

Revelation 16:8-11 – A Tragedy of Thrones

[read Ex 20:1-6] We humans love to worship all the wrong things. Ancient people bowed down to all kinds of idols and we think we are so much better than them. But modern people are so eager to worship the wrong things we don't even need a statue. You used to have to go to a temple to bow down to a statute: we've made idolatry mobile. And virtual. You can do it anywhere. There's an Amazon TV ad, I think for a documentary, that gives me the creeps: a well-dressed guy is sitting in a room that oozes wealth and he says, "I love money. Come to me!" I think to myself, "doesn't he realize how pathetic he sounds? Isn't he embarrassed?" But that's what we all do with the things we worship, isn't it? We debase ourselves before them.

At the beginning of the book of Revelation the Lord Jesus dictated letters to 7 churches in a province of the Roman Empire called Asia. One of those churches was in Pergamum, a city completely devoted to worshipping idols. The hillside overshadowing Pergamum was dotted with shrines and idols to all sorts of gods. The temple of Zeus high up on the edge of the cliff even looked like a giant throne overshadowing the city. And it was one of the ancient centres for Caesar-worship. The ESV Study Bible notes that one of those temples was "dedicated to 'the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma,'"ⁱ That is, the worship of not only the emperor but even the patroness goddess of the city of Rome itself. All of this was the official state religion of Rome and one of the duties of being Rome's King was to also be High Priest—they called him, "Pontifex Maximus," or "Supreme Pontiff." Religion in the Roman Empire was never God-centred.ⁱⁱ

Christians in Pergamum were surrounded by idols. Surely there were times when they knew better but gave in to social pressure and went along. Can you imagine how their conscience might have burned; the humiliating heat of that shame of having bowed, temporarily, to a god they didn't really believe in? But the people of Pergamum were not ashamed of debasing themselves before idols of Caesar and Rome. They boasted in it. They were so proud their city was the official *neokoros* of emperor worship—The Temple Sweeper. A janitor. Cities competed for the right to that title. Tripping over each other in a frenzied attempt to humiliate themselves before the unworthy emperors of Rome.ⁱⁱⁱ But their idols were not worthy of their worship. That's what's sickening about idol worship. There is, however, a God in Heaven who is worthy.

For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. 11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. 12 O LORD of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you! (Psa 84:10-12 ESV)

In the fourth and fifth bowls of God's wrath we see how God turns the people who used to worship the beast against it, to hate it, become disgusted with it, and then remove it from its throne. ***God caused Christendom to turn against the Antichrist and take away his kingdom.***

God made Christendom hate the Antichrist (vv8-9)

There is something in these verses that doesn't seem to add up at first: compare v1, "on the earth" versus v8, "on the sun." That's only really a problem until you remember that Revelation is the written record of a vision of signs (c.f. "signified" or "made known in signs" Rev 1:1). So to interpret this, we start with what verse 1 says, the bowls are all poured out on the earth, and we interpret verse 8 in light of that. So the sun is a sign for something on earth.

But then what about the scorching fire and heat? In verse 8, who did God allow to scorch people with fire? The words are lit. "it was given" and all of the other 9 times in Revelation the same phrase is used it is always about a person God allowed to do something. Here in v8, it was the fourth angel that was allowed to scorch people with fire. Not the sun. The Sun is the object of God's wrath, not the means of God's punishment. We know that for sure because that's where the wrath in the fourth bowl is "poured out on the sun." That insight helps avoid far-fetched interpretations. Some teachers read this as if God gave the Sun permission to scorch people have to then stretch this word "scorch" to mean something like "burned up with fire." Some imagine the atmosphere filled with fire, polar ice-caps melting, flooding coastal lands around the world. Yet that's not what the Greek word here for "scorched" means. A Greek writer named Plutarch, around this time, used this word for "scorch" to refer to someone with a fever.^{iv} The word is only used two other times in the Bible: by Jesus. In Matt 13:6 (also Mark 4:6), He said that after the plants were "scorched" by the sun, because they had no roots, they withered. The word "scorched" means the sun was too hot for them and became hurtful instead of helpful. Not deadly; painful. That's how people living during the fourth bowl would feel about the authority of the ruler of Rome: his authority would make them wither, wilt, languish. Like Jonah under the blazing sun and burn in their anger at the one they blamed for their troubles. They would start hating the one this sun stands for.

John's 1st century readers knew that in their Bibles, the Old Testament, the sun, moon, and planets were common symbols.^v The sun is the brightest light in the sky, so it became a fitting symbol for the highest governments (like in Rev 12:1 where the Church is protected, clothed, in the Sun—the authority of the emperor in Constantine's edict of toleration). In this bowl, the object of God's wrath is the government of Rome. Sunlight is normally a blessing, but verse 8 says the angel was allowed to make it so that people felt burned by the King of Rome. They would feel like his rule was intolerable, a torture to endure, a curse instead of a blessing. If it is true that the first plague (16:2) was the outbreak of evil and corruption that showed how rotten Roman Catholicism was at the heart; and the bloody seas (16:3) speak of the wars that spread from Europe around the world; and the bloody rivers (16:4) that were supposed to spread the waters of eternal life to people are the churches and priests of Rome who spread death instead, then it fits that the people who used to worship the popes of Rome would start to hate them instead. That's what happened when God's fourth bowl of wrath was poured out on the ruler of Rome, the Bishop, Pope, and King of Rome.

