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Revelation 19:11-21

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# JESUS, OUR GREAT SAVIOR

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

This past week the world has been celebrating the life of William Wilberforce. On Friday the movie *Amazing Grace* was released, timed to coincide to the day with the 200th anniversary of the passage by the British House of Commons of Wilberforce's bill for the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce persevered for twenty years, through tremendous opposition, even ridicule, and through numerous defeats, to get this bill passed. Even after its passage, he did not rest. He continued to press for the abolition of slavery itself. Twenty-six years later a bill to this effect finally passed the Commons on the very day that he died. Wilberforce was a man of principle and integrity, through the sheer weight of which he became the elder statesman of British politics, a man with a sterling reputation. Within hours of his death the government decided to bury his body in Westminster Abbey, perhaps the highest honor that can be afforded in Britain.

I attended the same college as Wilberforce: St John's College, Cambridge. In my first year I lived just above the room that he had occupied, a room now known as the Wilberforce Room. Last weekend the college hosted a conference to mark this 200th anniversary. Last Sunday a special service was held in the college chapel. The Dean concluded his commemorative sermon—a sermon devoid of God or Christ—with these words:

The best legacy the abolitionists we remember today could have would be a people, us, who took the time to understand why they couldn't always sleep, a people who faced the truths of history without averting our eyes; a people who had the courage to try and understand our world as it really is; a people prepared to make a commitment to the scrutiny of our society and its assumptions, and to a renewal of our moral energies, energies for the task of transformation, action and yearning for a world not limited by the present structures, perceptions or even pieties.<sup>1</sup>

Is that so? Would Wilberforce call us simply to face our history, renew our moral energies, and pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps? What was it that kept Wilberforce awake at night? What would he wish as his legacy?

Though St John's College now applauds Wilberforce, the College would not want any of its students to emulate his student life. He was rich and indolent; today we would call him a "party animal." At 21 he won election to parliament by outspending his rivals, and embarked on a career as a self-seeking politician—it all sounds so modern! But at the age of 25 God got hold of him, partly through the ministry of John Newton, and he became a changed man. It was his faith in God that undergirded his integrity and his persistence through constant opposition. It was his thoughts of God that kept him awake at night.

Today the world applauds Wilberforce as a principled man who took a stand against evil, even at great cost to himself. But the world is less comfortable with what motivated him. Hence we have a commemorative sermon with no mention of God.

What are we to do about the evil that is present in the world? The Left, reluctant even to use the word "evil," calls for us to repent of our history, and to imagine a new world, to "visualize world peace," to sing with John Lennon, "Imagine all the people, living life in peace...it's easy if you try." The Right calls for us to respond to evil with force or with legislation. Yet for all the visualizing of the Left and the force of the Right, evil persists. Tragically, 200 years after Wilberforce, the evil of slavery persists. Is this due simply to a failure of our imagination or to insufficient force and legislation?

What should we as Christians, who take our lead not from the Left nor from the Right but from the Scriptures, think about evil? What should we do about evil? More importantly, what is God doing about evil?

The book of Revelation, to which we return today, has much to say about evil. There is deep, systemic evil, evil that runs much deeper than a failure of our own imaginations. There are malevolent forces at work in the cosmos, forces that are implacably opposed to God. Revelation identifies these symbolically as the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. At the root of evil is the dragon, the ancient serpent, also known as Satan or the devil. Constantly working behind the scenes to oppose God and his people, the dragon employs the beast and the false prophet as his visible agents. The beast is the totalitarian ruler. The false prophet deceives the earth-dwellers into worshipping the beast rather than God. Christians at the end of the first century lived in a world in which the beast and the false prophet were clearly visible—clearly visible, that is, for those who had eyes to see. A major purpose of this book is to open the eyes of these Christians to see these realities. The beast was Roman imperial power; the false prophet was the system that orchestrated the worship of Rome and its emperor. Rome and its emperor are long gone but the beast and the false prophet are alive and well in our world today. Behind the beast and the false prophet stands the dragon, Satan. But where does Satan come from? Where does evil come from? We're not really told. The Bible is far more interested in showing us what God is doing about evil than in explaining the origins of evil.

