

Introduction

He went down in the history books as one of the craziest emperors of ancient Rome. After his father died, his mother, said to be one of the most beautiful and wealthiest women in Rome, married her uncle, Emperor Claudius. When a son from Claudius' failed third marriage was set to be emperor ahead of him, his mother poisoned his adopted father and made him emperor. Within the first five years of his reign, he killed his mother and later banished his wife. Obsessed with indulgence, greed, and pleasure, he considered himself the savior of the world. When the Great Fire broke out in Rome, he made the Christian community the scapegoat. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Christians were covered in wild animal skins and dogs tore them to pieces. They were used as human torches and convicted of hating the human race. According to church tradition, the apostles Paul and Peter were executed via beheading and crucifixion. This is Nero, the emperor during the first major Christian persecution. Now let's cut to the chase: if you were a Christian in the congregation at Rome, would you really think you're winning? *The competition seems too intense.*

He went down in the history books as an tyrant who ended his reign with terror. The charges of treason against members of the Roman Senate were relentless. He didn't back down from his own family to the point that his wife feared for her life for rumors she was sympathetic to Christianity. He enforced emperor worship and expelled Christians from Rome. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, he arrogantly insisted on being addressed as *Dominus et Deus*, "Master and God." According to church tradition, under his rule the last remaining apostle, John, was banished to the island of Patmos, near the city of Ephesus off the coast of Turkey. This is Domitian, the emperor during the second major Christian persecution. Now let's cut to the chase: if you were a Christian in the congregation at Ephesus, would you really think you're winning? *The competition seems too intense.*

And this is only the first two of roughly ten major Christian persecutions over four centuries in Rome. To see that persecution is still alive today, just think about Christian missionaries in North Korea or Christians in Nigeria killed by Boko Haram in their churches. Thankfully we in America don't face persecution like that, yet random church shootings still pop up in South Carolina and Texas. Yet it seems the devil is having his way today. The patience for Christians who openly promote their crazy, closed-minded, intellectually regressive views in the public sector is starting to wear thin. The willingness of people to get involved in the church compared to just a generation ago seems few and far in between. Now let's cut to the chase: if you are a Christian in the congregation at Ann Arbor, would you really think you're winning? *The competition seems too intense.* That's why we need the Second Lesson from Revelation 20. It peels back the curtain of the end times and reassures us:

Christ Crushes the Competition!

Revelation is often considered the most confusing book of the Bible to read. It's apocalyptic literature that features dramatic visions of the end times and scenes of the epic conflict between Jesus and the devil. On these last pages of the Bible, this seventh and final vision refers back to many themes from the opening pages of the Bible in Genesis. Since it was likely written during that second wave of persecution under Domitian as the apostle John is exiled on Patmos, this striking language is exactly what they need to hear. *And I saw an angel*

coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. Earlier in Revelation, Jesus says he holds the key to death and Hades, so this angel is Christ himself, who binds the devil for a thousand years. Not only does Revelation seem confusing to understand, but that thousand year period makes Revelation 20 arguably the most debated section. Various forms of millennialism called pre- and post-millennialism teach that Christ will institute a physical, earthly kingdom either before or after he returns to this earth and will rule for a literal thousand years. Some supporters of millennialism believe that the first resurrection referenced here means believers will be physically raised to live and reign with Jesus, before everyone else is raised in the second resurrection. On the basis of Old Testament passages, they believe Christ's kingdom will be in Israel and specifically in Jerusalem.

Several factors show the thousand years cannot refer to a literal millennium-long physical kingdom here on earth. Even supporters of millennialism do not believe that Satan is a literal dragon, that Jesus has a literal key from a locksmith, or that he bound him with a literal iron chain. John does not see the resurrected *bodies* of martyrs beheaded in persecution but their *souls*. Elsewhere in John's Gospel (5:24-25, 11:25-26), he uses the term "life" in two senses: first, coming to faith in Jesus, then, resurrection to life on the last day. So the first resurrection here does not refer to a separate bodily resurrection of believers but life through faith. The overall context of Revelation uses symbolism, especially with numbers. A thousand is ten (the number of completion) to the third power (the number of God). Simply put, the thousand years stands for a complete time period fixed by God, the entire New Testament age from Jesus' first coming until his second. Jesus told Pilate his kingdom is not of this world, and his kingdom is a spiritual kingdom in our hearts through faith.

