

Not Loving Lives So Not Shrinking from Death

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's pray together. Lord our God, we pray tonight that as we come under your word, that your word will teach us, correct us, challenge us, rebuke us, that your word will train us in righteousness, equip us for every good work and make us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ.

These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, Tom is a menace. In fact, Tom is more than a menace.

Tom's a terror. Tom's a terrorist, really. Tom is a terrorist who is bent on the destruction of his enemy. And Tom does everything he can to destroy his enemy.

Poor little Jerry, the mouse. Tom is against Jerry. Tom's the terrorist, a ferocious feline.

Tom is a cunning cat. And every time you see Tom and Jerry, this ferocious large cat and this tiny little mouse, somehow we know that he will always fail.

[1 : 1 9] Somehow we know that Jerry will be safe. Even though we know the result, we're engrossed to see the dynamics of what Tom will get up to to try and destroy Jerry.

And he keeps coming back. And he comes back time and time and time again. Now, Revelation is not quite a cartoon.

And it's not a comedy, that's for sure. Nor is it a made-up story like a Tom and Jerry cartoon. But there are some connections between something like Tom and Jerry and the message of the book of Revelation.

Revelation. The book of Revelation basically encourages Christians who are being opposed for their faith, who are being persecuted, whose lives are under threat.

It's encouraging Christians in a tiny church, in the midst of the mighty Roman Empire, at the end of the first century AD. The church is a mouse compared to the terrorizing menace of the Roman Empire.

[2 : 3 1] And if you look on the surface, you would think, wow, this big cat, this tiny mouse, we know who's going to win the cat. And yet it's not. And if you look quickly at the situation at the end of the first century, with a tiny church scattered around the Roman Empire, and the might of Rome in all its glory under the Emperor Domitian, well, you'd think, wow, Rome's going to win here.

They'll stamp out this little pipsqueak mouse of a church. Surely. What we find in the book of Revelation is that the enemy is often portrayed, not quite like a cartoon character, but a bit like that, with images and pictures of a beast that is a bit strange, that keeps coming back, indeed.

But just like Tom and Jerry, though it engrosses us and probably amuses us, we know who wins. Jerry.

And in the book of Revelation, one reason why people get so confused about this book, and misled by it, is that they forget the very basic, very clear message.

From chapter one, more clearly in chapter five, and thereafter, we know the result. Jesus wins. The result is so important from the beginning of the book to the end.

[3 : 59] This is not a mystery book. Who's going to win? Who's going to win? Let's turn the next page. Who's going to win? Three quarter time. Who's going to win? We know from the beginning. Jesus wins.

Just like we know that Tom loses when we watch Tom and Jerry. Jesus wins. And yet, knowing the result is the key to being engrossed and encouraged by this book.

It doesn't and shouldn't lead us to boredom. You know, when you watch a sporting replay and you know the result, it's always, I find boring. When you don't know the result, it's engrossing. But in a book like this, we know the result, and yet it should be and is engrossing, even though we know the result.

A little bit like Tom and Jerry. Chapter 12 of the book of Revelation. A sign in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with a moon under her feet, and a crown of 12 stars on her head.

Pregnant, crying out in pain, gives birth. It looks like Mary. She looks like the mother of Jesus.

[5 : 11] But then, she doesn't just look like Mary, the mother of Jesus, either. Clothed with a sun? Seems a bit odd for Mary from Nazareth.

But yet, there are echoes there of perhaps Joseph's vision. Joseph being the man with the Technicolor dreamcoat, the 11th son of 12, to Jacob in the book of Genesis, has a vision of moon and stars and things like that, bowing down.

Is this woman the people of God? Israel, as it's called throughout the Old Testament. She doesn't simply fit the category of Mary, as we'll see as the chapter unfolds.

And the dragon that pursues her, and pursues the baby, that the baby is born and snatched up to heaven, and then the dragon turns his attention on the woman. She doesn't quite seem to match Mary, the mother of Jesus.

