

## **Christ vs. Empire** *The Book of Revelation*

### **Christ vs. Empire, Part 6: When the Empire Burns** *Revelation 13, 18, and 21 (selections)*

Mako A. Nagasawa  
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Neighborhood Church of Dorchester

#### **Introduction: On Fire!**

Our country is on fire. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, the fires came as a response to another police shooting: Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back by police officers, as he calmly walked to his car. His children were in the car, and watched. This brought out massive protests, much of it peaceful. But there was the burning of buildings and cars. Our country is on fire. Weeks ago, Val showed a picture of the fires that burned in Minneapolis, Minnesota: the police station, the Target store. After the police murder of George Floyd, massive protests and demonstrations erupted everywhere. Portland, OR was another city that showed our country is on fire.

Our planet is on fire. California is burning: dry lightning storms have caused over 700 forest fires, which Native Americans understood how to prevent. Two of the fires have been in the top three largest fires California has faced.<sup>1</sup> In June, the Arctic portion of Siberia had forest fires, with record heat and fire for the second straight year in a row.<sup>2</sup> Earlier this year, Australia was on fire, with 15,000 fires throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, back in California, Death Valley, California reached what might be the hottest temperature recorded by humans on the planet: 130 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>4</sup> The world is on fire.

#### **Relevance: When the Empire Burns**

Why does this matter to us? For lots of reasons, but some Christians and other folks have said the end of the world is coming. Fires were supposed to be a sign of the end. Are we living in the days of the last Empire? If so, so what? What does Jesus say about it? We need to see with the eyes of faith that Jesus is purifying us from our allegiance to *Empire*. Fire reminds us about what is false and what is true.

#### **Text and Context**

At Neighborhood Church of Dorchester, we've been in this series called Christ vs. Empire. Revelation tells us that we are headed for one city or the other. Babylon the Great or the New Jerusalem, the holy city. Where do we set our hearts?

The Book of Revelation is the most mysterious of all the books of the Bible. It was written down by John, the same John who wrote the Gospel of John. It was probably written towards the end of John's life at the end of the first century AD. The two books are very related. Revelation promises a blessing on anyone who reads and "heeds the words of this book" (Rev.22:7). So it was written to encourage Christians who were persecuted by the Empire.

#### **The Last Empire Introduced: Revelation 13**

So the last Empire is introduced in Revelation 13. The Empires will get worse. I'll read just a few verses to show you how that Empire looks.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Hay, "Why California's Wildfire Year Could Be the Worst in Decades," *Reuters* and *U.S. News and World Report*, August 28, 2020; <https://www.usnews.com/news/top-news/articles/2020-08-28/mother-nature-on-steroids-early-signs-point-to-devastating-california-fire-season>

<sup>2</sup> Laura Millan Lombrana, "Siberian Arctic Temperatures and Fires Beat All Records — Again," *Bloomberg*, July 7, 2020; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-07/arctic-siberia-fires-and-temperatures-beat-all-records-again>.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Hurst, "Climate Change 'Clearly Played Role' in Australia's Severe Fire Season," *Euronews*, August 25, 2020; <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/25/climate-change-clearly-played-role-in-australia-s-severe-fire-season>.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Berardelli, "Death Valley Reaches 130 Degrees, Hottest Temperature in U.S. in At Least 107 Years," *CBS News*, August 17, 2020; <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/death-valley-records-highest-temperature-107-years-heat-wave/>.

1 Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns *were* ten diadems, and on his heads *were* blasphemous names. 2 And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like *those* of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. (Revelation 13:1 – 2)

What in the world is this? How do we read it? Let me give two quick principles about how to read Revelation, in general. It's hard if not impossible to read Revelation literalistically. Just take this for example. The beast has seven heads in v.1. But it has one mouth in v.2. How is that possible? Wouldn't the beast have to have seven mouths? Here are two principles I find helpful.

#### *First, Revelation is a Code*

Do you know when Cynthia Erivo in the movie *Harriet* sang the song, "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt-land. Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go!" Slaves sang that song because it had a double meaning. It was a code. They could always say, "We're just singing about the Bible, singing about the Bible. Nothing to see here." But the double meaning or the code was about liberation and escape. Let my people go. The ancient Jews and early Christians were also captive peoples, held by Empires. So they used the words and phrases of the biblical books before them to write books like Daniel and Zechariah and Revelation. This style is called "apocalyptic" literature.

#### *Second, Revelation is Like a Mural*

The way Revelation uses words and phrases from the earlier biblical books is like a mural. If you see a mural of black history, there are certain people's pictures that you're likely to see: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr. and so on. There may be scenes like ships crossing the Atlantic to Obama swearing in as President. You have to know the story, the history, in order to appreciate the mural. Revelation is like that. It's throwing a bunch of words and images together like a mural. It's dense. There's a lot to look at.

