

The Book That Won't Let You Stay Comfortable

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0:00] So y'all, I got saved when I was 12 years old. At least I think it was about 12. I can't quite remember.!

So deeply that I cried, I wept for hours. And then later, when I was about 15 years old, I remember going forward at church when an invitation was given to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

I grew up in one of the Baptist churches, y'all. And when I went forward, I was ushered into this small room with several other people, and I was asked if I indeed did want to receive this spirit in a fuller way, in keeping with the church's understanding.

And nearly as soon as I had said yes, a deacon came forward and laid his hands on me, and immediately my legs gave out. And as I lay on the floor, I felt this sensation of floating.

It was like, I can only describe it maybe as floating on this ocean of love and joy. Again, having had this experience of receiving what I couldn't explore.

[1:35] But I got saved when I was 12. While other churches had other ways of thinking about what that meant and what that language was about salvation at this Baptist church, this church that I grew up in, walking the aisle to the front, asking to be born again, was the most important thing you could do.

It was considered the ultimate moment of surrendering to something out past the edges of logic and somewhere in the country of hope, faith, and love.

Of all the things that I can remember in those years, all the things that came after that decision to walk down that aisle, one of the clearest was having this insatiable hunger for the Bible.

I would spend hours during the summer when I was a teenager sitting at a desk, this little desk in my parents' bedroom, reading scripture and pouring over my mother's commentaries.

Interestingly, the first book that I ever systematically read was the book of Revelation. And while I never got into the Left Behind series, in my study I did encounter every problematic way of reading that you can imagine.

[3:00] I assumed that this book predicted things that I needed to know about the future. Yet in all those hours of study, I don't think that I ever understood that Revelation is a salvation story.

It is a vision of how the world will be made right. It is a confident assertion that injustice will ultimately be answered and that one day heaven will collide with earth in this joyous union.

We spent the last few weeks, several weeks, moving through these key scenes in the book of Revelation, the vision of Christ in chapter one, the letters to the churches in chapters two and three, the centering vision of worship of the lion that really is the lamb in chapters four and five, and then considering the various parts of the judgments in chapters six through 17.

But today, as we start to bring this sermon series to a close, I want to make sure that we understand something that my teenage self never could have grasped.

Again, indeed, that Revelation is a salvation story. See, without a vision of salvation, it is difficult to be and become the kind of dissident disciples that the book of Revelation calls us to be.

[4:43] The kind that is able to do the four main things that Revelation keeps calling us back to. Worship. Testimony.

Faithfully giving witness, resistance, and endurance. More specifically, worshiping the lamb. Faithfully giving testimony with words and actions to the lamb Jesus.

Resisting empire and the evil that is behind empire. And enduring in allegiance to the lamb. No matter what. The book of Revelation is a salvation story, but for many of us, the language of salvation may be hard to swallow.

It may be language that is associated with coercion. At its best, it may represent deep inauthenticity.

And at its worst, pure deception. Ironically, the language of salvation may be the exact languages, the exact languages that warns us, deep in our bodies, deep in our bones, that warns us of bad news rather than good news.

[6:00] Language that is just another way of separating those we deem worthy of paradise from those that we deem worthy of disposal.

Pastor and biblical scholar Eugene Peterson is really, really helpful here. And just a side note that if, you know, as we wrap up the series in the next couple of weeks, you want more revelation, Eugene Peterson's book, *Reverse Thunder*, is gorgeous.

Beautifully written and thought provoking. So I recommend it. I'm going to quote from him a few times today. So about salvation, Peterson reminds us that the root meaning of Hebrew, in Hebrew of salvation, is to be broad.

To be broad. To become spacious. To enlarge. It carries the sense of deliverance from an existence that has become compressed, confined, and cramped.

To be saved biblically is to be liberated into a kind of spaciousness, a kind of wideness. For me, the mental shorthand for personal salvation that I find most helpful is grounded in Jesus' prayer in the Gospel of John, just before he gets arrested.

[7:27] As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they be in us. I think of it as being caught up and committed to the spacious Trinitarian life of God.

A communion of love and self-giving and mutuality. On the cosmic level, I'll often come back to 1 Corinthians 15 and consider salvation through the lens of the hope of human history, which chapter 15 expresses so well.

That hope is put simply like this. That God may be all in all. In the final pages of Revelation, salvation ultimately looks like heaven coming down to unite with earth.

But before we get there, Revelation gives us some final scenes of judgment that I actually think tell us a lot about salvation. That can give us a vision of what receiving and awaiting salvation might look like.

We're going to consider several different scriptures today. But for now, we're going to start out in Revelation 18. It'll be on the screen. I'm also going to read a lot of scripture today.

[8:49] So feel free to pull up Revelation 18 if that feels good to you. After this, I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority.

And the earth was illumined by his splendor. He called out with a mighty voice, fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. It has become a dwelling of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul bird, a haunt of every foul bird and hateful beast.

