

July 25, 2010      Psalm 90:13, 14; Psalm 91:1-2, 14-16; Revelation 7:9-17

## **STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK**

Two weeks ago we left Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Han Solo celebrating the demolishing of the Death Star. There was a “New Hope” for the empire. When we left John’s letter, we were at the end of chapter 3 where Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” He also promised that if we open the door, He will come in.

Had the “Star Wars” movies ended with “A New Hope,” we could have said, “And they all lived happily ever after.” The same could be said for the Revelation. But we would have been wrong.

In the movie, Darth Vader and the evil emperor are still very much alive. In Revelation, death has been vanquished by the Lamb of God, but Satan is still very much on the prowl. In Episode 5, “Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back,” there are huge battles to be fought and our heroes will undergo terrible trials and tribulations.

In Revelation, beginning with chapter 6, the joyful praises of chapter 5 are about to be shattered. The Lamb is the only one worthy to open the scroll by breaking the seven seals. And when He breaks the first seal, John sees the most fantastic things.

We can shake our heads and brush off the things about which John writes as the diary of a mad man. Or we can look at these chapters as typical apocalyptic writing – meant to be dramatic and fantastic for the purpose of revealing great truth.

We watch the “Star Wars” movies with their fantastic creatures and space ships; we see humans depicted with unbelievable power and ability; and we enjoy the story that is being told: a tremendous, awe-full battle between good and evil. And we understand the violence and the fantastic nature of the movies.

When we come to the middle chapters of Revelation, we need to look at them in a similar way. John is using human language that is limited by our very humanity to try to describe the ultimate battle between good and evil. And in his vision, he sees fantastic and terrifying creatures that help to unfold the great drama that is taking place.

Remember that John saw the Roman Empire as evil, and was trying to help these young Christian Churches withstand it's power. His imagery is violent and fantastic – but no more so than what creative movie producers like George Lucas, Stephen Spielberg and Stephen King have given us.

John sees the struggles of the 7 churches as a matter of life and death. He wants to impress upon them the seriousness of what is happening all around them. His visions are terrifying – and rightly so. The Christians are battling the source of all evil.

The 1<sup>st</sup> four seals reveal the four horsemen: white for conquest; red for blood, meaning civil strife; black for injustice which leads to famine; pale for death.

The opening of the 5<sup>th</sup> seal reveals the souls of those slain for bearing witness to God, and they cry out “How long, O Lord!” This plaintive cry is a familiar one in the Old Testament. We heard it in Psalm 90.

When the 6<sup>th</sup> seal is opened, there is a terrible earthquake and the sun turns black; the moon becomes like blood and stars fall to the earth. Can it get any worse than this? The 6<sup>th</sup> seal unleashed terrible destruction and suffering. But in chapter 7, we see that God's faithful people are protected by the seal of the angels.

Just as God put a mark on Cain to protect him, and in Ezekiel where a mark was put upon the faithful, so a mark – a seal – is put upon the foreheads of the 144,000 so that no damage will befall them.

Notice the similarity to Passover, where the blood of a lamb marked the homes of the Israelites and kept their firstborn safe from the angel of death. Remember that the number 144,000 is simply a number that is too large to count in Greek. It is not a literal number.

Chapter 7 goes on to talk about the multitude from every nation – too great to count – whose robes have been made white in the blood of the Lamb. Note the irony of red blood making robes white. They have come out of the great ordeal or the great tribulation and they shout praises to God and to the Lamb with loud voices – yet more worship!

As you read Revelation, do you get the notion that there is a lot of noise in heaven as God is praised? Chapter 7 ends with the assurance and hope that “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Chapters 8-18 are jam-packed with extraordinary images that are frightening and violent. These seem strange to us, but to John’s listeners, they would have been commonplace because “Revelation” is typical apocalyptic literature. It is comparable to us watching the “Star Wars” movies, the “Chronicles of Narnia” movies, “The Lord of the Rings” movies, or reading those wonderful C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien books.

This middle section of “Revelation” is similar to “The Empire Strikes Back” in that evil seems to be getting the upper hand as battles are fought and trouble is packed upon trouble. Darth Vader looks like he has the upper hand. Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Han Solo are struggling. In “Revelation” after the 7<sup>th</sup> seal is opened, there are horrible beasts that arise – one from the sea and one from the land.