So who's actually reigning during this period? You'd be surprised. ***Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.*** John's vision is not of Jesus on his throne, but of *believers* on their thrones reigning with Christ. That's why this matters for Christians still today who wonder if they're really winning in the face of so much spiritual competition. In all the theological complexity, don't miss the simple points. The devil is bound and doomed. You're going to reign with Jesus. Christ crushes the competition.

With foot high grass filled with dandelions, the rusty iron chain-link fence separates the run-down house from the rest of the neighborhood. A few steps past the creaky gate reveals a black and red sign near the dirty, cluttered front porch: "Warning: Beware of Dog." Within a few seconds, a drooling, panting, teeth-bearing pitbull comes barreling from the side of the house, and his ferocious bark echoes down the street. It's scary to look a pitbull right in the eye as it wants to jump on you and take you down. All you want to do is turn around, run away, and admit defeat.

Ever since the deceiving serpent made an appearance in the Garden of Eden on the opening pages of Genesis, your enemy the devil has been prowling around, wreaking havoc on this world, looking for someone to devour (1 Pe 5:8). All the perfection of Eden, gone! All because our first parents brought sin's destruction into the world. "Turn around. Run away. I'm winning," the devil says through his barred teeth. All your loved ones, they die! You can't be with them anymore! All because death is an inevitable part of this world since the fall into sin. "Turn around. Run away. I'm winning," the devil says through his barred teeth. Easy ministry where interested people simply show up at church all by themselves, gone! Church work these days is just too hard! Why don't you just hunker down and wait for Jesus to come back, since

that's the best the church can do? "Turn around. Run away. I'm winning," the devil says through his barred teeth. All he wants to do is convince you you're losing. *The spiritual competition is too intense*. What does this lead? It certainly plunges us into despair that living in the twenty-first century church is just too difficult. But that's not all! It leads to our idolatrous admission, "Well, if the devil's winning and we're losing, that means you, Jesus, have lost too."

That's why we need Revelation. Though the devil is a ferocious animal, feet before he wants to jump on you and take you down, his chain yanks him back and he can't touch you! Christ has bound him, and he can go no further than Christ allows him. What binds the devil and limits his advance is the spread of the gospel, because it announces the Seed of the Woman who crushed his head. That deceiving serpent filled with so many lies is no match for Jesus! As he died on the cross, Jesus did not lose. He cried out, "It is finished" as he stomped on the head of the serpent and sealed his fate. Because of that, the devil has no more power over you! Still today, every time the gospel is proclaimed within these walls, every time Redeemer supports the our synod's mission work in places like Zambia and Hong Kong, every time someone new in our neighborhood learns about God's grace in Bible 101, Christ crushes the competition. With its striking language and vivid scenes, Revelation completely changes your view of the church today. Through this book, see the souls of those faithful Christians who endured persecution and martyrdom in first centuries of Christianity ruling on their thrones with Jesus. Through this book, see the souls of people in this congregation like Doris Bowling, Norm Horning, John Burt, and Ruth Stoll who died in the Christian faith and are reigning with Christ now. Revelation replaces pessimism and defeat with confidence and victory.

Conclusion

One of my professors told us a story of a pastor who was walking down the halls of his church and ran across the church janitor. He was surprised to see him reading the book of Revelation. "Why are you reading Revelation since it's so hard?" "I'm surprised you say that," the janitor told his pastor. "I thought it was an easy book." Wracking his brain around all of the major theological and interpretive difficulties in the book, the pastor couldn't help but say, "If it's so easy, why don't you tell me what it's about?" "Jesus will win." Yes, Revelation is usually not the go-to book for light reading when Christians pick up their Bibles, but there is a simple beauty in the striking apocalyptic literature in Revelation. In that sense, Revelation is the easiest book in the Bible. Its simple message needs to be heard by Christians under Domitian's persecution and Christians in our world today: Christ crushes the competition. He wins, and that means you win too. Amen.