 144,000.

We spoke of this before but 12 tribes, 12 apostles

10x10x10 representing the innumerable perfect number.

It begins with the listed tribes of Israel with whom this begins

but it also spills beyond the listed tribes of Israel.

This alludes to all of God's people past, present and future – the multitude.

They are marked by the seal of God.

Okay, so what does it mean to be sealed by God?

They get a stamp on the forehead?

NO – remember, these are all symbols!

To be marked by God means several things.

It means that you belong to him.

You are secure in him.

Any that harm you as you serve him will answer to him.

Secondly it means you represent him.

Not just by wearing churchy clothes and churchy grins

But by the reflection of his character.

This is what it means to bear the image of God

You do what he does, you have his perspective.

What makes him mad makes you mad.

What he does, you will do.

This allows us to face whatever situations come our way.

We belong to Jesus.

We reflect him in this world.

We live in contrast with those to bear any other mark

– say that of the beast.

We are a missional people.

The Multitude

Then there is a jump in images again.

It leaps forward to a time that is after.

A multitude in white waving palm branches.

And notice this, the multitude are of every tribe and every nation.

The tribes of the 144,000 are not by ethnicity but by faith.

The people of God worship as a multi-ethnic people.

This is why we are not an ethnic church.

This is why we will never be an ethnic church on purpose.

We worship with anyone of any race who will call Jesus Lord.

I refuse to have only friends of one ethnicity.

Never ever refer to our church as a Chinese church.

It is an affront to Christ who is Lord of every nation and every tribe.

The song they sing is significant.

“Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb.”

I have said this before and I will continue to say it.

Your mission and my mission is not to save the world.

It is to live out and tell of our own salvation

from our fear, from our selfishness, from our insecurity, from our hate.

We live for and speak of the one who does the saving.

We proclaim his glory!

An Elder interacts with John and reveals who those clothed in white are.

Note one thing – v.14 “these are ones who have come out of great tribulation.”

The Greek is present continuous, and understood as:

“Those who are coming out of great tribulation.”

Who is coming out of great tribulation?

John is.

The Ephesian church is.

You are.

I am.

“All those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

All those who have been saved.

This is an image of Hope.

And listen to what is said of them: v.15-17.

It is as if we have travelled forward in time to look at ourselves.

But do you see yourself?

That is the question these images bring.

Can your sanctified imagination under the Holy Spirit's guidance take you here?

Do you feel the seal upon your forehead?

Do you hear your own voice sing,

 "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb?"

I am certain of this.

John sees it.

John hears it.

John feels it.

It is what Jesus has told him to reveal to those 7 churches that struggle.

That struggle with losing their way to complacency, comfort, fear, pride.

They are being reminded of their mission and of their destiny.

And so are we.

So are we.