

Revelation — Lesson 3

Rome Played an Important Part in God's Plans

Daniel 2 tells us about four kingdoms that would rule in the 600 years from the time of Daniel to the time of Christ. The history of those great empires was determined by God long before it happened.

And history shows us the hand of God in those historical events. How else can we explain the rise of Greece under Alexander the Great? How else can explain the ascendancy of Rome over such great powers as Carthage, and the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon, Syracuse, and the Seleucid empire? How else can we explain the triumph of the church over the mighty Roman empire even though Rome attacked when Rome was at its height and the church was in its infancy?

Listen to a few sentences from the introduction to the recent book, *Roman and Her Enemies: An Empire Created and Destroyed by War*: "Lying at its heart is a mystery as profound as any in the records of human civilization. How on earth did the Romans do it? How did a single city, one that began as a small community of castle-rustlers, camped out among marshes and hills, end up ruling an empire that stretched from the moors of Scotland to the deserts of Iraq?" The answer is that it happened because God made it happen, just as he had already told Daniel that it would happen.

It is interesting to study about the interplay of Greek and Roman culture at the time of Christ. As Horace famously stated, Rome may have conquered Greece, but Greek culture conquered Rome. The combination of Greek culture with Roman might created the perfect cradle for the coming of Christ and the beginning of his kingdom, and it was not by accident!

The Greeks brought reason, rationality, logic, and language. Rome brought peace, roads, trade, law, and communication. Although Roman religion later brought emperor worship and persecution, ini-

tially it was open and tolerant. This situation allowed Paul to do what he did and take Christianity beyond Jerusalem into the Greek world.

The importance of the Roman peace, the *pax Romana*, cannot be overstated. The Greeks' hobby was war. The church would have had a much more difficult time reaching beyond Jerusalem had the Greeks still been in charge.

Another important factor was the Greek language, which had been around since 800 BC and had twice the vocabulary of Latin.

Those who believe that Christianity is anti-intellectual and irrational should note that Christianity began at a time of Greek intellectualism and rationality, and again that was no accident. It is no accident that the church was established, not in a time of superstition, but in a time of rational inquiry. Greek thought is admired even to this very day. In fact, it has been said that the Greek contribution to western philosophy was western philosophy!

Who Were the Emperors of Rome & Why Should We Care?

We are going to spend quite a bit of time discussing the early Roman emperors. Who were they and why should we care?

We should care about them because Daniel and John wrote about them. In fact, Daniel sketched out the history of the first 11 Roman emperors 600 years before they came to power. John described them while they were in power. We will need to understand that historical context if we are to understand this book.

As we discussed earlier, our focus will be on the first eleven emperors. (Where even though we say *first* we should keep in mind that Rome was a monarchy *before* it was a republic as well as *after* it was a republic. We are starting our count *after* the republic.)

Julius Caesar was killed by those who feared that he was leading Rome toward a monarchy. His death in 44 B.C. marked the end of the Roman republic. His adopted son Octavius became Augustus—the

first Roman emperor. The first five emperors make up the Julio-Claudian Dynasty.

- Augustus was the first emperor (although no one at the time would have called him that). Many argue that the list should begin with Julius Caesar, and in fact the classic work by Suetonius (*The Twelve Caesars*) does begin with Julius. However, history tells us that Augustus was the first emperor. Further, he was the emperor at the time of Christ, which is another reason to start with him. Finally, as we will see, the internal evidence supports using Augustus as our starting point.
- Tiberius was the stepson of Augustus.
- Caligula was the adopted grandson of Tiberius.
- Claudius was the uncle of Caligula.
- Nero was the stepson of Claudius.

The next three emperors ruled during the Civil Wars of AD 68-69.

- Galba reigned 7 months and then was hacked to pieces in front of the Forum on Otho's orders.
- Otho reigned 95 days and then killed himself after Vitellius defeated his army.
- Vitellius reigned 8 months and then was killed after Vespasian's army entered Rome.

The next three emperors make up the Flavian Dynasty.

- Vespasian (along with his son Titus) put down the Jewish revolt of AD 67-70 and destroyed the Jewish temple.
- Titus was Vespasian's eldest son and reigned for only 26 months.
- Domitian was Titus's younger brother.

