

From the January 4, 2009, Issue

Tormented in the Presence of the Lamb

Regardless of their eschatological views, if they're honest, most Christians would have to admit that the book of Revelation seems plain scary in many regards. Accounts of the mark of the beast, vials and plagues being poured out upon the inhabitants of the earth, devouring locusts, and blood up to horses bridles seem to paint a very different picture of Jesus and the execution of his judgment than the loving and forgiving Messiah who extends mercy to the lost, heals the sick, and comes "not to condemn the world, but to save it" in previous books of the New Testament.

Filled with spiritual symbolism, allegorical analogies and figurative language, the last book of the Bible proves to be a formidable challenge, even to the most accomplished Biblical scholars and theologians. In fact, so great are the hermeneutical difficulties with the book of Revelation that it is largely ignored by many preachers and even entire denominations in the modern church.

My personal opinion is that this neglect is often not a bad thing, given the direct warnings against "adding to or taking away from" in the last chapter of the book.

Speaking from my own personal experience, one of the hardest things to accept about the book of Revelation is the apparent lack of mercy that God shows toward those unlucky souls who, by no fault of their own, happen to be born in the wrong generation of human history and end up being deceived by the Anti-Christ. Deception, by its very definition, indicates no intentional fault on the behalf of the one who is deceived.

Nevertheless, all of the wrath of God is said to be unleashed upon those unfortunate souls who don't understand what is going on and actually accept the "mark of the beast" in their foreheads and hands. Even the most ardent proponents of the rapture doctrine must admit that somewhere in their converted hearts they feel some sense of sorrow for their "lost" loved ones suffering in the earth at the hands of an angry God who's finally had enough.

Having struggled for most of my life with such issues of apparent injustice on the part of a holy and just God who "Is Love" and "judges righteous judgment" even to the point of giving his only begotten Son for the salvation of a sinful world, I am eternally thankful that he has brought me to a place where my uncompromising hermeneutic is that our Father God is absolutely good and is exactly who Jesus revealed him to be regardless of my inability to understand some scriptures that would, on the surface, seem to portray him differently.

I am convinced that when Jesus said "*Come to me and I will give you rest for your souls*" (Matt 11:28), he was talking about the freedom from fear and un-ease of not knowing who the Father really is as indicated in the preceding verse where he proclaimed "*No man knows the Father except the Son and no man knows the Son except the Father*" (Matt 11:27). I am grateful, not only to God, but also to men, past and present, such as C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald, Karl Barth, and C. Baxter Kruger for allowing themselves to be used of God to boldly proclaim the true heart of God even in the face of great opposition.

I have found that the more I rest in Jesus' true revelation of Himself and the Father in the

fellowship of the Holy Spirit rather than man's ideas of who God is, it is amazing how different the scriptures begin to look. One case-in-point is the account of the tormented souls found in Revelation 14:9-12 which reads:

And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.

I am not a Biblical scholar or theologian and I certainly do not make any claim to be able to interpret fully this rich and figurative passage, especially in light of the aforementioned warnings, but I do want to share a few simple observations, hopefully without adding to or taking from:

First, though it does say that the “*smoke of their torment* ascends up forever” nowhere does it say that they *are tormented* forever. This is very key for me as I have never seen how that a loving and merciful God could allow any of his children to be consciously tormented for eternity with no way of escape.

I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes by George MacDonald... “*There is but one thing lower than deliberately to believe such a lie, and that is to worship the God of whom it is believed.*”

Secondly, it occurs to me that smoke is usually an unpleasant thing to be directly in the presence of. I can remember many a cold night sitting around the campfire with my hunting buddies and having to move whenever the wind directed the smoke at my face because it burned my eyes and made me cough. (*Not a pleasant experience, at least for my allergic eyes and asthmatic lungs*).

Thirdly, the fact that there is no rest *night or day* for those who worship the beast indicates to me that this is speaking of an unpleasant existence in this present world rather than a condition of the afterlife. What effect would the rising or setting of the physical sun have on those in Heaven or Hell? (*I'd also be willing to bet that this lack of rest probably has a lot to do with Matt. 11*).

Lastly, (*and this was the real kicker for me as I read this passage recently in a different light*): Notice the proximity of Jesus to those in torment. They are tormented, not apart from Jesus and separated by gulfs of eternity and space, but “*In the Presence of the Lamb.*” This phrase alone has brought more repentance to my heart than I have experienced in a very long time. This is the Jesus who is willing to come to us in our darkness and confusion in order to bring us out of it. This is the Jesus of 2 Corinthians 5:21!

What I had previously seen as a description of an angry God rewarding his precious Son with the eternal torment of those who dared to rebel against him was recently turned upside down in my mind by the Holy Spirit. Could it be true that this scary passage of scripture is actually a beautiful picture of a Jesus who loves us enough to be present with us in our darkness? Could it be that the torment of his deceived children is as irritating and unpleasant to God as smoke in the eyes?

Could it be that the wrath of the Father is poured out for the express purpose of awakening us to

his loving embrace rather than punishing us eternally for not accepting it? My uncompromising hermeneutic says yes! My own experience as a father of two children says yes!

For I am convinced that we cannot have a greater capacity for love and mercy than our Maker because all of the love and mercy that we feel comes directly from him.

May God grant us all to be part of that great multitude spoken of in Revelation 7 which come out of tribulation and get victory over the beast. *For they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes. Amen*

~ Brad Campbell