

A Future Journey with Christ

Historical Context

Luke 21:34-36, Revelation 12:10-12

INTRODUCTION:

We are continuing a voyage through the End Times of the Bible. This morning we are going to lay some more groundwork on how to study and interpret Revelation and by considering historical context.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Luke 21:34-36 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

³⁴ “Be on guard, so that your hearts will not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life, and that day will not come on you suddenly like a trap; ³⁵ for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth. ³⁶ But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, **and to stand before the Son of Man.**”

Revelation 12:10-11 (NASB)

¹⁰ Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying,

“Now the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night. ¹¹ **And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.**”

Prayer

You can make the Bible say anything you want if you choose to take it out of context. So in light of that we are going to talk about the historical background of Revelation. Because one of the contexts that is so important, when it comes to Revelation, is historical context. We must remind ourselves that this book is written to a real group of people, at a real time, and a real place. When you try to interpret the Bible without historical background, you look foolish. What I am wanting to point out is that Revelation is written to real people.

BODY:

I. REVELATION IS WRITTEN TO REAL PEOPLE.

Rev. 1:9 tells us that John is writing Revelation from the Island of Patmos which we know as a mining island. It was not an inhabited island. It was a island of slaves or people who

were banished by Roman leaders. If you are on the island of Patmos you would know that if you were sending some sort of letter to the mainland, you would send it to Ephesus first because that is the first city along the major Roman road John is writing a letter that is going to be passed from city to city along the Roman road that he himself knows.

John had been exiled, but he was their pastor! These are his congregations. He knows them intimately. Even though he is sitting on the Isle of Patmos, he knows the order of the cities along the Roman road. That is because he has no doubt been on this road many times. John was exiled to Patmos by Domitian. When Domitian died, he was replaced by Nerva. Nerva released John from the island.

What is the point that I am getting at?

These are actual places! These are actual people. These are actual churches going through real situations and real experiences.

THEREFORE if any interpretation of the book of Revelation does not make sense to these seven churches, I seriously question the interpretation. Why would John write to them about things that they would never experience when they are going through such tough times?

II. REVELATION IS A BOOK OF CONFLICT.

If you could sum up what was happening in the churches at this time, the word would be CONFLICT.

Conflict can be defined as two people or two kingdoms who try to occupy the exact same space at the exact same time.

ILLUSTRATION:

Might be like six people are playing a high stakes game of musical chairs. The stakes are that whoever is sitting at the end of the game gets hired for a very lucrative job. The problem is that there is limited seating and somebody will not get a seat. This is going to cause conflict especially when the stakes are so high. Why? Because two people are trying to occupy the same space at the same time.

Revelation is a book of conflict. On average about every fourth verse is talking about conflict. If you were to look at a map of the Roman empire and a map of the spread of Christianity, you would see that they both occupy much of the same territory.

They are both trying to occupy the same space and the same time. What does that equal?
Conflict!

The very first basic conflicting territory is the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan. It is the story that began in the Garden of Eden in chapter 3 of Genesis. It will not conclude until the Tree of Life is given back to man in the New Heaven and New Earth in Revelation 22.

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan are fighting over the exact same territory at the exact same time. And the territory they are fighting over is **PEOPLE**. That is the

overlying conflict that you will see constantly resurfacing throughout the entire book of Revelation.

The spiritual conflict that is occurring behind the veil to us here on earth is actually impacting what is happening in this material world.

There is another conflict that is going on concurrently with the conflict with the Romans. That is the conflict between the non-believing Jews and the Christians.

Where do we see conflict between these two groups in the Bible?

All over the place right? Jesus' life. Stoning of Steven. And Paul. Paul is actually found on both sides of the conflict. First when he was Saul, he went around persecuting Christians as his ministry for the Jews. Later he met Christ on the road to Damascus and converted to Christianity and was persecuted by many of the same Jewish leaders that he previously served.

The Jewish leaders felt that their power was being threatened by Christianity. They did not see Christianity as a fulfillment theology of the Old Testament. They did not believe that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah. They felt Christianity was a religious sect that must be destroyed. The Jews were the driving force behind Jesus' crucifixion. They did not actually perform the crucifixion, the Romans did, but it was because of the insistence of the Jews.

Matthew 27:22-26 (NASB)

22 Pilate *said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" They all *said, "Crucify Him!" **23** And he said, "Why, what evil has He done?" But they kept shouting all the more, saying, "Crucify Him!"

24 When Pilate saw that he was accomplishing nothing, but rather that a riot was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this Man's blood; see *to that* yourselves." **25** **And all the people said, "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"** **26** Then he released Barabbas for them; but after having Jesus scourged, he handed Him over to be crucified.

The Jews made it very clear. "**We** are killing Him!"

This is the same setting that the book of Revelation is set in.

Let's look in Revelation at some verses that suggest this. Listen to the language that is used. It is written in red letters to indicate that Jesus spoke these words to John to communicate to the churches in Asia Minor.

Revelation 2:8-9 (NASB)

8 "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

9 I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

What does that tell me? Christians are in conflict with the Jews.

To the church in Philadelphia:

Revelation 3:9 (NASB)

⁹ Behold, I will cause *those* of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and *make them know that I have loved you.*

What does that tell you? Conflict between Jews and Christians.

The story hasn't changed with the Jews and Christians by the time that Revelation was written. They are deeply in conflict.

Why are they in conflict?

The Jews say, "I belong to Yahweh and we are representative to His people" and the Christians say "Me too!" But the problem is that the Christians say that they also belong to Jesus Who is the full revelation of who God is. And the Jews say "I don't think so!" So the message creates a conflict. Not only were they both claiming the same God with a different message, the Christians were also found preaching in their synagogues.

