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*Parish of Central Saanich - St. Mary's and St. Stephen's*

**Lent 2016**

**Bible Study Series**

***"Perspectives on Life from the Book of Revelation"***

The Rev. Dr. Brett Cane

*Mondays at St. Stephen's - 7:00 p.m.; Wednesday at St. Mary's - 11:00 a.m.*

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***Study #4: "Nothing Succeeds Like Failure -  
God Has a Job for Us to Do"***  
**Revelation 5, 11 (6, 7, 8, 9, 10)**

***Opening Prayer:***

*Heavenly Father, in your Son Jesus Christ you have taught us that to lose our lives is to gain them; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to receive this truth deep within our hearts and then to live it out in our lives and bear faithful witness to Jesus, to the glory of your name. Amen.*

## **Introduction**

When it comes to success or failure, I think we all like to do well, to succeed. Sometimes, however, the methods we use to ensure we end up on top are less than ideal. We will use whatever power is available to us that gives us the advantage. We will expand the truth to make us look good in the eyes of others. We will tell stories about people to give folk the impression we are in charge. We will coerce people to do our bidding through our superiority in emotional, financial or physical strength. In all of our striving, though, it rarely dawns on us that God calls us to succeed through failure, as Jesus tells us: "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Mark 8:35). As the only major religion that has as its symbol a sign of humiliation and defeat - the cross, Christianity has a lot to say about succeeding through failure as shown in the key passages of Revelation we are studying today - chapters five and eleven. We begin by setting the scene in chapter 5.

## **Setting the Scene (Chapter 5)**

We open in the throne room of heaven which continues the scene from chapter 4 where we left off last week. There we saw that God is in control and in his rightful place at the centre of the universe which we affirm through genuine, heartfelt worship. In chapter 5, the One who sits on the throne holds out a scroll fastened with seven seals which no one can open until the Lamb of God appears in the midst of the throne and who alone is worthy to open it. This results in great praise and worship of the Lamb and the One who sits on the throne by "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them" (Revelation 5:13). In the following chapters (6, 8, 9), as the seven seals are opened, and later, as the seven trumpets sound, there are two series of seven judgements which proclaim God's verdict upon evil but which, by themselves, do not have the effect of bringing about repentance or establishing God's rule. The

opening of the seven seals does not reveal the content of the scroll which occurs only in chapter 11 which we shall look at later.

### **The Scroll and the Lamb**

What is this scroll with seven seals? If God had given this vision to John today, it might have been, "And I saw a safety deposit box with seven locks, but I wept because no one had the keys to open them" (verses 1-4, adapted). The seven seals give us the clue that the scroll is a testament, or will - to be opened, when possible, in the presence of the seven witnesses who sealed it, then read aloud and executed. The scroll is God's plan for the bringing in of his Kingdom which is now ready to be declared and put into effect. But no one can open the scroll - until we see the Lamb who alone is worthy to open it. Why? Because it is only by his self-sacrifice that the plan can be brought about.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before we meet the Lamb we see the Lion - "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (verse 5). We have heard these titles before, beginning in Genesis (49:9) through Isaiah (11:10) and into Revelation itself (Rev. 1:17-18; 22:13, 16). We think of the great warrior hero, descended from the royal line of David, who will defeat Israel's enemies and free them from tyranny.

But no sooner are we introduced to the Lion than we see him transformed into the Lamb - and a slaughtered one at that: "A Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne" (verse 6). Now our minds go back to the Passover Lamb whose blood allowed the Israelites to go free at the Exodus from Egypt (Exodus 12) and the sacrificial Lamb of Isaiah on whom "the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

The Lion who is the Lamb: the One who conquers by being defeated. Jesus did not come into Jerusalem riding on a great charger but on a humble donkey; his crown was not of gold but of thorns, his throne a cross. The plan of God for restoring his kingdom is centred on the death of Jesus. God's way of defeating evil and restoring his kingdom through sacrificing himself - seeming failure - has been successful!

