

The Oppressed Will Win: Rereading Revelation

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[0 : 0 0] So, several years ago, when I was in seminary, I had the pleasure of taking a few classes! with a professor of mine named Dr. Josiah Young. Dr. Young was this handsome, older black man who! carried himself with a certain gravitas, but who also managed to be kind of suave. He was cool.

Me and some of the other students would joke that he reminded us of Billy Dee Williams. Y'all know who that is, right? A little, you know, okay. Yeah, Billy Dee Williams.

And he, ironically, was a person who inspired me to at least consider wearing jewelry. As a masculine or center woman, you see five years later, I still got, I got one necklace and I'm moving forward, okay? I'm trying. But beyond his style and the way that his presence helped expand my understanding of who could be a theologian, Dr. Young was specifically an expert in the theology of the works of people like Toni Morrison and James Baldwin. He was brilliant at seeing how those writers' explorations of the black experience and of the black understanding or black understandings of God could teach us all something about the divine.

And it was one comment from Dr. Young that lit the spark for me in my love for the book of Revelation. One day during his systematic theology class, Dr. Young pointed out this simple line in Revelation while talking about a theology of resurrection. It was Revelation 24.

Then I saw thrones and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been headed for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God.

[2 : 1 0] They had not worshiped the beast or its image. It had not received its brand on their foreheads or on their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Dr. Young explored that verse and eventually encouraged us to consider the ways in which it might include all of those throughout history who have been killed unjustly at the hands of empire.

How the love of God might bear them up, restore their bodies in justice and seat them as those closest to God. Now while there are no one-to-one correspondences in Revelation, it's a symbolic book after all, there are the seeds here of something that gives me hope. Something that grounds my faith.

The day Dr. Young probed that verse was the day I fell in love with this book, this book of Revelation. And then about two years later, I found myself far from the seminary and again finding myself in need of the hope that the message of Revelation offers.

I was attending a conference of black churches who were all fiercely committed to racial justice. We were meeting in Birmingham, Alabama. And the first night of worship took place at 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of the bombing where four black girls were killed in 1963 by the Klan.

[3 : 5 1] And you can probably guess that I had never in my life experienced worship that was so full and so prophetic and so defined by both allegiance to the lamb and resistance to the empire.

And then a few days later, we traveled to Montgomery to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. With other black faith leaders, I walked among the hundreds of metal columns that memorialized the victims of the gruesome lynchings that occurred during the Jim Crow era.

I could not escape how completely frivolous all of the supposed crimes were. Then as we exited the memorial where the columns were hanging and we gathered about 50 yards away from the site for a word of prayer. As we did that, something that I'll never forget happened.

From inside the memorial, we heard this piercing scream. It's something I can't fully ever, I won't ever be able to describe it. It's probably the worst sound I've ever heard.

It was maybe an older person discovering the name of a relative or maybe somebody realizing that the soil in which they were raised was soaked with the blood of lynching victims. Or maybe someone had simply become overwhelmed by the injustice of it all. By the how long came Jesus of it all.

[5 : 37] All I knew at that moment was that something of the book of Revelation must be true. I can't be a Christian unless something of it is true.

See, the message of Revelation is essentially this. The oppressed will win. Those who resist empire will win. Those who follow the lamb will win.

They will overcome. They will be victorious. If you don't remember anything else from the sermon series, please, please remember that.

And perhaps there's no clearer place to see the beauty of that victory than the last two chapters of the book. So you can turn if you desire to Revelation 21 and 22. It will also be on the screen.

I'm going to skip some portions of it. So it might, if you want to see all of it, feel free to pull it up on your phone. Revelation 21 starts this way.

[6 : 48] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, see, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them. They will be his peoples and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more. Mourning and crying will be no more. For the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, see, I am making all things new.

Also, he said, write this for these words are trustworthy and true. Then he said to me, it is done. I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end.

[7 : 57] To the thirsty, I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. To those who conquer, those who conquer will inherit these things.

And I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the sexually immoral, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all the liars, their place will be in the lake of fire that burns with sulfur and fire, which is the second death.

Now we're going to come back to that last part, but I'm going to keep going forward. Because then after this initial vision of the new heaven and the new earth, as John sees it, there's this other part.

I'm not going to read it all, but essentially John is taken up onto a mountain where he can see the entire city, the entire bride. And the city is laden with precious stones and the gates and foundations memorialize the 12 tribes of Israel and memorialize the 12 apostles.

It's described as this perfect cube, 1500 miles high, wide, and long, just as the Holy of Holies was a perfect cube. And then John elaborates.

[9 : 11] I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord is its light and its lamp is the lamp.

The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day and there will be no more night.

People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations, but nothing unclean, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, brightest crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is a tree of life and its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month.

Nothing accursed will be found there anymore, but the throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads, and there will be no more night.

[10 : 24] They need no lamp or light or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. Now, this is a glorious vision.

It's the kind of thing that sweeps us away in longing as we find ourselves firmly entrenched in an unjust world, a world in which we struggle to be the dissident disciples we are called to be.

Yet, here, as everywhere else in the book, we have to remember that this is apocalyptic writing. It's not literal. Instead, it gives us these vivid glimpses of the work of God in the world and of God's dream for the world.

The new creation is described as God's home coming down. It's what one scholar calls rapture in reverse. God comes in tabernacles with God's creation.

Just as God once walked in the garden with the first humans at the cool of day, just as God once traveled with the Israelites in the Ark of the Covenant, just as God left the temple in Ezekiel's vision out of a desire to be with God's people, God in the new creation dwells fully with God's people.

[11 : 50] That is to say that God's presence is pervasive and perceptible. It is permanent incarnation. It is permanent Emmanuel. And to John's understanding, this is not like some ethereal mist.

