

Revelation should end when the seventh angel sounds his trumpet, and **there are loud voices in heaven, which say: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”**

(Revelation 11:15) The fight is finished. The war is won. End of story!

But John remembers what we forget. He remembers the seven churches whom he cherishes and whose spiritual life he watches over. He remembers the forces that threaten them. He needs to make sense of their impersonal and irresistible power.

John does not disappoint. He paints picture after memorable picture of the principalities and powers that rule the world and seem unshakable as earth itself. Vision after vision infuses the institutions of Imperial Rome with an air of something sinister and foreboding.

John does it with another vivid view of earth from heaven’s perspective. He locates the growing hostility toward Christians and the Roman institutions that condone it in a much larger setting. The seven churches of Revelation and the little people who make them up find themselves players in the ancient war between light and darkness.

### War in Heaven

John conveys this war and its outcome in the sign of the Woman and the sign of Dragon. The Woman carries God’s purpose through time. She is Eve. She is the daughter of Zion. She is the Virgin Mary. Her Son **will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.**

(Revelation 12:5) He signals the doom of darkness and the eclipse of evil.

The sign of the dragon opposes the sign of the Woman. It is **an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky and flings them to the earth. The dragon stands in front of the woman who is about to give birth, so that it may devour her child the moment he is born.** (Revelation 12:3, 4)

The Woman and her child are spared. War in heaven ensues, and Michael and his angels drive the Dragon and its angels out of heaven. But they win the war in heaven only because the followers of the Lamb overcome the dragon on earth **by the word of their testimony; they do not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.** (Revelation 12:11)

The dragon, **that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray,** (Revelation 12:9) knows that his time is short. War in heaven becomes war on earth, and it is war to the death between the Dragon and the Woman. The Dragon furiously attacks the Woman’s offspring. The seven churches of Revelation find themselves caught in the crossfire. We find ourselves caught in the crossfire. The Lamb and His army of martyrs have won the decisive battle in this warfare, but war rages on.

### The Beasts

The Dragon embodies itself in the form of a beast out of the sea. The beast, like the Dragon, has **ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.** (Revelation 13:1) It brooks no rival. **People . . . worshiped the beast and asked, “Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?”** (Revelation 13:3, 4) But the beast is **given power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them.** This attempt to crush the Church is how the dragon defies the authority of the Lamb.

The 24 elders and the four living creatures had sung to the Lamb. **You are**

**worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.** (Revelation 5:9) In defiant imitation of the Lamb the beast is **given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.** (Revelation 13:7)

The seven churches will not escape the power of the beast. **If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people.** (Revelation 13:10)

God's people endure another beast, the beast out of the earth. It has **two horns like a lamb, but it speaks like a dragon** (Revelation 13:11), and it exercises **all the authority of the first beast.** (Revelation 13:12) It is a deceiver. Whatever it says and however it smiles, it deceives **the inhabitants of the earth.** (Revelation 13:14) It causes **all who refuse to worship the beast out of the sea to be killed.** (Revelation 13:15) It mandates a mark of allegiance to the first beast, **so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark.** (Revelation 13:17)

The name of the beast out of the sea is a number, and it haunts mankind like a bad memory. It is the name 666. The seven churches of Revelation may have no more idea of why that number was chosen than we do, but every church knows, and we know, it means Rome, iron Rome, awesome in power and ominous in its growing oppression of the Church.

### The New Exodus

In opposition to demonic, deadly Rome stands the army that doesn't fight, the 144,000. **They follow the Lamb wherever he goes** (Revelation 14:4), and we know where the Lamb goes – He goes to slaughter. His strange army sings a song no one else can hear, and they fight with the Lamb's weapon: truth. **No lie was found in their mouths.** (Revelation 14:5)

An angel heralds the gospel they must bear faithful witness to: **"Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come."** (Revelation 14:7) A second angel heralds the fall of Babylon, the symbolic name of Rome. (Revelation 14:8) A third angel calls on the seven churches of Revelation to refuse the mark of allegiance to the beast, whatever the cost. **This calls once again for the patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.** (Revelation 14:12)

The Dragon's war against the Woman and Her offspring yields an unexpected harvest. The **one "like a son of man,"** (Revelation 14:14) the One who walks among the churches and summons them to overcome, now with sickle in hand, swings **his sickle over the earth, and the earth is harvested.** (Revelation 14:16) The martyrs' blood has watered the earth and brings forth a rich harvest of those who **fear God and give him glory.** (Revelation 14:7)

The Dragon's war against the Woman and Her offspring also yields an unexpected vintage. **The angel swings his sickle on the earth, gathers its grapes and throws them into the great winepress of God's wrath.** (Revelation 14:19) Then, like Israel of old, passing through the Red Sea, **those who had been victorious over the beast** (Revelation 14:2) pass through at last to safety, and they sing: **Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are worthy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been**

**revealed.** (Revelation 15:3-4)

A third sign, along with the sign of the Woman and the sign of the Dragon, appears in heaven: **the seven angels with the seven last plagues.** They pour them out until Armageddon rings down the curtain on Babylon. **And** how do the inhabitants of the earth respond? **They curse God,** (Revelation 16:21) unrepentant to the end.

### Take Aways

The seven churches of Revelation know that John foretells the fall of Rome. Every person today with the facts in hand knows that Rome did not fall for another 300 years. The angel was in no hurry to swing **his sickle on the earth**, gather **its grapes and throw them into the great winepress of God's wrath.** (Revelation 14:19) The wrath of God will come in many forms before that catastrophe; and along the way God extends mercy to His prodigal sons and daughters who refuse to give Him the glory due His name.

John's theological thriller simply does not invite a gory death wish for Roman or any other civilization. It calls upon the Church to overcome by bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ and the glory of God in the face of tyrannical opposition, even to the point of death. They like the Lamb overcome **by the word of their testimony; they do not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.** (Revelation 12:11)

If we miss that, we miss the message of Revelation; and we can miss it with pious-sounding words. When older evangelicals in this country are distressed about the moral and political decline they see around them, you may hear them say: "The Lord must be coming soon." Those words can easily mean, "I give up." They can easily mean, "There is nothing I can do."

But the decline of American influence in the world will not be the cause of the Second Coming of Christ. The moral confusion in our nation is no reason for the Second Coming of Christ. Decline in American church attendance and the Second Coming of Christ are not related. We are creating a bizarre phenomenon. "Older Christians grow disenchanted with the world and want the Second Coming of Christ. Younger Christians grow disenchanted with the Church and want to be Jesus in the world." (C. J. Stunkard, personal conversation, March 12, 2014) The devil divides our witness.

We can do better. We all belong to the Lamb's army. The white-robed martyrs have bequeathed their legacy to us. They say to us, "Now you shine. Now you do the most important thing. You bear witness to Jesus Christ and the glory of God. The conversion of the nations awaits your faithful witness."