These 11 emperors are depicted in Daniel 7 and Revelation 17.

How and When Did Rome Fall?

In our studies of Revelation, I will argue that its judgments are largely directed toward Rome, who was then persecuting the Lord's church.

That argument will present us with some important questions: When did the Roman empire fall? How did the Roman empire fall? What factors contributed to the fall of the Roman empire? How was the fall of the Roman empire a divine judgment? Did the fact that "Christianity" had become the official state religion indicate that the enmity between the Roman empire and God had ended?

The imperial period of ancient Roman history began in 27 B.C. when Octavian, later called Augustus, became the first emperor of Rome and ended in A.D. 476 when the last Western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was overthrown. The Roman empire continued in the East for another 1000 years until the invasion by the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century.

According to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, four primary reasons stand behind the eventual collapse of the Roman empire: External invasion, Inner decadence, Inner strife, Injury of time and nature.

Daniel 2 described the inner weakness of the yet future Roman empire as follows:

And as you saw the feet and toes partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle.

This description from Daniel 2 fits well with Gibbon's theory as to why Rome fell. In any event, if Rome is indeed the villain of this book,

then it is clear that Rome is judged in this book. How and when did that judgment occur?

One theory is that Rome was judged when the Western empire fell and the city was invaded in A.D. 476. A potential problem with this view is that it pushes the judgment off for quite some time, which could cause a concern with the time frame of the book. Another potential problem is that the much ballyhooed fall of Rome in A.D. 476 was not viewed at the time (according to some) as much of a fall and, in fact, the Eastern Roman empire continued on for another 1000 years. It is possible, however, that the judgment in view in Revelation is against the *city* of Rome rather than the entire *empire* of Rome.

Another theory is that Rome was judged when Nero died in A.D. 68 and the Julio-Claudian dynasty came to an end and was further judged when Domitian, the last of the emperors considered in Revelation, was murdered in A.D. 96 and the Flavian dynasty came to an end. As for the emperors that followed Domitian from AD 96 to 180, Gibbon writes:

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world when the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would without hesitation name that period which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors whose characters and authority demanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, (Five Good Emperors) who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws.

Although we should note that Christians were persecuted by emperors who ruled after Domitian (Diocletian in AD 303, for example).

We will have more to say about these two theories as we proceed into the text. (If you have been reading the 1990 commentary from our website, you will notice that it takes the first approach.)

But Didn't Rome Convert to Christianity?

Hadn't Rome become a "Christian empire" by the time it fell in A.D. 476? How could that fall then be a judgment by God?

It certainly appears to some that Christianity conquered Rome under the emperor Constantine, and many historians so argue, but is that really what happened? In order to answer this question, it will be helpful to first consider the life and supposed conversion of Constantine the Great. History books portray Constantine as a great champion of Christianity and a friend of the church. but was he?

Constantine was born in about A.D. 285 and came to power through a complex series of civil wars. At this point, his primary concern centered about how to unify the empire under his authority. With this aim, he embraced Christianity as a unifying force, staked everything he had on its support, and began to use it for his own purposes.

Was Constantine's conversion genuine? This question has long been a subject of debate and speculation. Michael Grant has the following to say regarding Constantine's motivations:

The emperor's motives have been endlessly analyzed and discussed. But it appears that he and his advisors experienced a growing conviction that, however uninfluential the Christians might be at present, the course of events was working, or could be made to work, in their favor—since they alone possessed the universal aims and efficient, coherent organization that, in the long run, could unite the various conflicting peoples and classes of the empire in a single, all-em-

bracing harmony which was “Catholic,” that is to say, universal.

A politician exploiting Christians for his own personal power and benefit — where have we ever seen that before?

Constantine not only ended the persecution of Christianity but he began to treat Christianity as though it were a state religion which, in fact, it later became. He authorized state money to be used for the construction of elaborate church buildings.

His own personal lack of conviction is evidenced by the facts that he had his son, Crispus, put to death, his wife, Fausta, put to death, and he retained his position as the chief priest of the pagan state religion.

