

The Kingdom of God: *Behind the Scenes*

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Key Thought:

Revelation 12-13 provides both the behind the scenes vision of the Kingdom of God and God's provisions for living faithfully inside it.

Goals:

To understand what is going on spiritually in our parallel kingdom experiences
To feel sobered but encouraged by the existence of these spiritual realities
To follow God's prescriptions for living faithfully as His Kingdom citizens

Message:

Thanks to Gabe for inviting me to speak to SFC.

Great honor to proclaim God's word to his people

I grew up loving to watch Star Trek.

Loved the characters of Kirk, strong leader of a team, Spock (the brain), McCoy (the heart), Scotty (the can-do engineer), Sulu, Chekov and Uhura (the faithful bridge crew)

One of my favorite episodes (besides *The Trouble with Tribbles*) was *Mirror, Mirror*. The plot in essence:

- In one of those pesky transporter malfunctions, Captain Kirk, McCoy, Uhura and Scotty are beamed into a parallel universe in which the Federation exists as an Empire,
- Intolerance & ruthlessness replace mutual respect,
- and assassination becomes the preferred method for career advancement.
- I especially enjoyed the Mirror personage of Spock (looks good in a goatee)

I bring this up because we too live in two parallel universes. We live as citizens of both the kingdom of the world and the Kingdom of God. For the past three weeks, we've looked at the Kingdom of God. Sally Bryant began with a fundamental value of the Kingdom: all are invited to the party. Reggie McNeil continued with the primacy of the kingdom over that of the church.

Today I want us to consider what is going on behind the scenes in the Kingdom of God so we can be better prepared to face what opposes us by appropriating what has been given to us by God.

In the kingdom of the world, we perceive reality through our five senses of sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing. We judge situations and our personal options for living by using these abilities.

But in the Kingdom of God, we must realize is that there is a parallel dimension that is just as much a part of our existence as the one we are physically aware of. It's a spiritual dimension of being. Beyond the physical, there are spiritual forces at work behind the scenes, around and on us every minute of the day. Some of these forces are benign. Others are highly malevolent. Some seek our peace and health. Others seek our destruction.

Where can we learn about this spiritual dimension of our existence? Well, I thought since this is my first time sharing a Sunday message with you all I'd select a passage of scripture that's non-controversial, easily explained and one of which the church over the ages has enjoyed a large measure of agreement in interpretation. Let's all turn to the book of the Revelation!

Actually, I'd like to blame all this on Pastor Gabe. I got the idea for my two messages from his previous study of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3. When Gabe began this series, I reread Eugene Peterson's wonderful commentary on Revelation entitled *Reversed Thunder*. As I read the entire book, I came across a direct reference to the in breaking of Christ's Kingdom on earth. This arrival changed everything for our world, but we must understand its context.

John's revelation was a welcome message to those seven beleaguered spiritual outposts, but John doesn't choose to write a normal epistle. Instead he desires to energize the imagination with a particular form of writing called apocalyptic literature. It's filled with fantastic visions, mysterious creatures and numerical intimations. I believe Peterson chooses the right hermeneutic by interpreting the book first and foremost as a message to those particular churches in their particular time. To properly understand Revelation, we must ask the questions: What did John wish communicate to those seven churches? What did they need to hear? How would they have interpreted the visions, symbols and prophecies given to them? What then can we learn from listening in to his word to them?

I also believe the message isn't just for the first century church. Peterson's second interpretive decision was to understand that Revelation's message speaks to these spiritual realities as existing in our own time as well.

Thus the answers we gain from pursuing both these lines of thought will give us insight into the dual nature of our own existence both in the kingdom of the world and the Kingdom of God. The enemies and allies of Revelation continue their work, impacting you and me today. The future implications of Revelation are beyond the scope of what we want to examine today in our time together.

What then do we learn from John's revelation? Well, in a word, it's not all peaches and cream out there. Serious forces have always stood marshalled against Jesus, his disciples and the sovereignty of God. They are powerful and they can do us great harm. At the same time, we must realize that God is Lord over all of creation and has provided insight, guidance and resources for his followers to be victorious in this battle back in the first century and here again in the 21st. In essence, the apostle Paul summed up the entire message of Revelation in his letter to the Ephesians 6:10-12 (ESV)

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

For our two weeks, we're going to concentrate on chapters 12 through 14 of Revelation. They provide a series of perhaps the most intriguing visions within this letter. We begin with the most bizarre Christmas story ever presented.