God made Christendom take away Antichrist's Kingdom

Under the fifth bowl, God's wrath is laser focused on a specific target—not the whole world, not even the symbolic “earth” or lands of the old Roman Empire, not all Christendom, but specifically on the throne of the beast. Now this isn't world-wide darkness. Those who think it is don't interpret this enough in the light of the original Egyptian plague of darkness in Ex 10:21-23, where even in Egypt, the Hebrews still had light. Connecting this symbol, then, to the sun as the ruler of Rome, this predicts that throughout his kingdom, the light of his rule and authority goes out. The wording in verse 10 gives the idea of sudden and complete darkness—(ESV: “plunged”) the beast's authority is suddenly snuffed out.^{vi} The fifth bowl of God's wrath, then, targets the kingly authority of the beast, brings an end to the 1260 years of his ability to wage war against Christians, his “dominion” is taken away.

In the time period between when the beast's dominion is taken away and the day Jesus returns, do people repent and humble themselves and give God glory? No. In verse 10-11, their response is not because of the darkness, but because of their own sins, their evil, their “sores” from the first bowl. The next words spell it out what “sores” they blame God for: [read 11b]. Earlier they cursed the name of God (v9) even though it was God who exposed the hypocrisy and evil inside the Roman Catholic hierarchy, who let the idol-worshipping false Christianity of Europe bear its natural fruit in the form of immorality, godlessness, hatred of religion, and anarchy; even though it was God who allowed revolution to throw down kings and raise up new nationalism across Europe; even though it was God who allowed all that to culminate in wars that soaked much of the world in blood (i.e. the first 3 bowls, vv1-7). *What do they do?* They cursed God's name—breaking the third commandment—justifying their own death sentences. Now they curse the God of heaven, *The King of all the kings on earth, the Most High! But “the Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all” (Psa 103:19).*

It was about the year 607AD when the dragon gave the beast great authority as the priest-king of Rome. Ever since then, the “throne” of the popes has been called, “the Holy See” (“see” means his chair or seat).^{vii} 1260 years later, the King of Italy took it all away, invaded the Pope's kingdom, conquered Rome, and made it the new capital of Italy. The priest-King of Rome was no longer a king. His Kingdom went dark in the year 1870. His 1260 year dominion was over. But did the beast repent? No, in 1870 he issued a new decree claiming to be infallible in anything he declares from his throne. For 59 years, until 1929, the popes were prisoners in the Vatican, refusing to set foot on ground ruled by the Italian government. They literally didn't go outside; in the sun. But in 1929, the pope finally admitted his lands were gone, and struck a deal with Mussolini creating Vatican City as a new sovereign state—so the beast could pretend still to be a king.^{viii} “They did not repent of their deeds.” God caused Christendom to turn against the Antichrist and take away his kingdom. But we humans want to keep our thrones, be our own gods, and in our hearts we want to pull God off His throne, don't we?

Religion in the Roman Empire was never God-centred. It wasn't even really pope-centred. Satan was happy just as long as it was never Christ-centred. Peter told his readers, “Be sober-minded;

be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1Pe 5:8). Satan doesn’t care who you worship as long as you don’t worship God. That was his strategy in the first century, when John wrote Revelation, and that has been his strategy ever since. In fact, some of you might remember that Jesus Himself told the church in the city of Pergamum, (Rev 2:13) “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.” Because God was not the centre of worship in that city. As long as that’s true, when any other idol, or every other idol is worshiped, Satan is happy—as long as we don’t glorify God.

Let me ask you two questions, to test whether your worship is really God-centred: **1) When you sin, why do you feel bad?** Is it that you’ve dishonoured God, or is it rather that you’ve disappointed yourself, failed to live up to your own standard, and are ashamed that if others only knew they would not accept you? Is God really at the centre of your repentance, or is it still about you? **2) When you sin, what do you do next?** If you try to make up for your sin in some way, to appease God or assuage your guilt, then Christ is not at the centre of your worship. Catholics call that “penance”—the attempt to pay God back for the way your sin has dishonoured Him.^{ix} [read Col 2:14-15] The only way a sinner like you and me can glorify God is by fully and only depending on what Jesus did to pay for our sins. Now if you are a Christian, that means Jesus has paid your ransom. Your sin earned you infinite death, but Jesus laid down His infinite righteousness in your place, so the debt was paid and you are no longer under God’s holy wrath. If you are, in faith, depending on Jesus to save you from the death you deserve, you are a Christian. Jesus has become both your Ransom and your Redeemer. When you admit your sin, your infinite need, and count on His infinite grace to meet your need, you give God glory. You magnify and show off the riches of God’s saving grace. You, by trusting Jesus, shine the spotlight of your gratitude and confidence on the inexhaustible supply of God’s grace in Jesus to save sinners like you and me. In this way we worship before the only everlasting throne of God.

