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Unveiling Hope – Revelation 12-13

Good morning and welcome everyone to North Park Community Church. My name is Matt Loveday and today we are going to be jumping right back into the book of Revelation as we continue on in our sermon series that we have called Unveiling Hope. For those of you who have been joining us for the past number of weeks, welcome back, the journey continues. For those of you joining us today for the first time in this series, we are so glad you are here. We've covered a lot of ground already, so if you have the time and if you are interested I would encourage you to go back and watch our other sermons in this series, you can watch them on our church YouTube channel.

For many of us the thought of studying the book of Revelation may seem a bit daunting. I would imagine that when most people think of the book of Revelation in the Bible they might immediately think of some pretty unsettling imagery, some unknown mystery about the end of the world as we know it, or about an epic battle between good and evil – and this wouldn't be wrong. Revelation is in some ways all of these things, but most importantly of all, Revelation is simply one piece of God's great story of redemption and love. A story that began even before our understanding of time. A story that still continues today, and a story that will carry us into the future.

It's a book of prophecy. It's a book about history. It's a book about the future. It's a book of visions and mystery. It's a book of endings and new beginnings. It's a book of apocalyptic literature and as we have learned, the word apocalypse simply means to unveil. And what Revelation unveils to us above all else is this idea of hope. That in the midst

of unsettling realities – faith in God gives us hope. In a world of hurt and pain – God offers us healing and hope. In the midst of a world that can be full of confusion, anxiety, and uncertainty – God's speaks to us about hope. And so as we dig into Revelation today, we will be in chapters 12 and 13. The goal is that we will end up at a place in our minds, hearts, bodies and souls – both individually and collectively, where we have come to know the hope we have in Jesus. A redemptive hope for what has been, a present hope for what is and a future hope for what is still to come.

And just before we jump in Scripture today, I want us to take just a moment to examine a few optical illusions. For instance, take a look at the first image. Do you see a bunch of black and white lines in a zig zag pattern? Is that all you see? Do you see the image of a panda? Chances are you see both. Or what about this classic image of an elephant in this second image? How many legs does the elephant have? It feels like our eyes are playing tricks on us. Depending on your focus you can see this image in a few different ways and just when you see it one way, all of a sudden your focus shifts and things appear different than they were before. It's the same image, it has not changed, but you can see this one image in a few different ways. Here is the third and last image for us to consider. Do you see a duck or a rabbit? Can you see both? It's one image, but depending on how you look at it, your understanding of it can change. Now here is my point as we head into today's message in Revelation 12 and 13. In many ways this is how the imagery of Revelation works; it's layered in the past, present and future. It's hard to pin down because as soon as you see it one way, things shift and you can suddenly see it differently. Is it this? (Yes). Is it that? (Yes). Is it both? (Probably). The image is important – God revealed these images to John and he captured them and described them the best that he could, but what is more important than understanding the actual image itself is understanding the truth that lies behind and within the image.

Last week Paul took us through the seven trumpets of Revelation, the image of a trumpet blasting and sounding a warning. And in chapter 11, a seventh trumpet blasts and loud voices proclaim.

Revelation 11:15

“The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.”

This is the truth that lays the foundation for where we will be spending our time today in chapters 12 and 13. It is right after this truth is proclaimed, that the world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ whose reign is forever and ever and that John witnesses something of great significance.

Revelation 12:1-2

Then I witnessed in heaven an event of great significance. I saw a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant, and she cried out because of her labor pains and the agony of giving birth.

Here we are introduced to a woman and it is clear that she is no ordinary woman. She is in many ways a cosmic woman. She is clothed with the sun, she has the moon beneath her feet and on her head is a crown made of stars – 12 of them to be exact. And in her radiance, she is also expectant. She is crying out as she awaits the birth of her child. Pretty dramatic stuff, but the drama has just begun!

Revelation 12:3-4

Then I witnessed in heaven another significant event. I saw a large red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, with seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept away one-third of the stars in the sky, and he threw them to the earth. He stood in front of the woman as she was about to give birth, ready to devour her baby as soon as it was born.