The previous section of Revelation (17:1–19:10) showed the Fall of Babylon, the human city, the city of those who worship the beast. But the fall of this earthly city does not remove evil from the earth. The city of man's creation must fall to make way for the city of God's creation, but the deeper forces of evil must also be removed before heaven and earth can be joined as one holy realm. Between the fall of Babylon and the descent of the New Jerusalem John has another series of visions (19:11–21:8), visions which show this removal of all evil.

I find it helpful to think of Revelation as an art gallery. Each of John's visions is like a painting on the wall. These paintings are arranged in groups, like rooms in an art gallery. Often the last painting in the room forms the doorway into the next room. The chronology is the order in which we view the paintings, not of the events de-

picted in the paintings. The final painting in the previous room, the Babylon room, showed the rejoicing in heaven over the fall of that city. That heavenly scene also forms the entrance into this next room, which begins, “I saw heaven standing open” (19:11).

In this room hangs a series of paintings, seven or eight depending on how you count them. We can think of them in four groups, corresponding to the four walls of our room. On the first wall hang three paintings: the rider on the white horse, an invitation to a gruesome feast, and the defeat of the beast and false prophet (19:11-21). On the second wall hang two highly controversial paintings of the millennium: one shows the dragon bound, the other shows martyrs reigning with Christ (20:1-6). On the third wall hang two paintings of final judgment: one of Satan, the other of everything else (20:7-15). The final wall contains a single painting of the New Jerusalem (21:1-8), which serves as the portal into the next room, the New Jerusalem gallery.

I suggest that if you try to read these paintings chronologically you will get very muddled. Instead, we should allow these visions to remain as paintings on the wall, as we stand in front of each one and ponder its meaning. We’ll find that, as usual, John has made extensive use of Old Testament imagery in composing these paintings.

Over the next three weeks we’ll look at the paintings on the first three walls. On these walls we see three stages of God’s response to evil: he has appointed a great Savior, he has bound evil so as to enliven a new people, and he will ultimately remove all evil from the earth. Today we approach the first wall to look at the first three paintings (19:11-21).

### A. The Rider on the White Horse (19:11-16)

**I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:**

**KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (Rev 19:11-16 NIV)**

The first painting is dominated by an awesome figure mounted on a white horse. The imagery is militaristic, drawn from both the Old Testament and contemporary Roman culture. After a great victory, the successful general, or later the emperor, was awarded a triumph: a grand parade through the streets of Rome, in a chariot pulled by white horses, followed by his army. Jesus is here portrayed as the conquering warrior and hero. His eyes are like blazing fire, and he is armed with a sharp sword for the defeat of his enemies. His robe is blood-stained. Whose blood is this? Some suggest that this is his own blood, or even the blood of the saints, but this aspect of the vision is an echo of an Old Testament text portraying God robed in garments splattered with the blood of his enemies as he comes to work salvation (Isa 63:1-6).

On his head are many crowns: the diadems of majesty. These are worn by only three figures in Revelation, indeed in the whole New Testament. The dragon has seven (12:3), the beast has ten (13:1), for

in the visible world they seem to have all the power and worship. But they are imposters; their diadems are falsely worn. It is Jesus, visible only to the eye that sees into heaven, who wears the true diadems.

Jesus is the divine warrior, God’s appointed deliverer before whom all fall. He judges and makes war; with his sword he strikes down his enemies to impose his rule; he treads the winepress of God’s wrath. This militaristic imagery leads many to expect Christ to appear in bloody vengeance, slaying his enemies left and right in the battle of Armageddon.

But is this really how God defeats his enemies, in a great blood-bath with Jesus at the head? No wonder many are uncomfortable with the bloody scenarios painted by the *Left Behind* books. But there are other aspects of the vision which should give us pause.