Ramsay Macmullen wrote the following with regard to Constantine’s view of Christianity:

Few of the essential elements of Christian belief interested Constantine very much—neither God’s mercy nor man’s sinfulness, neither damnation nor salvation, neither brotherly love nor, needless to say, humility. Ardent in his convictions, he remained nevertheless oblivious to their moral implications.

Some peoples’ religion is so private they don’t even impose it on themselves! There are many modern-day Constantines!

Alistair Kee in his excellent book *Constantine Versus Christ* described Constantine’s attitude toward religion as follows:

[His attitude toward religion] played an important part in his ambition to conquer and unify the Empire. ... Religion was too important to his strategy to leave in the hands of the ecclesiastics.

Was Constantine a positive influence on the Church? Alistair Kee makes the following point with regard to this question:

Because of his relationship to the church, Constantine was able to influence it and Christianity at a profound level. We must now consider how Constantine's values infiltrated the church: not how he was converted to Christianity, but how through his religious policy he succeeded in converting Christianity to his position.

Kee states later that "the values of Constantine replaced the values of Christ within Christianity" and that "Christianity was enlisted in his own personal crusade to gain control of the Empire and in the process Christianity was transformed."

The Roman empire's *embrace* of Christianity did more to damage the Church than did the earlier persecutions. Persecution, in a sense, allowed the Church to remain "pure" by effectively excluding anyone not willing to face death for his or her beliefs.

Remember Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 12:10 — For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Alistair Kee mirrors these thoughts when he states:

Only a sadist would wish that persecution continue in the church, only a masochist welcome it, and yet suffering seemed an inescapable experience for early Christians. ... [T]he history of the church till the fourth century was of random and often intensive persecution. Whenever the Emperor or the traditions of the Empire seemed threatened, it was open season on persecuting Christians. And yet this tiny minority, insignificant, weak and defenseless, not only survived but grew. ... To Christians ... it was not at all incredible that persecution could actually strengthen the church: it brought precisely the experience in which God was made known to them in strength. The later Roman influence effectively weakened the Church from within.

This is always the effect that society has on the church. When we let the world into the church and start letting the world change us rather than seeking to change the world, we weaken the church from within.

“Under Imperial favor the Church experienced a rapid growth. Many who thronged into it did so from expediency, rather than deep religious conviction, and the moral and spiritual quality of the Christian community suffered.”

The marriage of Rome and the church was an adulterous one and the resulting offspring matured into Roman Catholicism. Although it is both common and, in an initial sense, understandable to treat Constantine as a great champion and benefactor of the Church, a close examination reveals that his influence was far from beneficial.

F. W. Mattox described Constantine’s influence as follows:

Out of respect to Constantine for the favors he showed, the church gave up her independence and began to rely upon the head of the state for its organization and authority. The leaders seemed too concerned with present problems to see the danger in these developments.

Alistair Kee described Constantine’s influence by stating:

The fundamental issue is not whether Constantine called himself a Christian or not, but how he actually used Christianity and how, in the course of using it, he transformed it into something completely different. ... [I]n gathering up lines of thought often already present in the church and developing them in a certain way, they combined to effect something which had never been accomplished hitherto, the replacement of the norms of Christ and the early church by the norms of the imperial ideology. **Why it has been previously thought that Constantine was a Christian is not because what he be-**

lieved was Christian, but because what he believed came to be called Christian.

Finally, the following excerpt, also from Dr. Kee's book, provides a sobering lesson in the dangers of compromise. The church of Constantine's day, in embracing Rome, rejected Christ. (Did Rome become more like the Church or did the Church become more like Rome after Constantine? Ask a *Roman Catholic*.) After commenting upon the strength that the Christians had obtained through their persecution and suffering Kee notes:

[I]t is therefore all the more tragic that Christians should, in the moment of victory, forsake the Revelation in Jesus, for its opposite in Constantine. The church did not need the protection of Constantine; it had already taken on the Empire, century after century, and had in the end been victorious. ... If Constantine had in turn persecuted the church, he too would have failed to conquer it. How was it then that he was able to succeed where his predecessors had failed? How was it that by a little kindness, a word of praise here, a grant to build a new church there, he was able to induce the church to forsake what they could not be made to forsake under threat of torture or death? The Emperor offered so much, beyond the dreams of Christians recently under constant threat. He offered in effect at least a share in the kingdoms of the world. When Satan is seen to offer such rewards, the temptation is rejected. When one comes professing to be a follower of the One God, then his offer is accepted. ... And once again the Son of Man was betrayed with a kiss. Not that the betrayal took place in a moment. It was a gradual process. Gradually the church came to have faith in the Emperor, to trust him and to see in him and in his ways the hand of God.