Rather, it's a reality in which the people of God will be able to see God's face, fulfilling the dreams of the Israelites and fully consummating what the incarnation of Jesus had inaugurated.

One of my favorite things about John's vision is the clarity with which he expresses God's desire to restore rather than destroy.

God's heart for composting rather than disposal. As one writer puts it, This is the making of all things new, not the making of all new things.

The new creation doesn't erase human history. It doesn't eradicate the human desire to create human culture from nature. Instead, it builds on the good things that have come before.

[13 : 05] It doesn't cast off the physical world as something disgusting. It's not, as Michael Gorman points out, an escape from the materiality of existence, but rather it is the very fulfillment of material existence.

Yet, along with the descriptions of abundance, the new creation is also defined by what's not there, by what's absent. There's no sea. There's no sea.

There's no sea. John goes to pains to make that clear about the city. It is 1,500 miles high and wide and long and that corresponds to just about the same size as the entire landmass of the Roman Empire at the time that John would have been writing. The new Jerusalem replaces the eternal city of Rome with the eternal kingdom of God. Now this vision is not just some lovely idea to be trotted out at funerals. Some kind of opiate for the masses as Karl Marx suggested. Something that allows us to indulge in our illusions of escapism. Something that keeps the bottom rung in the American caste system from engaging in revolution. It's not what this is.

Instead this book, this section, this passage as John sees it, envisions it, writes it, is something that is to be read aloud so that it can be performed. It opens before us a theology of radical involvement in the world and a commitment to a very public discipleship.

It asks us to engage in worship as a dissident practice, knowing that every time we sing and gather, every time we sing Jesus is Lord, we are implicitly proclaiming that Babylon and the beast are not. It asks us to engage in a daily discernment saying a clear no to the culture of death embodied in Babylon and a clear yes to the culture of life embodied by the new Jerusalem. It invites us to radical imagination using more than common sense to guide our lives. It calls us to a Christ-shaped non-violent resistance to the unexplainable weight that always seems to be pressing down on us.

[16 : 48] Telling us that alternative communities like ours don't matter. Telling us that our ordinary testimony is of little value is of little value, whispering that it's time to just give up now, to go along, to just survive. This vision invites us to faith in Jesus and faithfulness to Jesus.

And y'all dang it, if it does not invite us to embody hope. The truth is that when I think about how I felt that night that I spent worshipping at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, or when I think about how I felt moving through column after column of the memorials to lynching victims, or how I felt sometimes just reading the paper, or seeing the criminal justice system at work in our city.

When I have my gaze on those things, the greatest hope that I can often muster is for judgment. The discordant notes that we read in John's vision about some people being forbidden from its awesome beauty.

Some days they just feel right to me. Yet for the good news to be the good news, it has to be about both judgment and salvation.

About boundaries protecting what is good, as well as a never-ending possibility of transformation into that good. See, the gates of the New Jerusalem will, in some sense, never be shut.

[18 : 44] And we have to take that language seriously. There are some fascinating scriptural threads to follow here related to the possibility that those who are outside will eternally be offered the opportunity to come in.

You can look at Ezekiel, you can look at Isaiah for that, in particular. That the places outside the gate will ultimately be redeemed. But I'll just say this, because this is probably the clearest thing to consider from Revelation.

If you follow the trajectory of the kings of the earth in the book of Revelation, you realize that they move from early in the book to being described as immoral and deceived.

They're following the beast. And then you see them gathering for war against God. And then next you see them being utterly destroyed. Yet in Revelation 21, 24, there's this beautiful image.

The nations will walk by its light. And the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Somehow God's inclusive love is for the healing of the nations.

[20 : 02] Even those who are outside seem to have this possibility, even in the new creation of pledging allegiance to the Lamb, of acknowledging their thirst and having it quenched.

The end of Revelation reminds us that God's desire has always been to create a people. And that God's will is for the reconciliation of all things.

Despite the days when we find that our greatest hope is judgment. God's greatest dream remains for salvation in the truest sense of that word.

While reflecting on the Isaiah passages that undergird John's vision of the new creation, the ones that you may have heard in which the lion lays down with the lamb, Brad Jerzak says this of the reconciliation to come.

At Christ's table, former government death squad members and terrorist rebels embrace. The disappeared reappear, resurrected to speak the word of release to their torturers.

[21 : 16] Occupying forces bend the knee before those whom they sequestered in refugee camps. Holocaust victims who went like sheep to the slaughter make eye contact with the wolves who gas them.

On God's holy mountain, all harm is abolished. From lime pits to extraordinary rendition to suicide bombing, humanity's nightmare is exposed and washed out like camera film in the sun's brightness.

With such a radiant vision in mind, Revelation asks us three simple questions at least. Whose reality will you live inside of?

The reality of empire and the deathly forces underneath it? Or the reality of this symbolic vision of Revelation? How will we perform the script of faithfulness to the lamb who really is a lion?

And finally, how will we exchange our need for certainty with the hope that beckons on every single page of this book? These are some of the questions we are invited to live as dissident disciples of Jesus.

[22 : 40] And when all is said and done, the book also calls us to hold tightly to something very similar to the dedication I saw written on the wall as I entered that lynching memorial in Montgomery.

For the hanged and beaten. For the shot drowned and burned. For the tortured, tormented, and terrorized. For those abandoned by the rule of law.

We will remember. With hope, because hopelessness is the enemy of justice. With courage, because peace requires bravery.

With persistence, because justice is a constant struggle. With faith, because we shall overcome. Table Church, thank God for the book of Revelation.

May it be a blessing to you every time you read it, and even more as you perform it in the world. Amen.