So what is the last Empire? It combines all the Empires that came before it, and that's why the Empires get worse. It's a beast coming out of the sea: That refers back to Daniel 7. Daniel saw four Empires rising out of the sea. Empires rise out of the Gentile peoples. Israel was the people of the land, of the garden, and of rest. The Gentiles were the people of the sea, of chaos, and of restlessness.

But from Daniel to Revelation, there's a change. Revelation fuses the four different Empires that Daniel saw. Elements of the Greek Empire as the fast moving leopard are there. Elements of the Persian Empire as the strong bear are there. Elements of the Babylonian Empire as the roaring lion's mouth are there.

Why does this Empire have ten horns and seven heads? Because it's mature and developed. Ten is the number of establishment in the Bible. How many Commandments did God give Israel at Mount Sinai? Ten. He established Israel's law, and they built a moral vision from there. Just before that, how many plagues did God bring upon Egypt in the Exodus? Ten. He established the undoing of Pharaoh's reign. How many times did God speak in the creation of Genesis 1? Ten. He established the heavens and the earth. There are ten horns. Horns represent authority, like a crown. So ten horns represent an established authority, authority that grows on. The Empire also has seven heads. Seven is the number associated with completion in the Bible. God completed the heavens and the earth in seven "days" in Genesis 1. God completed the temple with seven objects in it in Exodus 25 - 40. God completed Israel's calendar with seven holy days in Leviticus 23. Why does the Empire have seven heads? Because heads represent sources. If the beastly Empire has seven different sources, it's a complete collection of different political sources, nations, conquerors, and so on.

It makes sense. Every new Empire has to beat the last one. It swallows the last one and becomes like it in some way. That's why the U.S. as an Empire has the cultural pride of the Greek Empire with its desire to enslave outsiders and dominate them through culture and language. The U.S. has the centralized military power of the Roman Empire with a conquest narrative to impose the "pax Romana" or Roman peace on others (e.g. Virgil's *Aeneid*). The U.S. took over from the British Empire its naval power, its air power, and its financial power. Empires just swallow each other's strengths. So an Empire with ten horns and seven heads is mature and developed. It's changed over time, but it's now one animal. The Empire in Revelation is already a combo. Every Empire is going to be like this.

But there is one difference between the Empires before Jesus, and the Empires after Jesus. And that is: The Empires need to claim Jesus' authority. They were threatened by Jesus' authority before. They can't allow him to continue. So they claim Jesus' own authority. They trick the Church into supporting the Empires. Here is Revelation 13:11 – 12.

“Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb [like Jesus, the true lamb] and he spoke as a dragon [like Satan, the serpent]. 12 He exercises all the authority of the first beast [the Empire] in his presence. And he makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed.”

I think this second beast is a Jesus imitation, a false Jesus, or a false Church. Because this second beast, who claims authority with his two horns like a lamb, is getting people to worship and obey the first beast, the Empire. This is a perversion of Christianity. This is a false Church that supports the Empire. The Empire had a fatal wound, because Jesus said he and he alone is king of kings and lord of lords. In fact, in Daniel 2, the sequence of four Empires was represented by a statue and that statue was hit by a huge stone which destroyed it (Daniel 2:34 – 35). That means that all Empires were done for. But the beast of Empire “was healed” from its “fatal wound” (Revelation 13:12) with the help of the second beast (who was “coming up out of the earth” like an Adam-from-the-earth figure meaning its origin was probably from “the church” and not “the unbelievers” who are represented by “the sea”) that the Book of Revelation foresees will serve the Empire. There have been so-called Christians who said Roman Emperor Constantine made the Roman Empire into a Christian Empire -- that's not actually true, and there's no such thing. But there were so-called Christians in Nazi Germany who agreed with Hitler. And there are so-called Christians in the U.S. who are okay with white Christian nationalism or just white nationalism. Two weeks ago, I said there are Christians in a nation, but there is no Christian nation. We are called to influence, to activism, even to shape policies. But we always point people to Jesus.