### **Success through Failure**

The concept of success through failure has tremendous practical implications for society and our own personal lives. Thinking back to John's time, the Christians were surrounded by a world order upheld by enslavement and brute force. We tend to sentimentalize the Roman Empire and think only of its glory but we forget the economic and physical oppression it was built upon - coercive power - which will be revealed as we travel further through Revelation. I remember a comment made by a radio newscaster the morning after the Academy Awards in which the film "Gladiator" won the Oscar for "Best Picture". He described it as an epic depicting the "glories of ancient Rome." I don't think he had seen the movie - it really depicts the depravity and corruption of that oppressive system.

Here in chapter 5 we have a different vision of power. God's power is not like that of Rome. The reference to the seven eyes and the seven-fold Spirit of God (verse 6) points us to a complex image related to forgiveness in chapters 3 and 4 of Zechariah which says "There are seven eyes

on that one stone...These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range throughout the earth...And I will remove the sin of this land in a single day...Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zechariah 3:8, 9; 4:10; 4:6). God's power is not like that of Rome. His victory is achieved by freedom from sin and empowerment by the indwelling Spirit, not brute force.

Jesus spoke about how we use power when he was faced with the request from the mother of James and John that they sit at his right and his left in his kingdom. Having just spoken of his impending death at the hands of the authorities (Matthew 20:17-19), he then tells them "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25-28). A commentator observes that "It is instructive that Matthew places the outrageous request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee between Jesus' declarations of ultimate sacrifice and selfless service."<sup>1</sup>

Look at history. How did the Roman Empire become Christian? Through the martyrdom of the believers, not conquering hordes. When I was in Rome a few years ago, I lined up for an hour to get into the Coliseum, there were so many people present. But when we finally entered the arena, it was as if the thousands of people sight-seeing had melted away. Yes, the building is vast, but there, standing below where the Emperor's box used to be was a huge black cross, commemorating the up to 90,000 Christians who were martyred in that place. That is why there was a hush; that is why the Roman Empire turned to Christ – through the sacrificial deaths of believers. Look at the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down on the 9th of November - we did not have to resort to military victory but to faithful prayer and internal collapse. A recent article on the BBC website "Did a prayer meeting really bring down the Berlin Wall and end the Cold War?" documents the effect of a prayer meeting of thousands at St Nicholas Church in the East German city of Leipzig which itself was a culmination of seven years of faithful prayer.<sup>2</sup> Did the crusades bring about the re-conversion of the Middle East? The legacy of those unsuccessful armed conflicts still haunts us today in challenges to our efforts to tell Moslems of the love of Christ. Jesus charges us today to look at how we relate to one another as nations, ethnic groups, a church family, and individuals. Do we try to achieve our goals through co-coercion or manipulation, shows of strength and superiority? As an example on a small scale, do some of us use our long-time service in the congregation to impress others and get them to do what we want? Do others of us use our more extensive Christian knowledge or spiritual experience to do the same thing?

Jesus' response to us is: "Those who would come after me must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for me and for the gospel will find them" (Mark 8:35). This is true martyrdom - not necessarily actual death but death to self. This is how Jesus conquered sin, the world and the devil and we are to carry on his work in the same way. Success through failure.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris Stuart, in *Encounter with God*, Scripture Union Notes, October-December, 1999, pg. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Crutchley, BBC NI Digital & Learning; October 9, 2015, found on <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/0/24661333>

## Judgements and Delays

But before we expand on this, I want to answer the question some of you might be asking: "But what about the horrendous judgements that follow chapter five in chapters six, eight and nine? Aren't they coercive in nature, using brute force to change people's minds?" This is a good question, because judgement is an important feature of the book of Revelation.