Listen to Revelation 12:1-6 (ESV)

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male

child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

This is not your usual Nativity tableau. No singing angels, no adoring shepherds, no gift-bearing wise men. John desires to give us the story behind the scenes. Through vivid images, he reveals what was happening in the spiritual realms when the Christ child was born. The great dragon (Satan as he will be identified later) wants to destroy this incarnation of God, the infant who will grow up to be the Messiah and will rule all the nations with a rod of iron.

But the dragon is thwarted in his desire and both the child and the woman escape. The child is caught up to heaven while the woman escapes into the desert. The failure to destroy the Christ child has tremendous negative repercussions for the dragon. The following scene presents what happens next.

Read Revelation 12:7-12 (ESV)

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And 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 brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

Not only does Satan fail to prevent the Christ child from entering into our world to accomplish his redemptive purpose but he himself is kicked out of heaven along with all his henchmen. Notice the heavenly voice’s proclamation: “Now the salvation, and the power and the Kingdom of God and his Christ have come to earth.” God’s Kingdom has arrived in Christ. And notice how the victory of Christ over Satan is won. He has been conquered by the blood of the Lamb on the cross and the faithful witness of Christ’s disciples to this fact.

This is all is good, right? Well, yes and no. For while the kingdom has arrived in Christ, so also Satan and his motley crew have also arrived “in great wrath.” After failing a second time to capture the woman, John reveals his next target.

Revelation 12:17 (ESV)

Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

John continues in chapters 13 and 14 to describe the kind of warfare Satan now wages against God’s faithful disciples. After contemplating his defeat, he calls for earthly reinforcements. First he summons a beast from the sea.

Revelation 13:5-8 (ESV)

And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it.

Many scholars believe this beast for first century disciples is the symbol of the Roman empire personified by its parade of increasingly hostile Caesars. By the time of Revelation's writing, Emperor Domitian was on the throne insisting that he be considered divine and demanding his citizens worship him as a god. Gabe alluded to Domitian when he preached on the church at Pergamum with its temple for emperor worship. Every year the people were commanded to burn a pinch of incense at his altar and proclaim, "Caesar is Lord." Those who refused would face the full fury of the Roman state.

Now let's fast forward for a moment. There is another line of scholarship which theorizes that the beast represents any diabolical force which stands against the rule of God's Kingdom and the Lordship of Christ. Listen to Alan Johnson, Professor of Bible and Theology, Wheaton College:

The beast challenges the sovereignty and majesty of God by denying the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Therefore, whatever person or system-whether political, social, economic or religious-cooperates with Satan by exalting itself against God's sovereignty and by setting itself up to destroy the followers of Jesus...embodies the beast of Revelation 13.

In this line of thinking, there have been many manifested "beasts" that have arisen over the centuries and will continue to do so until the end time.

Even today we as disciples of Jesus face forces that stand opposed to the Gospel and it's the sovereignty of God. Does our culture still take Christ's words seriously? He proclaimed, "I am the way the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me." That is so not politically correct in a culture that values religious pluralism and is becoming increasingly secular.

We continue to see a decline of evangelical Christianity in American culture today. The Pew Research Center has documented the growing decline of those identifying themselves as belonging to a particular religious group. A growing number of individuals now identify themselves with no religious affiliation at all. They are called the *Nones*. In his book *The Rise of the Nones*, James Emery White chronicles this disturbing trend:

From 5% in the 1940's to 8.1% in 1990 to 15% in 2008 to 19.3% in 2012.

The *nones* now make up the nation's fastest-growing and second largest religious category.

Why this downward movement? Interestingly enough when I Googled the question, "Where is Christianity under attack in America?" I was led to a website article in of all places *The Daily Beast*. The author, Jay Michaelson, contends that this attack is a myth. What's really going on is that a myriad of forces/trends are at work to decrease the Christian footprint in this country. I found one paragraph particularly/especially interesting:

These changes are taking place for a constellation of reasons: greater secular education (college degrees), multiculturalism, shifting social mores, the secular space of consumer capitalism and celebrity culture, the sexual revolution, legal and constitutional changes (like the banning of prayer in public school), the breakdown of the nuclear family, the decline of certain forms of family and group identification, and the association of religion in general with nonsensical and outdated dogmas.

