

INSTEAD OF THE END – THE CHURCH

We have been playing tag with the Book of Revelation and discovering that the BATTLE is not about what we thought and is not fought like we thought, and that indeed its major Message is approximately the reverse of what is usually assumed and proclaimed in its name. No book in the New Testament, for instance, is more optimistic about the final outcome for most, if not all, people.

You have just listened to a reading of chapter seven. Previously we were talking about John's introduction of the Lamb as symbol of the Christ, and how that never turns back into Lion. And we were musing about how *Arnon*, the lambkin, was the only creature anywhere who was found worthy to open the seven seals of the scroll, so that Life might move on into its intended future.

We stopped there and went home, just as the Lamb began to open the seals. If we had been one of the early churches, receiving this letter for the first time, what are the chances that everybody would have gone home without learning what happened next? But of course everybody knows now what came forth as the seals were broken and why, so we have skipped over that part.

Even if we did not know it or understand it very thoroughly, it is nevertheless clear that what we are waiting for is the seventh seal. Seven is the holy number. The entire Book of Revelation is a carefully designed writing of interlocking sevens: seven candles, seven spirits, seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven plagues, seven bowls. Seven is the holy number, and we know or sense or feel by some inner archetypal awareness that the big spiritual breakthroughs will come at the seventh.

So whatever happens in the breaking of the first six seals, it is the breaking of the seventh seal that we await with eager anticipation. After all, the scroll cannot come fully open – LIFE cannot be fully known – until the last seal is broken.

The breaking of the first six seals is told in chapter six, and naturally we expect the seventh to go in chapter seven. Instead, with either appreciation or annoyance, we run into the author's artistry. He is not about to sell the punch line so cheaply. Instead we get an interlude. Later, in chapter eight, as the seventh seal is broken,

there comes the crescendo of crashing silence in Heaven, seven angels with seven trumpets come forth, and we start counting all over again. And of course, at the seventh trumpet – after a glimpse of the final outcome (and more details of the struggle here on earth) – we will find ourselves in the midst of seven plagues, and start counting all over again. John leads us through sevens within sevens until finally we come to the great BATTLE – only to discover that the Lamb has been riding and dying and converting all along the way, and that “dying your way into LIFE” has been what the scroll has always been about: conquering by powerlessness, surrender, turning it over, rebirth, a new WAY. But that is where we started. The Message of God’s reconciling love is the only weapon the Lamb will ever wield; the only blood He will ever spill is His own; the war (both cosmic and private) is the war between us and God (we are a race of rebels, taking our lives into our own hands); and the BATTLE is about our conversion.

Backing up to the seventh chapter, may I suggest that Revelation’s author is not merely being cute. Neither is he postponing the breaking of the seventh seal just to heighten the drama. The interlude we find in the seventh chapter is *the reality* that John and his fellow Christians are facing as he writes The Revelation. That is, it is clearly the belief of the early church that Jesus is coming *soon* to close down life as we know it, and to set up a righteous Kingdom in the place of this world of travail and woe – a Kingdom of love and peace and joy for all eternity.

The whole first generation of Christians lived in the expectation of this final consummation at any moment. It is part of why they were bold in the midst of danger, and joyful in the midst of hardship and pain and trouble. What were a few more days or weeks of this misery, when Jesus was coming soon? It was this “soon” (“He is coming soon!”) that lit up their faces and enabled them to live the incredible forgiveness, sharing, and “sitting loose” to this world’s hard realities.

They knew all about the first six seals, just like most of us do (the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the death of the martyrs, the heralding earthquake), and none of that mattered much because the Lamb would break that seventh seal and come again, and then all the travail would be over and the party would begin. But they kept getting this interlude. And then they would get this interlude. And after that, they found themselves in this interlude.

As John writes The Revelation, it has been fifty-some years since Jesus died. It has been over twenty years since the Apostle Paul died. The Emperor Domitian has come to power, and John believes the church is in for a new age of persecution more widespread and severe than anything seen under Nero. Why does the Lord delay? Wouldn't this be a good time to bring things to completion and start the party? Yet they find themselves in this interlude. What went wrong with the timing? Why is it taking so long? With sufficient inspiration, humans are pretty good in the short run, but the long haul is hard for our kind. So the prayer infiltrates the church with greater and greater urgency: "Come Lord Jesus, *quickly* come!"

They want the END to come, but instead they get the CHURCH. Twelve thousand from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand from the tribe of Mercer Island, twelve thousand from the tribe of Corona del Mar, and so on.

Nobody ever wanted the CHURCH. You are not the first ones who ever felt that way! *Nobody* ever wanted the CHURCH. What we have always wanted is the party. We want to be close to God. We want the travail and testing to be over. We want to be free of all the encumbrances and imperfections that drive us nuts and make us feel guilty and incomplete. We would like to be rid of the fear and terror that haunt us, sitting there on the edge of our controlled mental defenses. And we would like to somehow be someplace where we did not have this constant awareness of so *many* people in pain, of one kind or another, and knowing that we can never fix all of it.