Two points will help us as we begin to answer the question. First, judgement is the beginning of God's victory over sin and evil. The judgements of the *seven* seals, trumpets and bowls find an echo back in Leviticus (26:18-23.): "If after all this you will not listen to me, I will punish you for your sins *seven* times over." Judgement prior to the coming of the Kingdom of God is rooted in teaching of Old Testament prophets<sup>3</sup> and Jesus in the Gospels.<sup>4</sup> Evil must be shown up for what it is. Injustice must be dealt with. Salvation and judgement are two sides of the same coin.

Secondly, the actual judgements do not issue directly from God. They are called out or unleashed by the four Living Creatures or the seven angels and their trumpets (e.g. 6:3, 8:5). They are not portrayed as the naked or direct power of God which would be very coercive indeed. But what are these judgements? Many see them as specific prophecies just before Jesus returns. But in Mark 13:7, Jesus says that such disasters must happen, "but the end is not yet." Although things may get worse in the future, these disasters are common to every generation. They are more the natural outcomes of human sinful behaviour, the world as it is, and the unleashing of demonic forces brought on by human co-operation with evil.

John's images come from two sources: one is the Old Testament, for example the plagues of Egypt at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 9, 7, 10); the other is from contemporary events of John's time such as the eruption of Vesuvius darkening the sky for weeks and making the moon look like blood or the severe North African famine in the last decade of the first century which produced strikes and rationing in Rome itself. The rider on the white horse (Revelation 6:2) would have given people the instant image of an invasion by the mounted bowmen from the dreaded Parthian Empire on Rome's eastern border - much the same as visions of Russian May Day parades would have aroused fear in us during the days of the Cold War. John uses traditional and contemporary disasters to demonstrate God's continuing judgement against human arrogance and sin.

But there is a further purpose in judgement and that is to lead us to repentance. God's heart wants to deliver people from evil and this is revealed in Revelation 6:10. When the fifth seal is opened, the martyrs cry out "how long?" They are told to wait a little longer. Why? To give time for the people of the world to repent and receive God's rule in their lives. Throughout Revelation there is a tension between the need to end injustice as soon as possible and to give time for people in the grip of evil to repent of it. Thus there are restraints and delays. A demonstration of restraint is symbolized by the fact that the judgements are not as devastating to begin with. The seals of chapter 6 affect only a quarter of the earth (Revelation 6:8) and during the trumpets the destruction is increased to only a third (Revelation 8:7, and ff.). Delays are shown by the two pauses in the series of God's judgements between the sixth and seventh seals

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Amos 5:18ff. Isaiah 2:12 ff., Zechariah 1:2ff.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 13 and its parallels: Matthew 24, Luke 21.

(chapter 7) and between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets (chapters 10 and 11:1-14). They represent "breathing spaces" - time allowed by God for witness and a chance to repent.

Unfortunately, this approach is unsuccessful; none of this results in repentance. At the end of the judgements of the seals and trumpets, John says: "The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshipping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood - idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts" (Revelation 9:20-21). The coercive power of judgement has not worked. What does work is success through failure - ours!

### **Our Role in God's Plan**

The stage is now set for the revelation of the content of the scroll in chapter 11 which describes God's plan for the Church - the part we are to play in his plan to rescue the world. Like Jesus, who is the faithful suffering witness (cf. 1:5), we are to put into practice the principle that nothing succeeds like failure. God will reclaim his kingdom by extending his mercy through the witness and martyrdom of His people. God has a job for us to do.

But before we look at chapter 11, we have already been given pointers in previous chapters to our purpose and role in God's rescue plan. In chapter 5, in the song to the Lamb we heard: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God" (Revelation 5:9, 10). This states clearly that we have been saved to serve. "The victory Jesus has already achieved in his death and resurrection is decisive, but needs to be continued by his Christian followers in the present and completed at his coming in the future."<sup>5</sup>

Then in chapter 7 we move from battle imagery to martyrdom. In verse 4 we read of the famous 144,000, thought of by some as the number of people in heaven. This is a stylized number, representing the whole of the people of God. We see this in the handout outlining the number symbolism of the Book of Revelation.<sup>6</sup> Not only do we know it is stylized by the actual number itself (the number of the people of God (12) times itself times the number of great magnitude (1000)), it also reads like the OT census figures when the tribes of Israel were numbered for military service (e.g. Numbers 1:34-35). The counting shows that the whole people of God were included. But this battle imagery is immediately replaced in verse 9 by an unnumbered multitude of martyrs: "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb." The 144,000 and great multitude are the same people, but now described as from every nation, tribe, people and language. Therefore, the number of the saved is not limited to 144,000 – it is a representational figure for the whole of God's people.