But who is the dragon? Well, he looks a lot like Herod the Great. Herod the Great was trying to kill Jesus after he was born, remember? Killed all the boys of Bethlehem up to the age of two.

[6 : 20] But it's not simply Herod the Great. Herod the Great died when Jesus was three or four years old. He is not the Herod who was there when Jesus was crucified.

That's his son, one of his sons. This dragon looks like Herod the Great, but he looks a bit more as well like Pharaoh, the Pharaoh who attacked Israel, enslaved Israel in the book of Exodus.

And then this dragon, well, it looks a little bit like Rome, the Roman Empire, the Roman Empire that is attacking all the Christians at the end of the first century AD.

And who is the baby? Well, the baby is Jesus. And yet, it's a little bit unclear as well. In verse 5, we're told that this male child will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.

There's no doubt that the essential identity of this baby is Jesus Christ, though he's not named in this description. But what is puzzling is that the child is born and then snatched up by God to heaven.

[7 : 30] Is that Jesus? What about his life? What about his miracles? What about his teaching on earth? What about his death? What about his burial?

What about his resurrection? Jesus wasn't just born and snatched up to heaven as a baby, which is sort of the impression you get here. Now, the book of Revelation is full of those sorts of little puzzles and intrigues in a way.

One of the things it's saying to us is that history repeats itself. There are patterns in history. And that's one of the key messages here that's illustrated here, but we find it all through the book.

You see, the dragon is not limited to being Herod the Great or limited to being Pharaoh. The dragon, in a sense, is like a cartoon character. He is the enemy, whether that's Pharaoh or Herod the Great or Domitian or any other enemy of God's people, of God's children.

And what that's doing for the reader in John's day is encouraging them to see they're not unique. This has happened before. The opposition they are facing from the dragon of Domitian is just like what Jesus faced from the dragon of Herod the Great and there are echoes of that from what Pharaoh did to Egypt in the time of Moses or just leading up to the birth and the life of Moses as well in the Old Testament.

[9 : 01] History repeats itself and there's an encouragement in that so that John's readers if they see the echoes of history repeating regarded through the symbol of a dragon in a way like a cartoon character what they should do is take encouragement.

What happened to Pharaoh? A gluggy death underwater. What happened to Herod the Great? didn't succeed to kill the baby dead.

So what it's doing by identifying the current situation with patterns that have happened before is actually to encourage but by using these sort of symbols like a dragon as the book of Revelation does the style of literature does that is that it doesn't close the book at the end of the first century AD because these are patterns that continue in history in different eras different ages there are other dragons other Herods or other pharaohs or Domitians it's not one person who fulfills this as some people try and interpret this as the dragon or in the next chapter the beast with the 666 that was Hitler oh no it wasn't it was Reagan oh it's the Pope actually I mean all sorts of weird ideas it's a pattern that goes on it's the regime the government the ruler the leader within or without the church trying to stamp out the gospel and put to death

God's people they fit the pattern history repeats itself but what about this baby snatched up to heaven what how does that quite match Jesus what's going on in that description of course there's no ignorance in the book of Revelation about Jesus life his teaching his miracles his death or his burial or his resurrection but why does it jump from birth to ascension to heaven what I think the answer is that it glosses over that because the real element of safety is the ascension Jesus is snatched up to heaven he arrives where he should arrive at God's right hand in heaven he's safe and all the enemy attacks on him regarded by the dragon trying to kill him that probably summarizes more than just Herod the Great but even Pilate and the other Jewish leaders later in Jesus life leading up to the crucifixion the key thing is not that Jesus escaped death because he didn't but he's in heaven he's ascended so birth and ascension are the key things here and again there is encouragement and perspective being given for the Christians in John's day at the end of the first century the promise to them is not that they will escape death the red theme running through this book is that Christians should be prepared to die for their faith but the key is death is not the end what matters is the ascension to heaven to be safe with God we know