Now I would submit that while Mr. Michaelson may think all of what he has just listed is only the working of natural and secular forces, the Apostle John would declare that there are other forces at work behind the scenes empowering and steering these forces. In essence, the real beast continues his assault on the Kingdom of God. But Satan is not done with his assault. Even with the success of the first beast, the dragon now summons a second beast.

Revelation 13:12-14 (ESV)

Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth...

John describes this second beast as looking like a lamb but speaking like a dragon. His job is to deceive the world into false worship. He appears good on the outside (like the Lamb of God) (can call down fire from heaven like Elijah), but he speaks with the voice of the Satanic dragon. Again, scholars have various opinions on this beast's original manifestation. My money is on the priests and enforcers of the imperial cult who coerced worship of the image of the emperor.

And, I believe, like the first beast, the second continues his deceptions today. How hard it is these days to know what form of Christianity we are to follow! For we in America have devised our own forms of the kingdom and proclaim their own separate gospels.

There are many churches today who proclaim the Prosperity Gospel. Their message: Christianity will make you wealthy. The largest church in America today is pastored by a man who preaches this gospel. The time of your prosperity is at hand. Your God is a god of plenty!

But Joel is not the first to proclaim this perverted gospel. A man named Richard Gaylord Briley has written such a notable book as *Pray and Grow Rich: Seven Overlooked Secrets from the Bible That Control Your Wealth, Success and Happiness*.

Does God like you better broke? Or might God really want you to be a success? "Pray And Grow Rich" tells how ordinary people can apply purposeful faith and seven long-ignored spiritual secrets hidden in plain view in the Bible, to reach their highest life-enhancing goals, including wealth. Do you have God's permission for success?

A close cousin to the Prosperity Gospel is the Feel Good/Consumer Gospel. Think of those churches which produce more show than worship, offer a wide array of goods and services, look like a shopping mall and appeal to our American ideal of conspicuous consumption. Their gospel reads this way: God's job is to make you happy and content. Just accept Christ and you have your fire insurance against hell. Entrance into their Kingdom will provide God's comfort, peace and good times.

Church up the peninsula that offered a country club membership.

I used to witness to others that once you accept Christ, all your troubles would go away.

Both of these gospels are false, promulgated by the second beast in the name of religion. They offer the way to happiness, but it is all illusion, smoke and mirrors.

Think about beer commercials. They offer you friends and coolness if you buy their beer.

Jesus has shown us the way of true discipleship where the values of the world are turned on their head but the outcome is the one true way of living that meets the needs of our souls not our guts.

Whoever wants to be great must become the servant of all

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, not treasures on earth

Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me

He who wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake shall find it

Here the foundational story is not the stock boy who worked his way up to become president but the son of the company owner who humbled himself, became a servant and died for all.

How then can a believer (in the first century or the 21st) who faces this false trinity of powerful opponents hope to stay true to Christ? What can be done to provide a Christian response to these deceptions? Eugene Peterson gives us a healthy perspective:

St. John's Apocalypse does not underrate the satanic—we are opposed by great power and deception. All the same a lot of it is sheer bluff, and the caricaturing visions reduce the satanic trinity from what it puffs itself up to be, to what it merely is. This is not supernatural power before which we are helpless; it is more like paranatural power that we are not used to. But trained by St. John's pastoral imagination, we are equipped to stand fast and discern.

In chapter 14, John provides three equipping visions that will lead the way to our victory over the forces of evil. The messages of these three can be condensed into the following:

Worship the Lord

Hear his word

Live out his truth

Conclusion

Life can get disorienting, and if we are not careful, murderous.

Just one week ago today we observed the 18th anniversary of the latest tragedy for the Kennedy family. On July 16, 1999, John F. Kennedy Jr. died when the airplane he was piloting crashed into the Atlantic ocean off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The two passengers on board, Kennedy's wife, Carolyn Bessette, and her sister, Lauren, were also killed.

What happened? He became totally disoriented when he couldn't see the horizon. Although John Jr. was qualified to fly at night, the atmosphere was so hazy it prevented him from seeing the horizon. Lacking a proper perspective he ploughed his aircraft into the ocean killing himself and his two passengers with him.

We assuredly need these behind the scenes perspectives of our world supplied to us by the apostle John. Without divine guidance, it's too easy to lose our bearings and fall prey to the siren songs of false kingdom ways. I look forward to learning more next week.