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Bauckham, *New Testament Theology*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), pg. 67.

<sup>6</sup> See handout "Number System in Revelation", taken from John Richardson, *Revelation Unwrapped*. (London: St. Matthias Press/MPA Books, 1996), pg. 16.

By switching from battle imagery to martyrdom, we are taken back to the similar transformation of the conquering Lion of Judah to the sacrificed Lamb of God in chapter 5 (9). The people of God are “Wearing white robes and holding palm branches,” (7:9) and they have come through “the great tribulation” (7:14). The washing of robes in the blood of the lamb in this verse refers to sharing in the sufferings of Jesus not just cleansing from sin; the palm branches speak of the victory procession. In other words, just as Jesus conquered through death, so do we. Our role is to follow Jesus into martyrdom, but then there is resurrection.

Then in chapter 10, John is given a little scroll (verses 8, 9) which is the same one as taken by the Lamb in chapter 5 whose contents are now revealed in the first part of chapter 11 (verse 1-13). On these verses hang the key to understanding the meaning of the whole book of Revelation, which we will unlock in a few moments. The end of chapter 11 (verse 14-19) sees the sounding of the seventh trumpet which ushers in the final victory and kingdom of God. The rest of Revelation from chapter 12 on is an elaboration and expansion of the contents of chapter 11. As I described in my first study, it is like "clicking on" specific aspects of the "web page" of God's vision to get greater details.

### God's Plan Revealed

We now look at the contents of the first part of chapter 11 (verses 1-13) which reveals the secrets of God's plan. John measures the temple of God (verses 1-2); two witnesses prophesy for a limited period; they are then overpowered and killed by the "beast from the abyss" (verses 3-10); they are resurrected shortly afterwards (verses 11-12); and then comes a great earthquake with limited destruction followed by a great turning of people to God.

What does all this mean?

- ***Role of the Church:*** The story is really a parable about the role of the church.<sup>7</sup> The two witnesses are composites of Moses and Elijah. We can see this when John refers in verse 6 to them as having “the power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain” (i.e. Elijah – 1 Kings 17, 18) and “the power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague” (i.e. Moses - Exodus 7-11). Moses and Elijah were prophets who stood up to the pagan world of their times. The concept of two witnesses also leads us back to the olive trees and lampstands from Zechariah 4: (1-6) as well as the seven lampstands of the first chapter of Revelation which have now become two (Revelation 11:4). When you put all these images together we see that they represent the church as a whole, as did the "144,000" and the "great multitude" of chapter 7. We, the church, are the lights that "shine" with Jesus; we, too, are called to be prophets, witnesses through our "deaths," both literally as actual martyrs, and figuratively through death to self daily.
- ***The protecting of God's people:*** The "measuring" in verses 1 and 2 represents the protecting of God's people just as their "sealing" did in chapter 7 (verse 3) It is the sign of God's ownership of us; we are sealed by the Spirit to be preserved through the great trials we will go through. This same concept of protection is expressed through the 42 months, 1260 days, and three-and-a-half years (verses 2, 3, 9, 11). They all represent half of 7, the fullness of time; in other words, their suffering is for a *limited*, not unending period. The tribulation and

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Bauckham, pg. 84.

persecution will not last forever. The resurrection of the witnesses (verses 11) parallels that of Jesus - the apparent victory (seen in verses 7, 10) of God's enemies is not to be; the death of the witnesses does not refute their testimony, but confirms it.

