

“The Good News in Revelation: God’s Answer to Injustice”

Revelation 5:1-10; 20:11-15

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

This week we continue our journey into the Book of Revelation, which is one of—if not the most—difficult books to understand in the Bible. A lot of people are scared away from this book because of the vivid descriptions of monsters and beasts, war and bloodshed, final judgment and death. And as we learned last week, even Jesus appears in Revelation as a scary character with hair as white as snow, fiery eyes, bronze feet, and a sword coming out of his mouth. This is hardly the picture of Jesus we get from the four gospels or from the letters of Paul. Actually, this vision of Jesus portrays him as the divine Son of God in all his majesty and glory. Nonetheless, many people avoid reading Revelation believing it is all bad news about the end of the world. And while it does speak of the End Times for this world, Revelation is a book that contains good news about the future of humankind.

The good news is that God has overcome evil and death. Jesus Christ, who came to share this Good News, will come again and the whole Creation will be renewed by God, who will put a final end to suffering and death. So, the message of Revelation is one of encouragement. This was an especially important message for the first Christians who were persecuted for their faith. Revelation told them to hold on, to persevere, even in the face of suffering because God’s final word is not suffering and death, but a word of life.

Before we explore the good news in Revelation any further, let’s find out a little more about the kind of book we have here.

- **Revelation is a letter**, written by John of Patmos to seven churches in Asia Minor, what is today the country of Turkey. In the first century, books and lengthy letters like this were written on scrolls made of papyrus or animal skins. You had to unroll the scroll in order to read it and roll it up again when you were done. If Revelation was published as a scroll today, it would be about six feet long. A letter like Revelation would be read aloud in a gathering because many people back then did not know how to read.¹



Ruins of Ephesus in western Turkey

- **Revelation is a prophecy**. It came from God through Jesus, through an angel, to the writer John. When we hear the word prophecy, right away we think it’s going to be a prediction about the future. It is true that the future is the subject of Revelation—it’s about God’s future for the world. But that’s not all there is to biblical prophecy. Prophecy in the Bible is chiefly about preaching God’s concerns for the way people are living, and to call them back to the worship of God. This is reflected by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, who spoke for God telling people to repent and come back to worshiping God and following God’s ways.²

For example, here is the prophet Isaiah speaking to the people of Israel about their failure to care for other people: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Revelation is a prophecy that both calls people to return to, or keep trusting, God, and reveals God’s plans for the future.

- **Finally, Revelation is a type of literature known as apocalyptic**. When we hear that word, we think about a battle between good and evil—the apocalypse. Apocalypse means to unveil or to reveal. Just like you would draw back a curtain to see what’s going on outside your window, Revelation draws back the

¹ Larry Helyer and Ed Cyzewski, *The Good News of Revelation*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 7.

² *Good News of Revelation*, 8. Mark Allan Power, Ed., *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, Revised and Updated*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 833.

curtain on what God is doing in the spiritual realm and reveals something about the end times. Apocalyptic literature is also found in the Book of Daniel, and in portions of Ezekiel. Apocalyptic writing:

- Asserts that the end times are very near and could happen any day.
- It uses signs, symbols, and visions to convey its message.
- And, it assumes the people who receive the message can figure out what it means.

This last piece is very important. Revelation criticizes people, places and things going in the world at the time it was written, things like: the Roman emperor and the people who were persecuting Christians. If you were a Christian undergoing persecution and you wanted to say something bad about these folks, you couldn't say it plainly. If you did, you'd go to jail. This is why much of the language John uses is selected to keep outsiders from understanding the message from God.

And speaking of persecution brings us back to another important theme of Revelation: Justice. Here is a topic that hits close to home for us. It goes right to the heart of who we profess to be as people of faith. Most of us were brought up on the idea of following the rules, obeying the laws, and treating other people fairly. I remember being taught the "Golden Rule," which comes right from Jesus: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12). As we grew up, though, we learned the world doesn't always work this way. There are people in the world—not a majority, but some—who don't follow the "Golden Rule," or many other rules for that matter. Maybe you've met some of them:

- Have you've ever been cheated by a dishonest contractor?
- How about being purposely shortchanged by someone at the cash register?
- Maybe you've fallen for one of those telephone scams, or someone stole your credit card info and charged hundreds of dollars to your account?
- Or, maybe you or someone you know has been robbed or assaulted?

When we see people who break the law and do harm to others, we want to see things set right. We want justice. Justice is a popular theme in many of our stories, especially when we get to see justice in the end.

One of my favorite movies of this type is *Erin Brockovich*. The film stars Julia Roberts and Albert Finney. It's based on the true story of Erin Brockovich, a single, down-on-her-luck mom, who goes to work for a law firm in southern California. She discovers that many people in the small town of Hinkley are getting sick with cancers and other terrible diseases. She traces the source of the disease to a facility run by Pacific Gas and Electric. For years, PG&E had been dumping toxic chemicals that got into the ground water, sickening hundreds of people. The story ends with PG&E being taken to court and forced to pay out millions of dollars to the people who were poisoned.³

When people are wronged or oppressed or discriminated against like this, we want to see justice.