Look at the names of this conquering warrior. True, he is the King of kings and Lord of lords, but how did he come to bear that title? His other names tell us: by being Faithful and True, by being the Word of God. In the prologue, Jesus is first introduced to us as “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). Jesus both bore faithful witness to God and he was God’s faithful witness to the world. For this faithful witness he was put to death by a world which shut its ears to God’s word. But God has raised his faithful witness to life as firstborn from the dead, and has installed him as King over all. This King also bears a name “that no one knows but he himself,” which most understand as a reference to God’s own name: this faithful witness now enthroned as King of kings is God himself.

This is crucial to understanding what God is doing about evil. Because there was no true and faithful witness on earth, God sent his own Son to be that witness: the Son who both bore witness to the word of God and was himself the Word of God. Israel and Rome combined in unholy alliance in Jerusalem which had become Babylon to kill the Son. God allowed it to happen. God allowed evil to make its utmost assault upon the only one whom it did not control. On the cross God drew all evil onto his Son. Then in the resurrection God declared that evil, sin and death were defeated. Over the body of his own Son God broke the back of evil. It is this Son that he has installed as King of kings and Lord of lords. The decisive victory has been won.

This scandal of the cross was the centerpiece of the preaching of the early church.

Peter on the Day of Pentecost: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ...Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:36, 38).

Peter to the crowd amazed at the healing of a crippled beggar: “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead...It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing” (Acts 3:15).

Peter to the Sanhedrin investigating this healing: “...Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10).

Peter to the Sanhedrin again: “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (Acts 5:30-31).

It is this Jesus, killed by humanity but raised to life by God, who is the conqueror. No mere human could play this role of savior, for we are all implicated in evil. Israel could not play this role, for it had become indistinguishable from the other nations. Therefore God took upon himself this role. This is how God has shown his righteousness, his justice. Now we see that the sword with which Christ smites the nations comes out of his mouth: it is the Word of God.

Just as a Roman general in his triumph was followed by his victorious army, so Jesus is followed by his army: the armies of heaven. Mounted on white horses, they are dressed in white linen, symbolizing their victory and their purity. Some think that these must be angels since they are described as heavenly, but these are the saints. John has seen this group twice before.

In chapter 7 they are the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, bearing the seal of God, who are also the countless multitude from every nation gathered around the throne. These are robed in white, for “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). Their salvation is not of their own doing. Instead they sing, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10).

John saw them again in chapter 14 as the 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion. Here God has installed his King in the face of the dragon, beast and false prophet portrayed in chapters 12–13. As for these saints, they sing and “They follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4).

Now here are the saints again, following the conquering hero as his victorious army. They have conquered in the same way as Jesus, by being faithful witnesses to the word of God. In the visible world the beast seems to have overcome them, but God has vindicated them as he vindicated his Son, raising them to new life and exalting them to heaven. This is the Lamb’s army, but this army never actually does any fighting. It follows the Lamb wherever he goes, and it sings the praises of God and the Lamb. This imagery is so well expressed in the Moravian seal: “Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.”

## B. Invitation to a Feast (19:17-18)

**And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, “Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.” (19:17-18)**

The second painting shows an invitation to a gruesome supper. John here borrows imagery from Ezekiel, where the Lord pronounced judgment upon Gog, ruler of the land of Magog (Ezek 39:4, 17-20). This great supper of God is a parody of another supper earlier in the chapter, the wedding supper of the Lamb. The saints, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, are the guests at the one supper. God’s enemies are the food at the other.

## C. Victory (19:19-21)

**Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth**

**of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. (19:19-21)**

The third vision shows the final battle to which the first two paintings have pointed. On one side are the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered together for war. On the other are the divine warrior and his army. This is the third of four times John sees a great battle. In chapter 16, demonic spirits from the dragon, the beast and the false prophet gather the kings of the earth “for the battle on the great day of God Almighty” at Armageddon (16:14, 16). In chapter 17, the ten kings allied with the beast “make war against the Lamb” (17:14). Here the beast and the kings of the earth “gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army” (19:19). In chapter 20 the dragon gathers the nations for battle, surrounding “the camp of God’s people, the city he loves” (20:8-9). In each vision the forces of evil gather together to war against God’s people. Are these four different battles? Reading these chapters chronologically results in a muddle. This is the same battle: the battle which has been fought, is being fought and will be fought. God’s enemies are constantly assaulting Christ and his people. To earth-bound eyes the beast seems all-powerful: he has ten horns and seven heads (13:1). His victory seems certain.