Jesus died John knew Jesus died it's not here but it's assumed knowledge you see what matters is not that he was put to death wrongly unjustly and so on but that he finally is safe with God in heaven through death and that's the path for the martyrs that's the path often for those persecuted that this book is opening up for us again it's encouragement protected through death and yes the woman does look like Mary but not limited to Mary it's the woman again she's not named she's a slightly symbolic figure if you like not quite a cartoon character but she is Israel persecuted by Pharaoh she is Mary the mother of Jesus who flees into Egypt soon after Jesus is born she is the people of God the church if you like that is the patterns of history continue she's not limited to one identification in the end and we're told in this opening paragraph that she is taken to a place prepared by God in a desert where she's nourished for 1260 days it's a strange length of time three and a half years a short time really a limited time it's a time of maybe half of seven being a perfect fuller number perhaps it comes up in this book of Revelation in different ways scattered through these chapters she is being cared for protected if you like by God and within this book of Revelation it seems that period is the period between the first and the second time or comings of Jesus but it's limited it's a time of opposition before the end of all the evil all the opposition before the coming of the new heaven at the end of this book and at the end of time

[14 : 19] John is being given this vision that looks a little bit cryptic as a way of bringing encouragement to those who are persecuted to those who are opposed in his day for the faith in the first century at the last decade of the first century the emperor Domitian put Christians to death there was already persecution earlier under Nero and in between more locally in different places it escalated in the time of Domitian the emperor this is not a promise to escape death but it's an encouragement to see that there are patterns and the reason why the persecution is happening is because it happened to Jesus it's because of Jesus this is happening it's not because of you Christians it's because you are identified with Jesus that all of this is happening that's made clear a little bit later in this passage tonight what the church is facing in

John's day is not unique you see but it's because Jesus faced the same sort of opposition in some ways this dragon figure sort of also diffuses the threat of the opposition it's a little bit like poking fun the Roman empire is vast and intimidating in the time of Jesus it is threatening indeed but by describing it as a dragon in the next chapter as a beast and the different horns and so we're not meant to sort of identify every little bit of description it's the overall impact and whilst it's not comic by describing it in a sort of symbolic way somehow is a way of diminishing the threat you know you look at Tom and Jerry Tom is ferocious a terrorist and yet well he's not really that threatening he's sort of a cartoon character in a way and that's sort of what the book of Revelation does with some of its symbols as well it's a way of encouraging the people that though on earth the enemy seems absolutely formidable it is not ultimately that one of the themes through this book is don't be deceived by earthly appearances on earth the church looks tiny about to face extinction from the

Domitian regime that seems unconquerable and yet it's not so the real throne is the heavenly throne don't be deceived by earthly appearances there is a heavenly perspective that you are in danger of missing is what this vision is telling John's readers and so by using these sorts of symbolic type of figures the book of Revelation is guiding us to see things with a better perspective to see that the enemy is not quite as powerful as it might look on earth and that indeed though it doesn't look like it on earth God actually is sovereign over all of this last year I happened to be teaching this chapter in Myanmar at the Anglican College and when we got to the second paragraph that is verses 7 onwards to 12 one of my students a final year student said this looks like it's out of order it looks like it should come before the first paragraph and I think he hit the nail on the head it's not that they are out of order someone to shuffle the pages or something but it's telling us the book of

Revelation is not merely chronological but the events they portray don't simply happen in an exactly chronological manner now some people don't like that idea and yet a lot of history and a lot of biography even today is written in the same way that is we understand that it's not necessarily chronological because sometimes something gets said and then an explanation for it that in effect goes backwards in time is then given to us and sometimes themes are gathered throughout a chronological spectrum history and biography is not merely this happened then this then this then this nor is it the case in revelation it's again one of the stumbling blocks for people who trip up in their interpretation of this book is not merely a chronological sequence in fact revelation is a bit more like an art gallery where you see a perspective on one thing and a different perspective maybe on the same thing and then go backwards before you go forwards so the second paragraph helps to explain the first paragraph who is this dragon where does he come from why is he wreaking terror on the earth against this baby against this woman and against those who come from her and so we're told in verse seven that war broke out in heaven not after