The same was true for the first Christians who lived in the Roman Empire in the first century. It's kind of hard for us to walk in their shoes—or sandals—but the people who suffered on account of their faith desired to see an end to their suffering and justice against their persecutors. They prayed to God for an end to their torment. In Revelation, they receive an answer: God has heard their cries, God knows of their suffering, and God will act to bring final justice on the earth. We find the unfolding of God's justice in Revelation Chapter 5. The scene is heaven.

- John is brought into a throne room.
- God is seated on the throne. In his hand is a scroll.
- Only by unsealing the scroll and opening it can God begin to set right what has gone wrong with Creation, to establish justice in all the earth.

But there is no one to open it; no one is found worthy. John weeps at the thought that justice for God's people will



Adoration of the Lamb, Hubert van Eyck

³ "Erin Brockovich," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, article on internet, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erin_Brockovich_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erin_Brockovich_(film)), accessed 16 July 2020.

be denied. But then, one of the 24 elders who surround the throne tells John:

“Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5).

Now, there is hope. Now, God’s justice must come. There is one who is worthy, and we know who he is: The Messiah of God. Surely, he can unseal the scroll. Surely, he will lead God’s armies against the armies of the evil one and put an end to suffering and injustice for good. This is just what we’ve been waiting for. We’ve expected a Messiah, the great warrior-general from God. This is it! We’ll have a final war against evil. Now’s the time! Go, get your armor on; get your helmet and your sword; we’re going to war, and Jesus is going to lead us. Anyone familiar with the Old Testament picture of the Messiah would expect to see just this: the Messiah as a warrior leading the charge against evil.

But that is not what John saw in his vision. Instead of a Lion or a great warrior, there is “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Revelation 5:6). Here is the Messiah; here is Jesus. The one who died for our sins and the sins of many is the worthy one. He is celebrated in song by the elders:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation...” (Revelation 5:9).

The message is clear: God’s justice **is** coming; the world **will** be set right. But it will not come by force of arms but by the power of Christ’s sacrificial love.

- Only this kind of love can accomplish God’s justice.
- Only the One who gave his life for us, the same Jesus Christ, can usher in God’s justice in and for the world.

Here is a word of life for those who suffer.

Let me quote from two commentators who summed up the meaning of this passage so well:

The Lamb who was slain in an unjust act by the Roman authorities holds the key to justice for God’s people ... In an epic meeting of symbols, the cross that symbolized justice for the Romans was defeated by the slain lamb that symbolized justice and salvation ... The Lamb has ensured that the church will receive justice in God’s presence one day.⁴

That day comes in Revelation in Chapter 20, in a scene often referred to as the Great White Throne Judgment.



The Last Judgment

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them.¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.¹³And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. (Revelation 20:11-13).

This scene is the fulfillment of God’s justice. When Christ comes, all will stand before the judgment seat of God. The books that are opened contain the records of what everyone has done in life to answer the basic question: Did their lives reflect what they said they believed?

For those who lived in and believed in Jesus, there is something new ahead: Resurrection.

- God will make all things new.
- Heaven will come down to earth and God will make of them a new Creation where there will be no more suffering, no more pain, no more death.

This is the picture we get from Revelation 21. When God judges, we know God’s

judgment will be just because God is just.

- God’s justice will be perfect, unlike human justice, which oftentimes is flawed and makes mistakes.
- God’s justice will honor our choices.
 - o For those who choose to live according to God’s will and direction for our lives, we will live with God and Christ in the New Creation.

⁴ *Good News of Revelation*, 52.

- For those who choose to live without God, to follow their own agendas and priorities; for those who were unjust, violent, abusive, scornful, and without repentance, there is death and final separation from God.

For many people, this is another scary scene. After all, nobody likes the idea of being judged. But for those who have suffered, like the seven churches of Asia Minor, like all who have been subjected to evil and injustice, there is good news.

- The White Throne Judgment is the day of our reward.
- It is where God will declare us righteous and holy because of Jesus Christ.
- God has forgiven our sins through Jesus, who is our advocate, who pleads our case for us, who secured new life for us through his atoning death on the Cross.

This is good news for anyone who has suffered injustice in their lifetime.



***The Prophet Micah
Russian icon***

God is just, and God will bring about justice. It may come slowly; we may not see the justice we long for in our lifetimes. But as people of faith, we are called to be patient, and we are called to seek justice for the vulnerable in our society. The prophet Micah reminds us of this in an oft-quoted passage:

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

And from Martin Luther King, Jr., we have these words: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁵ The good news of Revelation for God’s people is this:

- Persevere in suffering, for you are not alone—God is with you.
- Justice is coming from the God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all that is. He will judge rightly and justly in the end.

May we hold on to this hope and this trust in our God, now and always.

Amen.

Ruins of Ephesus from Pixabay.

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⁵ Deborah Ellis, “The Arc of the Moral Universe is Long, But it Bends Toward Justice,” The White House, President Barack Obama, October 21, 2011, article on internet, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/10/21/arc-moral-universe-long-it-bends-toward-justice>, accessed 15 July 2020.