For all the nations have fallen from the wine of the wrath of her prostitution. And the kings of the earth have engaged in sexual immorality with her. And the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.

Now, if you remember pretty early in this series, I explained that you can't understand the book of Revelation without understanding the evil of Babylon. In chapter 17, Babylon is defined for the first readers of Revelation as the Roman Empire.

And for readers in every age as the centralizing, dominating, acquisitive force of every empire. In chapter 17, Babylon is characterized by idolatry, extravagance, status consciousness, murder, militarism, economic exploitation, and arrogance.

[10:28] Well, in chapter 18, we begin to encounter the final judgment scenes of the book of Revelation. And we begin to see more clearly the ways that this is a salvation story.

We hear that Babylon has fallen. We hear that there will be judgment of empire and salvation from empire.

It is described as occurring in one hour. If you go and look at the text, that's repeated over and over. It happens quickly, this downfall. And it has all the marks of being eternal, not just temporary.

To this defeat, we often overhear. We overhear these variety of reactions in the text. And the first reaction is one which is deeply desirous and basically lethal at this downfall.

Here's what it says further down in chapter 18. Render to her, the voice says, as she herself has rendered and repay her double for her deeds. Mix a double dose for her in the cup she mixed.

[11:46] As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of tormenting. Since in her heart, she says, I rule as a queen.

I am no widow and I will never, never see grief. This voice expresses a desire for the sharper edges of the biblical first will be last and last will be first.

It feels triumphant at the downfall and rejoices that Babylon will finally get what she deserves. When I think about this voice, when I was sitting reading this passage over and over, what came to mind for me was this story that Dr. Christina Cleveland shared.

I once heard her share in a conference. Dr. Cleveland is an expert in the black Madonna statues that exist all over the world. These statues, the Virgin Mary that are black.

And she explains that the black Madonna of Paris, which is known as Our Lady of Good Deliverance. She explains that this Madonna was sought out and has been sought out by countless people.

[13:00] People particularly who are hoping to get pregnant and to have these safe childbirths. But unofficially, she's known as a deliverer, actually, evil.

In particular, there are several variations of a story in which a woman in an abusive relationship comes and prays before the statue. And during the time in which this occurs, a woman would not have been able to get a divorce.

So she comes and is quite desperate. And the story holds that after the woman prays before this statue of Our Lady of Good Deliverance, her husband is never, ever seen again.

And Dr. Cleveland is known for calling this Madonna statue not just Our Lady of Good Deliverance, but also Our Lady of Mess Around and Find Out. Except she does not use the word mess.

She uses a different word. You might know that word. That's the kind of attitude that you first hear in this first perspective at the end of empire, this delight in comeuppance.

[14:14] But then you get to hear this other voice, a different perspective from those who profited from empire. You get to hear what they think about this. The kings of the earth, the merchants and the seed fairers, they all weep at her demise.

And here's some of the language they use. And the kings of the earth who engaged in sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning.

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her since no one buys their cargo anymore. Cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet.

All kinds of scented wood. All articles of ivory. All articles of costly wood. Bronze, iron and marble. Cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flower and wheat, cattle, sheep, horses and chariots.

Slaves, and human lives. The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you and your delicacies and your splendor are lost to you.

[15:23] Never to be found again. The merchants of these wares who grew wealthy from her will stand far off in fear of her. Horrified, weeping and mourning.

And then you also hear the shipmasters who mourn and cry out and ask what city was like the great city. The effect of these descriptions of mourning is to clarify the sins of empire.

This is an amazing passage to go back and sit with. It says that in every age they create economies of luxury at the expense of actual human lives.

They sustain those economies by creating trading relationships grounded in exploitation. They are ruled by their desire for delicacies.

Sometimes they even invest in grand architectural plans for the few. While the many are left to stand in line for basic necessities like bread.

[16:31] I'm just saying. I'm just saying. In every age they are sustained by those whom Eugene Peterson names as engaging in a religion of self-indulgence.

Of the group weeping at the downfall of Babylon, he writes, They got everything they wanted. Their lives overflowed with things.

And now it has gone wasted up in smoke. They are bereft of everything they wanted and invested in and enjoyed. It is not their businesses that collapsed.

But their religion. A religion of self-indulgence, of getting. Now it is gone. Salvation by checkbook is gone.

Meaning by money is gone. Religion as feeling good is gone. God on demand is gone.

[17:39] Self as temporary God is gone. God on demand. So. One reaction to the demise of Babylon teeters on the brink of vengeance.

While the other reaction mourns. Mourns. The loss of self-indulgent, self-centered. Self-centered lives.

The lives that some of us live. But which many more of us dream about. Yet what this portion of Revelation reveals is that.

Only. The only appropriate response. Indeed the only response that can pull us back from delighting in vengeance or mourning.

In complacency. Is the cry of praise to God. Grounded in a vision of salvation. A vision as beautiful as it is challenging.