But, but, but... The gathering at Armageddon is immediately followed by the declaration, “It is done!” (16:17) and the fall of Babylon. “[B]ut the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (17:14). “But the beast was captured” (19:20). “But fire came down from heaven” (20:9). We never actually see the battle being fought. God’s enemies gather against his people, but they are immediately defeated.

This third portrayal of the battle shows the beast captured. With him is taken the false prophet who has deceived the world into worshiping the beast. Let me remind you that all people in this book worship and they all bear something on their forehead. Many have been deceived into worshiping that which is not fit to be worshiped: the beast who has set himself up as king. Though he seem all-powerful in the visible world he is an imposter, a counterfeit. His worshipers bear the mark of the beast on their forehead, showing their allegiance to him. But there is another group, who worship God and the Lamb, who alone are fit to be worshiped, God as Creator, the Lamb as Redeemer. They bear the seal of God on their forehead, for they belong to him, purchased for him by the Lamb, and they are protected by him.

The beast and the false prophet, these two henchmen that the dragon uses in his evil assault against God, are thrown into the lake of fire. Hitherto the visions of Revelation have been seen on three levels: heaven, earth, and the Abyss. The Abyss is the abode of Satan; it is the antipode of heaven, but unlike heaven it is not eternal. Satan has been hurled down from heaven to earth (12:9), and hurled down from earth to the Abyss (20:3). From the Abyss he summons the beast and his demonic army to assault the earth. But there is a realm lower than the Abyss. This is the lake of fire into which are hurled all that is evil: the beast and the false prophet (19:20), Satan the dragon (20:10), death and Hades (20:14), and those whose names are not in the book of life (20:15). From this place there is no access to earth. God currently allows evil to rise from the Abyss and assault the earth; John is repeatedly shown that God allows this to happen. But this is not the end: God will one day completely remove evil from the world with no possibility of its return. We’ll look more fully at that in the next two weeks.

After their captain is disposed of, the beast's armies are killed. But note again that the weapon is not the physical sword. This is not a physical bloodbath at Armageddon. Instead, God's enemies are felled by the word.

### God's Response to Evil: The Slain Lamb

In conclusion, what are we to think as we look at these three paintings? What were the Christians at the end of the first century to think? They lived in a world of much evil. Their world looked to the Roman Emperor as its savior and hero. To him this world offered its worship while opposing any who refused to give such worship. But the Christians saw things differently. They saw heaven opened. They saw that the beast was but an imposter, that he was unworthy of worship. They saw, instead, one who was worthy, for he was Faithful and True. They saw that God had appointed a conquering lion, but they saw also that this lion had conquered by being the slain Lamb.

Yes, we live in a world in which evil is afoot. But we see into heaven. We see that God has broken the back of evil on the body of his own Son. At the heart of God's response to evil is the conquering lion who is the slain Lamb. Evil has already been broken; God will one day remove it entirely. How will God finally remove the instruments of evil, the beast and the false prophet? I don't know what it will actually look like, but the last thing I expect is a pitched battle on a field running with blood. God's weapon is not the physical sword but his word of truth. That word is ultimately the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who is Faithful and True.

Our eyes are on Jesus, our great Savior. So were Wilberforce's eyes. He wrote,

If we would...rejoice in [Christ] as triumphantly as the first Christians did; we must learn, like them to repose our entire trust in him and to adopt the language of the apostle, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Jesus Christ" [Gal. 6:14], "who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" [1 Cor. 1:30].<sup>2</sup>

It was God's saving grace in Christ which motivated Wilberforce. This is the legacy he would have wished for us. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

1. Duncan Dormor, sermon during Gospel Mass to mark the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807. St John's College, Cambridge, February 18, 2007.

2. William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797), quoted in John Piper, *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 72.

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