And yet just a few days ago at the Republican National Convention, Vice President Mike Pence twisted Hebrews 12:1 – 2 and 2 Corinthians 3:17. He took out the name of Jesus, and he put in the U.S. flag: “So let's run the race marked for us. Let's fix our eyes on Old Glory and all she represents. Let's fix our eyes on this land of heroes and let their courage inspire. And let's fix our eyes on the author and perfecter of our faith and our freedom.” No! Hebrews 12:1 – 2 says, “Let us also run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross [which is the Empire's social media tool of humiliation], despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Let me make clear that it's not just Mike Pence as an individual person, and I'm not judging whether he really knows Jesus or not. I don't know. But it's the idea his speech represents that is a problem: It's the idea that if you do what is good for the U.S., you are doing what is good for God, for Jesus, and for Christian faith. But no: Jesus calls us to do what is good whether or not it is good for the U.S. Christians in the British Empire were so committed to abolishing slavery, they eventually led Great Britain to the point of “economic suicide.” Was it good for the British Empire? Well, not in an economic sense. But Jesus calls us to do what is good whether or not it is good for the Empire.

Then at the end of Revelation 13 is verse 18: the mark of the beast that very empire wants to mark on its people. the ultimate sign of a mature Empire, the number 666. Now how many of you get freaked out by the number 666, whenever you hear it? Like in NYC, there's a building at 666 Fifth Avenue. It's owned by the Kushner family. “Aha!! I knew it!!” That's a joke, friends. But it illustrates something important. Christians have been freaked out about anything with 666 in it *today*. But what does 666 mean in the Bible?<sup>5</sup> Who is the only person in the Bible associated with the number 666? King Solomon. He set up the temple where God once came down in fire [and Revelation 13:13 says the second beast “performs great signs, and even makes fire come down from heaven to the earth in the presence of men” -- which is an imitation], and then his trade surplus in one year was 666 talents of gold in 1 Kings 10:14 and 2 Chronicles 9:13, which today would be worth around \$1 billion. He was the ultimate in human greatness in a sinful way because he claimed to live right next to God's house, have God's wisdom, and rule with God's blessing. But his sin broke the people; the twelve tribes fell apart after Solomon. So when we see in Revelation 13 the first beast of the Empire, and the second beast of the fake Christianity. And its leadership fusion

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<sup>5</sup> Start with the number 6. What did God make on day 6? Human beings (Gen.1:26 - 28). Human beings were meant to have dominion in creation in a godly way, to represent God's goodness and wisdom and love. But of course that got twisted by sin. So who was 6 cubits tall? Goliath. What was 66 cubits tall? The statue made by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. These are all examples of human greatness, but in a sinful way.

uses the mark of Solomon, the 666, the image of the king who lived next to God, had God's wisdom, and ruled with God's blessing.

### **The End of the Empires**

What is the destiny of the Empire? Every Empire consumes itself, even this type. The Book of Revelation describes it as a city that eats itself and burns itself. Later in Revelation 18:8, it says: "8 For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong..." (Revelation 18:8)

What are we reminded of? The Exodus, when God delivered Israel out of Pharaoh's Egypt. God said to Israel, "Come out of her, my people." And He brought down plagues to defeat the Pharaoh, and to encourage other people to go out with Israel (Ex.12:38). This time, the Empire is named "Babylon the Great," because the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 roped in all people. Then Revelation describes how rich this Empire made some people, even while it turned people into "slaves" and crushed "human lives" (Rev.18:11 - 13).

The fires in our cities and the fires in our forests are giveaway clues that the American Empire is consuming itself, and the fake Christianity that supports the American Empire is fake. Ultimately, God gives people over to their own choices (Rom.1:24, 2, 28), and that is His judgment. Fires like these have been happening for a long time, like when the city of Rome burned under the pagan Emperor Nero, who did not cause it directly.<sup>6</sup> But Constantinople burned under the Christian Emperor Justinian, and it was far worse because he caused it.<sup>7</sup>

God is just, and He will not allow the unjust system forever. He does not allow hypocrisy forever, especially in His name. Then in Revelation 18, the book gives us an actual command:

20 Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her..." 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth." (Revelation 18:20, 24)

Let me be very clear. We are not rejoicing over the fires in our cities or in our forests. We take them as a warning, as clues, and we take them seriously. We are to rejoice that God will one day defeat the Empire, including the fake Christianity of the Empire that passes under His name.

### **The Holy City: Revelation 21**

How do we respond to the fact that our country is on fire and will be on fire, that our world is on fire and will be on fire. I want to highlight three options. We might get discouraged, destructive, or devoted to Christ. Let me repeat that. We might get discouraged, destructive, or devoted to Christ.

*Discouraged:* Do you feel discouraged? Many have. We might feel like there's not much point to picking up trash, to beautifying our neighborhood, to planting trees, to making Boston better. Why do love and justice if the world is burning? And will burn? Why sacrifice for others? Why extend yourself in courage? Some people turned that question into the question why would you polish the rails on a sinking ship? Yet Scripture says, "Let us not lose heart. Do not give up doing good." (Hebrews 10:23 - 25)

*Destructive:* Or we might feel destructive. We might get resentful. We might join the forces of destruction in some way, letting anger dominate us. Scripture says, "Be angry [because Jesus got angry, so anger is appropriate], but do not sin..." (Ephesians 4:26). Do not be controlled by it and let it become something more, something else.