The CHURCH was not the dream of the early Christians. Their dream was of the END TIME. HE was coming – soon! They were not building churches; they were joining Jesus and becoming part of an unseen Kingdom that would flower fully at any moment.

But they did not get the END TIME; they got the CHURCH. It was the greatest misunderstanding and the biggest disappointment in all of Christianity. Instead of getting to go to Heaven, we get to sit around here: getting to know each other; trying to grow in the faith; trying to learn a little bit about love; arguing over how to represent the Kingdom here on earth, when we can barely keep it inside our own minds and hearts from one day to another. People often say to me, "I care about spirituality and admire Jesus, but I haven't got much use for organized religion or the church." No kidding!

At first the CHURCH was just a place to get together ... while we were waiting. It was a place to talk and teach and sing and eat and comfort each other ... while we were waiting. But even Paul, years earlier, had seen it as a *living* body – the body of Christ – at work in the world, doing what Christ had been doing here ... even if it was only while we were waiting.

When the time kept stretching out, more and more people started wondering what this “CHURCH” thing – this family of believers – was for and about. If the END did not come, there was nothing left but this CHURCH life – this waiting in the fellowship of believers. And what was this waiting life supposed to be like?

So there is this interlude – an interlude in which people receive the mark or seal of the living God. You do not miss the Passover-like allusion, do you? It will take time to do all this sealing. To John it still feels like an interruption, so four angels have to stand at the four corners of the earth and hold back the winds (of change) so that there will be time for the sealing – for the life of the CHURCH. And I know you know that the earth is more round than square; I hope it’s okay with you that John did not know that. God probably mentioned it to him, but in the midst of all the other amazing revelations, John probably didn’t have time to rework his entire understanding of physical reality, so he could not “hear” it.

The mark or seal is baptism. (I Corinthians 12:13; II Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30) (Within the significance of baptism, there is room for the symbolism of being touched on the forehead by the blood of Christ.) Baptism is the mark and seal of dying to the old life, of willingness to be obedient unto death, of powerlessness by one’s self, of surrender – and of birth into a new and living WAY, and of a much greater strength (rising out of surrender and weakness) when the Lord is in charge of our lives.

So how do all these thousands get sealed? That is what the CHURCH does, or is supposed to be doing: living in such a way that Christ’s sacrifice and mercy will reach out to touch and to heal and to finally draw others into this WAY – until they also are desirous to receive the mark or seal of *Arnion*: the Lamb who conquers by dying.

You all know it, but I cannot pass by this chapter without commenting that the one hundred forty-four thousand is also symbolic. Twelve is the number of the whole, especially the whole community gathered: twelve in a dozen, twelve months in a year, twelve tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, twelve energies of life – twelve represents the full community gathered. Just so, John has used twenty-four elders to symbolize all of Judaism and all of the Gentiles gathered around the throne (twelve tribes of Israel plus the new tribes brought by Jesus' twelve apostles). "One hundred forty-four thousand" is like John trying to say, "Twelve times twelve, carried to the thousandth power." That does not stretch *your* math, but it is off the page for his; they didn't even have Arabic numerals yet. But just in case we miss it, he continues: "*a great multitude beyond counting, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.*" Does that include Buddhists and Hindus and Muslims? Shall I read it again? And what are they doing? They are standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands – singing and praising. In other words, they are IN! Who does John think will be saved before it is over?

Most of us think of Revelation as speaking of the END that is coming soon. But to the ears of those who were reading it in its own time, The Revelation was telling them to get ready for a longer siege here on earth than they had been counting on. However long it would be, it had already been a lot longer than anybody had figured on. So the "soon" was going to be "later" than we had thought. Get ready. The mark and seal of the CHURCH – the faithful on earth – was baptism, and that was in stark contrast to the mark and seal of those who worshipped the Roman Emperor as a god. Choosing either could be lethal, but one never knew when the choice would be forced.

There were two deaths involved: the death from outer persecution and the death from inner bondage – the slow strangulation of fear that so often causes us humans to live for self or for sheer physical survival; or when, caught in the backlash, we simply squander life, letting the hours and days and the energy and love dribble through our fingers.

What is the joyful Life? Is it not Life wherein we are free to be for what we are truly for, to love what we truly love, to work and give and serve that which we truly believe in? Only the ONE who leads through death to LIFE has ever been able to show us the WAY or the HOPE for such wealth and fullness of LIFE.

So the mark we receive does not save us from the ordeal, but it sees us through it. And He *is* coming soon! For each one of us, this life does not last very long. We can be joyful here *only* insofar as we remember that soon we will be with Him in a place where truth is honored and where love is more important than how things look on the surface. To forget that future, for me at least, is to get sucked back into the ways and values that I detest. How I love The Revelation for reminding me.

So John's cosmology was a little small, but it did not throw him off by very much. The Romans looked big and wealthy and powerful; if you were not part of the Roman establishment, you were not relevant in that time, or so it seemed. But John thought that living in the fellowship of Christ's CHURCH, bearing witness to His Lordship, and dying before you would let anything drag you away from that Path was the only game in town, even if you lived in Rome itself.

And a lot of us do.