How Should We Approach Revelation?

Numerous approaches to this book have been proposed, and we will next briefly review the major ones.

What is the Historical Approach?

The Historical Approach is sometimes called the standard Protestant interpretation and is taken, for example, in the *Gospel Advocate* commentary by Hinds.

This approach views the book as a forecast in symbols of the history of the church. The Roman Catholic church often plays the role of the villain in this approach.

And it is certainly true that the Roman Catholic Church and the Roman Empire have much in common. Listen as historian Will Durant describes the relation between the two, and specifically describes the transformation of Rome into the Roman church:

Christianity... grew by the absorption of pagan faith and ritual; it became a triumphant Church by inheriting the organizing patterns and genius of Rome.... As Judea had given Christianity ethics, and Greece had given it theology, so now Rome gave it organization; all these, with a dozen absorbed and rival faiths, entered into the Christian synthesis. It was not merely that the Church took over some religious customs and forms common in pre-Christian Rome—the stole and other vestments of pagan priests, the use of incense and holy water in purifications, the burning of candles and an everlasting light before the altar, the worship of the saints, the architecture of the basilica, the law of Rome as a basis for canon law, the title of Pontifex Maximus for the Supreme Pontiff, and, in the fourth century, the Latin language as the noble and enduring vehicle of Catholic ritual. The Roman gift was above all a vast framework of government, which, as secular au-

thority failed, became the structure of ecclesiastical rule. Soon the bishops, rather than the Roman prefects, would be the source of order and the seat of power in the cities; the metropolitans, or archbishops, would support, if not supplant, the provincial governors; and the synod of bishops would succeed the provincial assembly. The Roman Church followed in the footsteps of the Roman state; it conquered the provinces, beautified the capital, and established discipline and unity from frontier to frontier. **Rome died in giving birth to the Church;** the Church matured by inheriting and accepting the responsibilities of Rome.”

We should be careful before we take a first century description that could apply to Rome and lift it out of that context to apply it instead to the Catholic church, even those these striking similarities suggest the description might very well appear to closely fit the Catholic church.

A major problem with the historical view is that it operates with the unstated assumption that we are presently living close to the end of the world. For all we know, there may be a million years of church history yet to come in which case the 2000 years we have seen so far will seem like a drop in the bucket. Remember, the end of the world will come like a thief in the night; there will be no signs!

Any theory that is based on an assumption that we can know that we are living in the end times is deeply flawed! It is based on a faulty premise.

This view ignores John’s clearly stated time frame for the book, that the things described therein were not to be sealed up but rather were to shortly come to pass.

In addition to ignoring the time frame, this approach makes the book to be of little significance to its initial readers. Further, it quickly becomes absurd in its attempt to match historical details to the visions in the book. As in the popular book by Nostradamus, something in

Revelation can be found to fit almost any historical fact if the context and time frame are ignored.

What is the Futurist Approach?

The Futurist or Eschatological Approach claims that nothing in Revelation from chapter 4 until the end of the book has been fulfilled yet. Instead, the entire book will be fulfilled at some time immediately preceding the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. This approach includes the very popular dispensationalist view that is summarized below:

- Jesus came to establish a visible rule on earth.
- The Jews did not accept Christ so the offer to rule was withdrawn.
- The establishment of the kingdom was postponed until his return.
- The church was established for the interim period. The church is a parenthesis in history and is not a fulfillment of any Old Testament prophecy. The church is a mistake! (This is always a part of pre-millennialism. They downplay the importance of the church—the body of Christ!)
- The church age will end with a “rapture” in which all believers will meet Christ in the air. This is the first stage of the second advent.
- During the next seven years, the antichrist will rule the earth, the Jews will be restored to Palestine, the temple will be rebuilt, and the sacrificial system will be reinstated. Those saved during this time are called tribulation saints.
- The antichrist will break a covenant with the Jews after 3½ years and a terrible persecution will follow.