I think these events but earlier and Michael and his angels fought against the dragon the dragon and his angels fought back but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven and the great dragon was thrown down that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan the deceiver of the whole world who was thrown down to the earth and his angels were thrown down with him that's heaven's perspective that's not the earthly perspective why is this dragon on earth wreaking terror and havoc because he's been defeated and thrown down from heaven behind the dragon lies the enemy the Satan the accuser that is the serpent from the garden of Eden what this is telling us and reminding us is that this pattern in history has behind it the enemy the

[20 : 35] Satan behind Pharaoh behind Herod behind Domitian behind all those who seek to stamp out and squash and end those who trust in Jesus death but how is he defeated there's a story told of two soccer players I usually say football but in Australia I need to be careful and say soccer and there's a great melee in the goal square and a goal is scored and two players claim the goal their feet touch the ball at about the same time so there's dispute whose goal this is and after the game they spoke to their manager and said well which of scored the goal and the they were defeated we're not told by whom it's a passive tense of the verb the victory becomes clearer a little bit later on verse 11 they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb now that's perhaps referring more generally but that's where the victory lies the victory of

Michael and the angels as they battle against the Satan or the devil dragon and his angels is a victory that is attributed not to Michael not to the angels but ultimately to Jesus and Jesus death that's where the victory in the book of revelation is clearly anchored all the way through in the death of Jesus Christ when death evil is destroyed by the cross of Christ that's why this dragon has been cast out now again we might think well chronologically that doesn't work if it's pharaoh killing off the Israelites well that's before the cross but that's not the sort of logical structure that revelation follows patterns in history the real victory has occurred in the cross but the pattern of enmity and dragon against God's people in the Old Testament even though that's before the cross that doesn't really matter in the way that the book of revelation thinks so what it's saying then to the

Christians is your enemy is fierce but he's a defeated enemy he's been cast out of heaven it's not as though we're facing a grand final next weekend let's say for argument's sake between God and this Satan and we don't know who's going to win we know there's a mighty battle in which God's people are in the middle of it but our enemy is defeated already it's a very famous illustration that was used by a German scholar in a book 50 60 years ago now by Oskar Kuhlmann he argued a similarity with this perspective on the 6th of June I think it was 1944 the Second World War was won on that day thousands and thousands of allied forces landed on Normandy Beach from that day on apparently it was clear that the allies had won and would win the

Second World War but it took 11 months before Berlin fell Germany surrendered Hitler suicided and those were some of the bloodiest months of the Second World War why because the Germans knew they were defeated they fought ferociously but they were defeated and that was apparently relatively inevitable through that time now it's not a perfect illustration but it applies in this sort of way the cross is the victory day we could say the equivalent of D day as it was called in June 1944 but the return of Jesus is the VE day victory in Europe day of May 1945 and John John's people John's readers and you and me we live in between those two days the bloodiest battles are going on Satan is fighting ferociously but defeated the victory has already been won and we're waiting for the

Lord's return when the realization of that victory will be made universally clear that's the perspective I think that works in the book of Revelation it's an encouragement to us the enemy is ferocious the enemy is vast and strong but is defeated he's already been defeated the great dragon is hurled down to the earth in verse 9 and what we then find is praise it's praise in heaven in verse 10 a loud voice in heaven singing praise now come the salvation the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down who accuses them day and night before our God but they've conquered him by the blood of the lamb this is a hallelujah chorus in effect in heaven now the song does say then woe to those on earth in the middle of verse 12 for the devil has come down to you with great wrath but what's the function of this statement of praise here you are a persecuted

[26 : 35] Christian in the end of the first century and you're being given a vision which gives you words of praise that they're saying in heaven and here you are on earth thinking wow it's all very well for you up there to sing your praise but look at the mess we're in how can we sing praise on earth we're in the middle of a great battle but that's not how it's meant to be read or understood revelation the book is dotted with praises all the way through they're heavenly praises but it is clear that though we are on earth and though we are fighting an enemy we already enjoy the victory we already overcome through the victory of Christ so though we are on earth we belong in heaven and though we are on earth we now must and can sing the heavenly praise in fact there's a significant role that this praise has in the book by way of encouraging