- ***The world repents:*** The subsequent earthquake (verse 13) leads to repentance. However, this time destruction is limited - only a tenth of the city is destroyed compared to a quarter and a third under the seal and trumpet judgements (Revelation 6:8; 8:7ff; 9:15). 7,000 are killed but nine tenths are left and turn to God - "and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven" (verse 13). Here is God's great victory. We saw that the previous limited judgements did not work (see 9:20 - "The rest of the people...still did not repent of the work of their hands, etc.") so in this, God's "last-ditch" effort to give people a chance to repent in this final interlude, it is the church's suffering witness that brings about repentance which judgements alone could not. The redemption brought about by the sacrifice of the Lamb is made effective through our witness to him by our continuing in the path of suffering and death. This is the unfolding of God's plan to rescue the world. Our role as martyrs is crucial to his plan.

### **Our Job Description**

How do you like your job description - to be a martyr! Of course, not all are called to literally die for their faith, but it is still a major feature of Christian experience. More Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than the previous 19!<sup>8</sup> The current situation for Christians in ISIS-controlled areas is one of the most horrendous persecutions of all time. For us, we may not be called to die literally but we are called to die to self daily. The symbolism of Revelation is very clear - we do not escape persecution - being a follower of Jesus sets us up for it. Our witness involves suffering.

This is made clear by the phrase "witness of Jesus" (12:17, 19: 10). It "means not 'witness to Jesus', but the witness Jesus himself bore which his faithful followers continue to bear. It is primarily Jesus' and his followers' witness to the true God and his righteousness... (it) is connected with Revelation's dominant concern with truth and falsehood."<sup>9</sup> (We will look at this and its implications for us in our final study). When the early Christians faced literal death in the Roman Coliseum with courage and hope, they bore witness to the truth of resurrection life in Jesus. For us, it means that we live a life of truthfulness and not one of denial avoiding the deeper work of renewal we know God wants to do within us. People see our participation in Christ's triumph over death when sin and evil are being conquered in our own lives. Or do they see us compromising?

But we do more than live out the life of Jesus, we also speak it out. In chapters 10 and 11, there is much emphasis on the prophetic nature of our witness. The allusions to Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet speak of the knowing the truth of God's law and the application of that

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<sup>8</sup> Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den: A Shocking Account of the Persecution and Martyrdom of Christians Today and How We Should Respond*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), pg. 1, as reported by Dr. James Dobson, in his October, 1999, Focus on the Family Newsletter. See also Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, (Dallas, TX; Word Publishing, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Bauckham, pg. 72f.

truth in current and personal history. Prophecy is the forthtelling of God's truth. Part of the message is one of repentance (the two witnesses wear sackcloth – 11:3). We are called to show up the errors of the age, to call people to repentance, to come out of compromise, to receive God's mercy and to be filled with his love. We do this, not with an attitude of self-righteousness, but as fellow-sinners. This is the prophetic role that we are called to play. We must stand firm and name evil for what it is – both in ourselves and in the church we love and society around us..

This is most difficult in a country and age (and church) where tolerance is the watchword. Now there is nothing wrong with what used to be called tolerance - everyone has a right to their own opinion. But this has now been subtly transformed into the complete opposite - all positions are valid. If this is so, then I am not free to speak out against anything, I am not allowed to express my opinion! So you shrink from standing up for the truth because it can make you very unpopular; you may be called narrow-minded, old-fashioned, or any number of names. People will say you are "imposing" your views. You are not imposing anything; is it "imposition" to throw a life-line to a drowning swimmer? God calls us to speak the truth with grace and love. We may be crucified for it, but God will bring about a resurrection - remember that we are sealed with the Spirit. Do not be afraid. This is our calling.

## **Conclusion**

Our job as part of God's plan to rescue the world is to be his witnesses. Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 24 in connection with the end of the age: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). "The people of God have been redeemed *from all the nations* (5:9) in order to bear prophetic witness *to all the nations* (11:3-13)."<sup>10</sup> Go and do your job!

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pg. 84.