- After another 3½ years Christ will appear a third time, defeat the antichrist, and rule on earth for 1000 years.

Hal Lindsey's *original* scenario of the end is even more imaginative:

- For 3½ years Satan will rule the world through a Jewish antichrist in Rome.
- The Jews will be allowed to rebuild the temple.
- Many Jews will be converted and a worldwide evangelism program will be undertaken by 144,000 Jewish preachers.
- After 3½ years the antichrist will set up his own image in the newly rebuilt Jewish temple.
- World War III will break out.
- Egypt will invade Israel.
- Russia will invade the Middle East and trample both Egypt and Israel.
- The Roman dictator will invade Israel.
- Rome will launch a nuclear attack against Russian forces in Israel.
- 200,000,000 Chinese troops will march on Palestine to battle the Roman army.
- The battle of Armageddon will begin and lead to worldwide destruction.
- Jesus will return to reign on earth for 1000 years.

If this seems dated, we are not the only ones to notice. Lindsey recently released a new book with an updated schedule of events.

Time does not permit us to discuss everything that is wrong with such an approach. First, it ignores the time frame as did the first approach that we considered. Further, it causes the book to have little significance to its initial readers. Finally, it changes as quickly as the headlines. Many thought Hitler was the antichrist— some still do. The political scene that caused Lindsey to reach his conclusions in 1974 is quite different in 2009.

Many saw Gorbachev as the antichrist— he even came complete with a built-in ‘mark of the beast’! More recently Hussein became their antichrist du jour as he threatened Israel with destruction while based near the site of historic Babylon. When asked about his changing views, a local dispensationalist preacher in Dallas said he wasn’t worried because everything he had said (and later retracted) was Biblical!

The ‘end-is-near’ crowd is not unique to our time. They have existed in every century since and including the first. A recent book entitled *AD 1000: Living on the Brink of the Apocalypse* shows how the ‘end of the world’ mentality raged near the end of the first millennium. That book begins with the following sentence: “On the last day of the year 999, according to an ancient chronicle, the old basilica of St. Peter’s at Rome was thronged with a mass of weeping and trembling worshippers awaiting the end of the world.” Even Paul battled those who thought that the end was near in the first century.

Although the purpose of this study is not to expose premillennialism, we will next consider a few of the basis tenets of that popular but badly misguided approach to this book.

What About the Millennium?

Does it make any difference what we believe about premillennialism? Is it all just a matter of opinion? Does it have anything to do with the so-called core of the gospel?

Carroll Osborn, the Carmichael Distinguished Professor of New Testament at ACU, wrote a book entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom* in which he grouped premillennialism among items that are just matters of opinion on which we should just agree to disagree. (On the same list

he placed the issue of whether baptism is *for* the remission of sins or *because of* the remission of sins.) **He is badly mistaken.**

John Walvoord, a leading **proponent** of premillennialism, has the following to say about the importance of the dispute:

If premillennialism is only a dispute about what will happen in a future age which is quite removed from present issues, that is one thing. If, however, premillennialism is a system of interpretation which involves the meaning and significance of the entire Bible, defines the meaning and course of the present age, determines the present purpose of God, and gives both material and method to theology, that is something else. It is the growing realization that premillennialism is more than a dispute about Revelation 20. It is not too much to say that millennialism is a determining factor in Biblical interpretation of comparable importance to the doctrines of verbal inspiration, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection.

It does make a difference what we believe about this subject. The premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel.

We owe a great debt to Foy E. Wallace for keeping premillennialism out of the Lord's church. Foy Wallace (then the editor of the Gospel Advocate) debated Charles Neal (minister of the Main Street Church of Christ in Winchester, Kentucky) in 1933 about the 1000 year reign. He was largely responsible for keeping that false doctrine from infiltrating the church. We have an "anti-debate" attitude today seemingly for fear we might offend someone by our knowledge and conviction, but I am certainly glad that was not the attitude back when Foy Wallace was preaching (and the church was growing!). Christians of his generation were much more interested in pulling perishing people into the boat than they were about not rocking that boat!