Christians we face opposition the Romans are the enemy in John's day and yet the Christians can sing Christ is triumphant Christ is victorious hallelujah the kingdom of Christ has come might seem a bit bizarre to be doing that when you're persecuted but that's the heavenly perspective being brought to bear on earth because it's true the enemy is defeated oh I might lose my life that's not the promise of revelation that I can escape death but I am on the victorious side already even if my life gets lost for the faith so these hymns of praise that are scattered through the book of revelation are to encourage to lift up the hearts of Christians on earth to sing the victory song that is ours already because our enemy though fierce is already in fact defeated in some ways it becomes a testimony testimony to Jesus a witness to his victory one of the most moving

Christian biographies I've read is a story called Forgive Me Natasha she was a Christian in the Soviet Union in the early 1970s and she was beaten up one week by the KGB a week later the KGB returned there she was with other Christians again singing God's praise and worshipping again she was beaten up but what played to the KGB leader was the praise and sense of peace on her face he couldn't wipe it out of his memory and after some time he became a Christian and fled the Soviet Union though later he was assassinated in Canada there is something about the witness of praising Jesus that is important even for the opposed persecuted Christian on earth now in the midst of persecution in the midst of opposition we are on the winning side

Jesus has won and we overcome in him but there's more to this part of the reason why we can sing that is because as it says in the hymn the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down who accuses them day and night you think of his accusations see this Christian over here God he's envious she's lustful he's greedy they're proud may in one sense be true but if we are identified in the lamb who was slain and who is alive and ascended to heaven and who intercedes for us at the right hand of God the father if he is our victor then those accusations are dead because our sin is wiped away Satan Satan Satan may throw every accusation against us before

God and none of it sticks oh yes we might have been greedy proud and lustful but we're justified we've been redeemed by the blood of the lamb we've been ransomed by him for God as chapter 5 makes clear so that's why we can sing God's praise because though Satan is hurling everything at us here on earth the worst that he can give us is not enough we are safe because of the lamb because our sins are taken the sting of death is gone death has no more fear for us anymore and that's the significance then of the end of verse 11 they've conquered by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony for they did not love life so much as to shrink from death is literally how it speaks and there is the key to this the key for

[31 : 55] John's readers how much do you love life my guess is that you all love life very much very dearly as indeed do I life is good LG tells us that we love life we've got everything we could dream of especially in Australia and that's why we want to shrink from death but we've got our perspectives wrong we've got our perspectives wrong last year I was in Pakistan teaching in a Bible college but then for a week for Langham preaching training preachers and pastors and I was back there again in June this year to do the same with the next stage when we arrived there this year we were told by some of our colleagues

Pakistanis about one man called Samuel Samuel was with us last year in Pakistan he sat in front of me as I taught during that week he was a preacher an evangelist but in February this year something happened to Samuel he was a volunteer at a Christian hospital in Karachi in the south of Pakistan he would take chapel services he would visit patients speak to their relatives he would pray for people hand out gospel tracts read the bible with them in February Samuel and one of his colleagues were kidnapped a month later the colleague escaped when he was found he was skin and bone Samuel was the same he said dead but Samuel has never been seen almost certainly dead now in some ways the world might think that Samuel is a fool

Karachi is a dangerous city in a dangerous country and Christian ministry in a place like that even in a Christian hospital many would regard as rather foolhardy not Samuel he didn't love life so much as to shrink from death he's lost his life no doubt for the gospel but he hasn't really lost anything because death is not the end just like the baby was snatched up to heaven jumping over his life and his death and his burial and his resurrection to his ascension so too for those who are persecuted this is not a promise to escape death it's not a promise to escape martyrdom it is a promise that those who overcome in the blood of the lamb are eternally safe with God as Samuel no doubt is when I preached on this passage in Pakistan and said exactly what