[18:41] See it's at this point in Revelation that for the first time. Chapter 19. We get to hear the word. Hallelujah. In chapter 19.

We hear shouts of praise from a great multitude. And then from 24 elders and the four living creatures. And then from the very throne room of God.

They praise God for salvation. And the salvation they announce includes both a meal and a confrontation. Both the marriage supper of the lamb and the rider on the white horse.

I'm going to read that portion. And then make a few last observations. Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude.

Like the sound of many rushing waters. And like the sound of mighty thunder pills crying out. Hallelujah. For the Lord God almighty reigns.

[19:38] Let us rejoice and exalt. And give him the glory. For the marriage of the lamb has come. And his bride has made herself ready. To her it has been granted to be clothed.

With fine linen bright and purple. For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And then further in chapter 11. Or verse 11. You see a second part of this vision.

Then I saw heaven opened. And there was a white horse. Its rider is called faithful and true. And in righteousness he judges and wages war.

His eyes are like a flame of fire. And on his head are many diadems. He has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood.

And his name is called the word of God. In the armies of heaven wearing fine linen, linen, white, and pure were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.

[20:43] And he will rule them with a scepter of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he is a name inscribed.

King of kings and Lord of lords. Y'all, I hope it is clear by now in this sermon series that revelation inoculates us against a Christianity that can be tamed.

Any vision of judgment and salvation that can be managed. In keeping with this genre of apocalyptic writing, these images are extremely graphic.

Keep reading. Come next week. Okay. But they're not literal. They're not literal. Jesus is not Rambo. His robe is dipped in his own blood.

It may be dipped in the blood of the martyrs who are faithful. But not. The blood is not the blood of his enemies. The weapon that he uses comes from his mouth.

[21:47] It is the prophetic word that challenges and corrects and exorcises. Yet even though these images are not literal, they are true.

And if these true images inoculate us against a tame faith, they also ensure that we cannot see this book as only about people over there.

See, because revelation is deeply critical of giving ultimate allegiance to the state, it's quite natural, I would say, to point the finger at white Christian nationalism.

At nationalism of every kind. And to be sure, reading Revelation, it does expose Christian nationalism as idolatry. But Revelation also has some things to say to progressive Christians.

And I don't want us to leave this book without being clear about it. A few years back, I had this conversation with a regular attendee at Resurrection City.

[22:55] And it really disrupted my thinking about using the label progressive. Basically, when I used that label for Resurrection City, she told me that she hated that phrasing, and much preferred the language of liberation Christianity.

For her, the progressive frame was a stand-in for a toothless Christianity. And while I do not use, well, I do, I do use the term, her comments helped me to realize the flaws of the language.

The foundation of progressivism is the idea that humans will continually advance upward from a state of primitive awareness to ever higher levels of culture and knowledge and technology.

But the images of Revelation remind us that salvation is not ultimately about making endless progress of our own work.

It is not about obtaining political power, whether in the service of the right or the left. It is not finally about our morality, whether grounded in the pursuit of holiness or the pursuit of justice.

[24:07] It is about being liberated by God and collaborating with God in the liberation of others. It is about receiving and awaiting what we cannot explain.

A table set in the presence of our enemies. Chapters 6 through 19 in Revelation are full of the cries of all those who have been unjustly killed.

Their endless cries from beneath the altar haunt the action of the book. Yet too often as progressive Christians, we carry the false belief that if we can just ask the right questions or read enough books, that we can somehow figure out suffering.

But this belief only drains our capacity to faith and to act in faith. The witness of Revelation is not that we are arranging the pieces of a puzzle toward a just world, but rather that we are engaged in a battle.

Richard Beck says that when we treat suffering as an intellectual problem, all that happens is that our doubts and questions pile up.

[25:30] And as they pile up, our faith becomes fatigued. When we deny in word or in practice that our battle is beyond flesh and blood, we shrink the horizon of salvation and trade in raucous cries of deliverance for logical calculations that never quite compute.

We make it so the rider on the white horse, no matter how larger than life Revelation paints him, is denied and dismissed in light of our own plans.

Instead of an open heaven, we get a flat universe. In trying to be our own saviors, we rid the world of genuine salvation, the kind that can only come from outside in ways that cannot be explained.

You know, I know that I've said a lot today. And honestly, I blame the book. The book is just a lot. Okay. It is.

I love it. It is a lot. But as we move to the last two weeks of this series, I just want to encourage you to, if you haven't already, to read through the entire book of Revelation. And I would read it with the study Bible.

[26:47] I recommend reading it with the study Bible. And ask it, ask God to open you up to the story of salvation inside of this book. Ask to understand salvation as this thing that can't be explained, but only received.

And know that the fact that it is big, that it's so much bigger than we are, is actually good news. So may the God of what cannot be explained, draw us into her salvation, into a story that enlarges us and liberates us into spaciousness and makes us the worshipping, testifying, resisting, enduring dissident disciples that she would have us be.

Amen.