When you try to occupy the same space at the same time, you will create conflict.

There was another group the Christians were in conflict with. They were also in conflict with the Roman society as a whole.

In the Roman empire there was no separation of church and state. None. They were the same thing. Politics and religion intermingled. Why? Because the success of a Roman ruler was directly guided by the gods themselves. Citizens were expected to worship the emperors as gods. At first the emperors were not actually considered as god until they died. They were considered an agent of god. When he died the senate would vote if he was to be added to the Pantheon of gods. If they voted him down, he was considered an imposter and would attempt to erase him from history. They would actually chisel out their names on statues. As time progressed some emperors decided that they did not want to wait until they died to become god. At the time that Revelation was written around 95 AD Domitian was emperor. He was the third emperor that believed that he was a god while alive. He started a tradition that required that any correspondence to him, either in writing or in conversation, must be addressed with "Our Lord and Our God". **Revelation 4 MAY HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT THAT!** We will eventually get there.

This got so bad during his reign that during one sporting event he had everyone executed who celebrated for a team that beat the team he wanted to win. He claimed that they were "defying a god by rooting for a different team than I".

Domitian thought himself as god and he functioned that way.

III. REVELATION EXHORTS US TO REMAIN FAITHFUL UNTIL DEATH.

This is the point of all of this. At the time of the writing of Revelation this custom is being put into place across the empire. That the way you show allegiance to Rome is by worshipping the emperors as gods. They would say that you could worship whoever you want, but you have to worship the emperor.

If you chose not to worship the emperor it was considered treasonous and you were punished. Sometimes even by death. The point was made. DON'T MESS WITH ROME!

The problem for the Christian was that **everything** that it meant to be a Christian was in opposition to the worship of the emperor. EVERYTHING!

A pledge of allegiance to a an earthly kingdom and worshipping a different king.

Jesus taught that there are two kingdoms. An earthly kingdom and a heavenly kingdom.

Matthew 4:17 (NASB)

17 From that time Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The problem: They were both trying to occupy the same space at the same time. What does it produce? CONFLICT!

The Roman society reacted to Christians not only by killing them but also by calling them slanderous names.

A. Christians were known by the Roman society as cannibals. Why?

Because these people talk about eating flesh and drinking blood. A bunch of psychos! Which was actually referring to.....the Lord's supper.

B. Not only that, they were considered incestuous. Why?

Because regardless if they are related or not, they called each other brother and sister.

What is that referring to.....we are all a part of the family of God. Therefore June is my wife, but she is more a sister in Christ than anything. Because spirit is thicker than blood.

C. They were also considered as atheists.

Not because they did not believe in a God as we describe atheism today, but because they would not worship the Pantheon of Gods. That was the definition of atheism in that day which brings about the fourth accusation.

D. They were considered insurrectionists.

Because, if you were claiming a different king and a different kingdom, that is "political revolutionary" talk. That is "overthrow of the government" talk. Plus if you were rejecting the Roman gods you were threatening the security of Rome. Because as you remember the success of a Roman ruler was directly guided by the gods themselves. If you reject those gods, you are actually threatening the security of Rome.

As a result the Christians were dealt with harshly at times. At times it actually meant physical death. Here is an example of one of threats that was placed against Christians.

It is letter from Pliny the Younger to the emperor Trajan around 112 AD describing how he had dealt with Christians and was asking for guidance. He said that he would ask

them if they were a Christian and **if they answered no** then he would make them do three things.

- He would make them invoke the gods.
- He would make them bow down and worship an emperor god statue.
- He would make them curse Christ.

He said he would go through those steps because it is said that a Christian cannot be forced to do them.

If they said yes

- He would threaten them with suffering.
- Then he would threaten them with death.

If they persisted he would have them executed. In other words, if they were so stubborn that they would not bow their knee to Rome, then he felt it best to kill them rather than let them stay and cause a problem.

Trajan writes back later and says "Yeah, you handled it OK". But be careful because people will make lists and try to eliminate people they don't like. So don't actively seek them out, but if they surface, kill them.

All of this suggests why Revelation was written in the first place. This is the setting of the book of Revelation. That is what these seven churches are facing. This is the historical context from which this whole letter emerges. To ignore that is to make this book something that it was never meant to be.

If they are experiencing persecution and even death because of their faith in God. Could this not provide the historical backdrop for such an emphasis on dying for Jesus? John gives them a glimpse into the future.

Revelation 6:15-17 (NASB)

¹⁵ Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; ¹⁶ and they *said to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; ¹⁷ for the great day of their wrath has come, and **who is able to stand?"**

John tells them of the wrath that is to come and asks the question **who is able to stand?**

Revelation 13:10 (NASB)

¹⁰ If anyone is *destined* for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.

Why does he repeatedly exhort them to be willing to die for Jesus? Because that is what they are going through! They may be beginning to wonder if this faith is really worth it. After all, Christ said He was coming soon and they still have not seen Him. They may be beginning to wonder if Christ really was the Messiah. Were the apostles wrong? Is this really worth dying for?

When people suggest that Revelation is just a group of future events that is going to happen, they are simply ignoring why the book was written to begin with. It is written to real people in real churches in a time period of conflict to assure the Christians that it is all worth it. Remain faithful, alert, and ready!

CONCLUSION:

Just remember. Despite how confusing the end times may seem to you, trust Jesus when He says that those who endure to the end WILL WIN! Who can stand at the judgment? How can you overcome Satan?

Revelation 12:11 (NASB)

¹¹ And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.

Revelation leaves the Christian with only have one option. Accept Christ's free gift of salvation and die to yourself. Do not be ashamed of the Gospel and share it with others. **Be faithful to death** even if that means captivity, banishment to an island, or even death itself!

He is Lord!