In Revelation 7 there is a peak into the future, on that last and final day when Jesus returns and humanity is judged, and someone sees a multitude of people who would not worship idols, who would not bow to the beast, who did in fact keep on repenting and giving God glory—the way it should end. And an angel asks John who are those people? And John writes, [read Rev 7:14-17].

ⁱ ESV Study Bible. “Revelation 2:13”.

ⁱⁱ From my sermon on Revelation 2:12-17... “[Pergamum] was the religious capital of the Province of Asia, but it was also the original capital of Caesar-worship. Its first such temple, to “the divine” Augustus Caesar and the goddess of Rome, had been built in 29BC. Another temple to the Emperor Trajan was built a few years after John wrote Revelation. This Imperial Caesar cult is what made Pergamum prestigious around this time.” (see *New International Bible Dictionary* (Zondervan, 1987), p767)

ⁱⁱⁱ Barclay, 45.

^{iv} J. Schneider, TDNT, s.v. “καῦμα, καυματίζω,” III:643.

https://accordance.bible/link/read/TDNT_Complete#12759

^v In my sermon on Rev 6:12f, I explained that in ancient times, people took for granted that various gods empowered their earthly, civic rulers. The human rulers were frequently thought to be representatives of and messengers for the various gods. c.f. Deuteronomy 4:19, 2 Kings 21:3, and 23:5. Also see Collins, *The Final*

Prophecy of Jesus, p151, fn49. "Sun Day" was named by Constantine for the ongoing worship of the Sun god. Ironically, the title of that idol was "Unconquered Sun" which very soon was overthrown by the elevation of Christianity. "The Roman cult to Sol is continuous from the "earliest history" of the city until the institution of the Christian cult as the exclusive state religion."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sol_Invictus] Accessed February 15, 2020. The emperors of Rome over and over again claimed the favour of the Sun god. Even after his edict tolerating Christianity (when the symbol of the woman being clothed with the sun [Rev 12:1f] was fulfilled in the Sun-worshipping emperor giving official protection to the Christian Church) Constantine kept worshipping the Sun god [Gonzalez p107; D.F. Wright, "Constantine the Great", *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978) p255.] But he had started a religious revolution. Superstitious fear of Christ swept through the land disturbing kings and soldiers alike [Gonzalez, p117]. Armies were afraid to look directly at the Christian symbol on the shields of Constantine's soldiers. [Ibid.] But it didn't make them believers. In 324, Constantine ordered all soldiers to worship the Supreme God on Sunday. But he didn't clarify whether this was the Roman Sun god, Apollo, or the Son of God, Jesus Christ. So people in Rome could pick who they worshipped as long as it was on Sunday. [Gonzalez, p.123]

^{vi} Thomas points out the intensive emphasis of the periphrastic pluperfect (p261).

^{vii} Boniface III "...was consecrated February 19, 607; ...After his elevation to the See of Rome, Boniface obtained a decree from Phocas, against Cyriacus, Bishop of Constantinople, by which it was ordained, that "the See of Blessed Peter the Apostle should be the head of all the Churches..." [<https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/popes-boniface-iii-vii>]. Accessed February 14, 2020. Also see, Wikipedia, "Pope Boniface III" [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Boniface_III#Papacy_\(607\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Boniface_III#Papacy_(607))]. Accessed March 16, 2019.

^{viii} "The city was captured on September 20, 1870. Rome and what was left of the Papal States were annexed to the Kingdom of Italy as a result of a plebiscite the following October. This marked the definite end of the Papal States. Despite the fact that the traditionally Catholic powers did not come to the pope's aid, the papacy rejected the 1871 "Law of Guarantees" and any substantial accommodation with the Italian Kingdom, especially any proposal which required the pope to become an Italian subject. Instead the papacy confined itself (see Prisoner in the Vatican) to the Apostolic Palace and adjacent buildings in the loop of the ancient fortifications known as the Leonine City, on Vatican Hill. From there it maintained a number of features pertaining to sovereignty, such as diplomatic relations, since in canon law these were inherent in the papacy. In the 1920s, the papacy – then under Pius XI—renounced the bulk of the Papal States, and the Lateran Treaty with Italy (then ruled by the National Fascist Party under Benito Mussolini[40]) was signed on February 11, 1929,[40] creating the State of the Vatican City, forming the sovereign territory of the Holy See..." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papal_States]

^{ix} "In theological language, this penance is called satisfaction and is defined, in the words of St. Thomas: "The payment of the temporal punishment due on account of the offense committed against God by sin" (Suppl. to Summa, Q. xii, a. 3). It is an act of justice whereby the injury done to the honor of God is required, so far at least as the sinner is able to make reparation (poena vindicativa)..." [<https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/penance>]. Accessed February 15, 2020.