Rome controlled the seas and the highways (or land) and the economy that traveled over them; so there is a beast from both. The situation looks dire. The 2nd beast is given the number 666. Let’s deconstruct that number. John says it is the number of a man.

The ancient Romans, Greeks and Hebrews used the letters of their alphabets as numbers. The Hebrew letters for “Nero” come to 666. It is very possible that John was using code language, which the folks in the 7 churches would have understood perfectly. Just as Babylon meant Rome, so the beast with the 666 mark meant Nero – representative of Rome.

Why would John have such antipathy toward Nero? Here’s a little history lesson. Nero was born in 37 AD. He had a very unstable childhood. Emperor Caligula banished his family around 39 AD, seizing the family’s entire fortune. Nero’s father died a year later.

He was raised in poverty by his mother until she married her uncle, Emperor Claudius. She convinced Claudius to adopt Nero and in 50 AD Nero became the heir apparent – ahead of Claudius’ own son. In 54 AD Nero became emperor at the age of 17 when his mother murdered her husband, Claudius! A lovely family!

Nero was hated as the Emperor. He was very lewd, involved in all sorts of deranged sexual practices – including incest with his mother and rape of both men and women. He eventually murdered many people, including his mother and sister.

In 64 AD most of Rome burned down. The people blamed Nero and the Empire was in an uproar. Nero needed a scapegoat, so he blamed Christians because they refused to worship the Emperor, refused the Roman cultural traditions, and refused Roman gods and goddesses.

Nero began murdering Christians – a practice that lasted for the next 200 years. Nero enjoyed torturing his victims before they died. He liked to dip Christians in wax, impale them on poles around his palace, then set them on fire, yelling “Now you truly are the light of the world.”

Nero’s persecution was practiced throughout the Empire and was carried on by Emperors Domitian, Valerian and Dioclesian. The Apostle Peter was crucified by Nero and the Apostle Paul was beheaded by Nero. Is it any wonder that John would name the horrible beast “666” – or Nero?

In the “Empire Strikes Back” there is a terrible battle between evil and the forces of good. Darth Vader tries to seduce young Luke Skywalker over to the “dark side of the Force.” The strength of that evil force is palpable.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, we are struggling against principalities and powers. This is not child’s play. Anyone who has been the object of racism knows the strength of that evil. If you have fought against pornography or the selling of children into the slave trade, often for sexual purposes, you can become overwhelmed with the perversity and enormity of that battle.

Those of us who work with ministries to the hungry or the homeless, with victims of domestic violence, or with those who are unemployed, can sometimes feel that all our efforts seem like a drop in the bucket compared to the vastness of the need.

But it’s nothing new! This is exactly what life was like for John and the Christians in the 7 churches to whom he wrote. Some were being sucked in to the temptations of the dark side – to the Roman culture and its emperor worship and its fondness of whatever feels good, at the expense of the poor.

Still others were discouraged, downtrodden, bruised and beaten up by trying to live a life that honored Jesus and not the emperor. John's letter was meant to strengthen them for the battle that was already being waged. And his letter is meant for us as well.

The end of "The Empire Strikes Back" is very dark. Darth Vader seems to be winning. Han Solo has been captured and is encased in a slab of carbonite. Luke Skywalker has learned the horrific news that his father, Anakin Skywalker, whom he thought was dead, is in reality Darth Vader, right hand man to the evil Emperor.

And in his battle with Vader, Luke loses his right hand – cut off by his own father. Can it get much worse? I remember watching Luke fall down, down, down, the shaft, and wondering how it would all end. As the movie concludes, the battle is going badly for the army of the Rebellion – those who oppose the Emperor.

Sometimes we feel that the battles we face are going badly and we get discouraged. But John reminds us here in chapter 7 that "the Lamb is in the midst of the throne; He is our shepherd, and he will guide us to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes." 7:17

"The Empire Strikes Back" is not the end of the "Star Wars" saga, and John is not yet finished with his "Revelation." As we will learn in my next sermon, "Soon and Very Soon, we are going to see the King!" Keep the faith!

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