*Disturbed, but Devoted:* But Jesus calls us to be devoted to him. Because there is a deeper fire. In Revelation 21, we see how Jesus has been forming and shaping his own people to show his goodness in the midst of the evil Empire. The church is called a city purified by Jesus' fire:

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<sup>6</sup> Editors, "Nero's Rome Burns," *History.com*; <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/neros-rome-burns>

<sup>7</sup> Melissa Snell, "Overview of the Nika Revolt," Thoughtco.com, July 19, 2019; <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-nika-revolt-1788557>.

10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. 12 It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names *were* written on them, which are *the names* of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel... 18 The city was pure gold, like clear glass. (Revelation 21:10 – 12, 18)

This is an image of purification. Pure gold, like clear glass. That's a really cool image, and again it shows us how to interpret the Book of Revelation. Pure gold is not clear, like glass is. So we are supposed to interpret it to get the meaning. Pure gold is purified by fire, and has no impurities. Clear glass is purified by fire, and has no impurities. This whole city is full of precious metals and precious gems. Not just diamonds in the rough, but diamonds cut to shine at their most brilliant. This is who we are and who we are becoming in Jesus. Jesus purified his own human nature, especially when he stood up against the forces of Empire without becoming like them. In Revelation 1, he is the purified one, the fiery one. By his Spirit, he is purifying us, so that the glory of the Father could shine in us and through us in the same way it shines in him. Here's an example of that from a sister in Milwaukee:

“Good morning family. I need to share a testimony about the goodness of the Lord. This morning I got up to walk Sherman. Committed to not let the evil one scare me out of my community, I took the same route I always take towards Washington Park. I carried the same frisbee, water bottle, and dog that Peter had yesterday. As I crossed the street at North and 46<sup>th</sup> a young man approached me and asked me about my dog. This happens daily but today felt different. It was 645 this morning, right around the same time Peter was robbed. I decided this wasn't a coincidence. He asked me my dog's name and if he could pet him...It made me nervous but in faith I decided to be my pre-robbery self. I told him it was Sherman and I let him pet him. Sherman wagged his tail. He asked if he could walk with us for a bit and I changed my route and continued walking down North Avenue so I could be on a busy street. As we walked I asked him how old he was and he said 28. He asked me and I said I was almost 50. He seemed shocked. I told him I had just celebrated my 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and he said he thought that was crazy. Then, compelled by the Holy Spirit, I told him that as a matter of fact my husband was just robbed at gun point yesterday. And then, as God will do, he created a miracle moment. This young man asked me if my husband was a white dude. I said yes and asked if he had met him before. I said that my husband is very friendly. And he said, “I know. Probably too friendly.” He said he recognized Sherman and asked if the guy who robbed my husband got some keys. I told him that's exactly what he took bcuz that's all my husband had. Then he said, “What if I told you I could give them back? I know the guy who took them because he robbed me too.” Only God He then asked me to walk with him to get the keys back. He took me to 2428 North 45<sup>th</sup>, went inside, and came back with Peter's keys. He said it was his brother who had robbed Pete. He walked with me to Washington Park, showing me that he had a gun so I was safe. It looked like a toy. I told him I was safe because Jesus is always with me he could have that safety too. I told him that Jesus loves him and is chasing him. I told him I wanted to give him a reward for returning my keys so he gave me his number and said call any time. He dropped me at the park and said to stay safe. I told him I was always safe and he could be too and that I would see him around the neighborhood.”

Finally, the New Jerusalem image is also an image of community. As this sister said, we don't let the evil one scare us out of our communities. Your relationships to draw people into Jesus' community matter. Your relationships in this particular community matter. If we relate to one another with the love of Jesus, or not, matters. God is building a holy community even in the midst of the Empire. Investing in other people by sharing life with them, or sharing Jesus with them if they don't know Jesus, is the way you participate in what Jesus is doing. In 2018, Chadwick Boseman gave the Howard University Commencement Address and said, “Everything you fought for was not for yourself, it was for those who came after you.” Here in this temporal life and in this age and in this world, that is true. We share Jesus for the sake of others, especially those who come after us. That's what makes our lives meaningful. But from an eternal standpoint, everything we fight for is for our truest selves, and others' truest selves, the best possible version of ourselves because it's the version Jesus is committed to. The best possible version of our church community is somewhere in there. The best possible version of human community is the purified city where the fire of Jesus shines everywhere. When the Empire burns, it reveals what is false and what is true. May it be so for us.