I've said tonight including referring to Samuel there were nods all over the place tears flowed from hundred pastors including my translator leading me to have tears in my eyes as well they know what it's like and in the course of preaching I said my brothers and sisters and me from Australia we don't understand this we love life because life is so good here it's partly why we struggle to understand and come to grips with the book of revelation life is so good here the opposition and persecution we face is trivial by comparison oh we might be called a museum from a dinosaur for example a dinosaur from a museum for example by some nasty journalist come comedian we might be ridiculed for our faith and our ethical stances but it's safe really and it's easy to love life and to keep on loving life but that's not the context of revelation it's not the context where most of our brothers and sisters live in the world today and it's hard for us to understand this but it's easier if you're in

Pakistan as a Christian or if you're in China where so many pastors have been imprisoned for long periods of time deprived underpaid the same in Vietnam Afghanistan in all those Eurasian stands Kyrgyzstan Kazakhstan and so on where it's very dangerous in many ways to be Christian to be a Christian pastor or preacher to give testimony to Jesus parts of India are the same Sri Lanka can be the same Myanmar can be the same it's not all that easy in Malaysia though losing your life for the gospel is not that common in Malaysia where I live the issues of life and death run at the centre of this book most of us will do anything to escape death but the challenge for us is to be as verse 11 says those who do not cling to life even in the face of death but this only makes sense sense if the dragon is defeated it only makes sense because the lamb's death is victorious it only makes sense because our sins are wiped clean it only makes sense because Satan's accusations come to nothing but if there is any stick in his accusations because the death of

[38 : 29] Jesus is not sufficient this doesn't make sense it's best to cling to life but because he is triumphant and because Satan is defeated this makes great sense that death is not something to shy away from death has lost its sting death is not about the loss of life it is about embracing the perfect life that God brings I'm not saying here that this is encouraging us to be suicidal not at all but it is saying to us even if the enemy would take your life as is the reality for many people whom I teach and minister with so what they cannot break our connection our victory through the lamb so rejoice verse 12 says rejoice rejoice you heavens and those who dwell in them oh yes there's woe on earth now but we're part of the victorious side we can sing heaven's praise now well the last paragraph briefly goes on to describe the hurling down of the dragon again it comes back in effect to the first paragraph the length of time is the same it's a diminished time this is a limited period this ferocious tom that is fighting against tiny jerry he's actually defeated he's limited he's restrained he spews out a river to overtake the woman and sweep her away but the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth this is almost like a cartoon you know when tom comes up to a great scheme to get jerry and something bizarre happens to save him that's what's going on here everything this dragon throws is thwarted even by nature itself by the creation opening up the mouth swallowing the river is it a red sea imagery perhaps it's probably not limited to that but here is god working his protection and so the dragon is enraged goes off against the woman and off against her offspring in verse 17 that is those who hold to Jesus and his testimony this book is challenging us to return to our first love challenging us if our love has become lukewarm challenging us not to embrace some form of wrong teaching false teaching or immorality it's encouraging and challenging us to hold firm in our faith but it's hard in Australia because life is so good we love life we love life on this world far too much some years ago I was teaching in Nigeria I went a few times to to teach and lead pastors conferences three times on one occasion I met an Anglican minister I was teaching a clergy conference for the diocese of Kaduna and the year before or two years before there had been riots in Kaduna as there have been in the last year or so and I met an Anglican minister I knew the story but he told me his 16 year old son was surrounded by a gang of Muslim youths wielding machetes they said to him renounce Jesus or die and he said Jesus is my Lord and my savior and they killed him he did not love life so much as to shrink from death a 16

year old it's almost impossible for most of us here to put ourselves in that situation because it is so foreign from comfortable Australia but we love life too much we love its pleasures its indulgences its comforts too much and the great great spiritual danger is we shrink from death we lose the heavenly perspective do not love life so much that you shrink from death let's pray oh God we thank you for the victory of Jesus your son that death should have no more fear for us that Satan is defeated we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ whose lives are seriously under threat simply for being Christians guard them strengthen them encourage them to hold fast to the testimony of Jesus and not to shrink from death and for us Lord God in such a different and comfortable place we pray that we will not love life too much for Jesus sake amen