In these verses we are introduced to a second character that John witnesses. A large red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and a tail that wipes out one third of the stars in the sky. And this menacing brute takes a predatory position as he stands in front of the woman, ready to pounce and destroy the woman's child as soon as it is born. This is pretty graphic stuff that John is describing for us. It's a vision filled with tension and conflict.

Revelation 12:5-6

She gave birth to a son who was to rule all nations with an iron rod. And her child was snatched away from the dragon and was caught up to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where God had prepared a place to care for her for 1,260 days.

And the woman gives birth to a son. A son who was to rule all nations with an iron rod. And yet, before the dragon can pounce, the child is snatched away and caught up to God and to His throne. And the woman, she escapes too, to a place in the wilderness that God had prepared for her. A place where she would be cared for. I love how these verses so clearly depict God as a rescuer, saviour and care giver. In the middle of this dramatic story, God is clearly the one who rescues the child, saves the woman and also cares for her as she flees to a place that God had prepared for her. God is a God of rescue, a saving God and a caring God. But just when we get to the point when we are told that everyone is safe, the drama isn't over. Something is still going on - a war breaks out in Heaven!

Revelation 12:7-9

Then there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels. And the dragon lost the battle, and he and his angels were forced out of heaven. This great dragon—the ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world—was thrown down to the earth with all his angels.

Michael who in other places within Scripture is referred to as an arch-angel (or a leader of angels) is fighting with the dragon. This cosmic story has become a cosmic war. Michael and his angels vs. the dragon and his angels, those stars of heaven that were wiped out by the dragon's tail. The image of angels fighting may be a shock to some of you. I mean we like to think of angels in a different way, as sweet little chubby babies resting on a soft cloud. These baby angels are cute little instruments of love, and maybe armed with a little bow and arrow but wanting to bring nothing but love. However, what John describes in chapter 12 is not a Valentine's day card kind of image – it's a cosmic image of a cosmic war, a battle that is being waged in the heavens.

And in the midst of all this imagery we are not left to wonder who will win. We hear of the result. John says clearly in verse 8 that the dragon lost the battle! Yes, there is a battle and it is cosmic, but the truth about this battle is that the dragon, even in this passage called the “great dragon” or the ancient serpent, the devil, or Satan – the one deceiving the whole world, loses the battle. This is the truth that John sees and this is the truth that John declares.

Like our optical illusions, the imagery works on many levels. On the one hand it speaks to a time before God created the world, describing the fall of Satan, on the other hand it drips with nativity imagery as we can see in this story the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Mary being the woman, King Herod being the dragon that wants to destroy the child. It’s a story that is this, but also that. It’s not necessarily about the images themselves, but the reality that the images reveal. And what the images reveal to John who wrote these visions down and what they reveal to us who are reading them today, is the truth that there is a spiritual war that is taking place in unseen heavenly realities.

And let me just take a moment to acknowledge that for some of you the thought of an unseen spiritual battle happening around you is a fear-inducing image. Our minds can go to countless stories, images, movies and thoughts about what that looks like. However, the idea behind Revelation is not to produce fear in our lives but unveil for us hope. So let me take a moment to touch on two basic things we can know about this unseen spiritual battle.

One – ***A bigger story is taking place.*** In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul reminds us of this fact when he says this:

Ephesians 6:12

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

Don’t forget Paul says there is more going on than what we can see. There is a bigger story taking place. So, let’s think of a few examples here to help illustrate what I mean. First, let’s think of John and this gospel of Revelation. In the time that John is writing this, the church is undergoing a time of great

persecution under the Roman Emperor and brothers and sisters in Christ are losing their lives. The enemy power of Rome at the time of John’s writing is an oppressive reality to the life of the church, but even under persecution, the church is persevering. Why? Because a bigger story is taking place. Or what about Job from the Old Testament? Job was a righteous man who loved and served God when all of a sudden his life got turned upside down and inside out, but it wasn’t because of any wrongdoing on his part. Job didn’t get answers, he didn’t know why things were happening the way they were, but he was part of a bigger story that he just didn’t see. Or Jesus and the crucifixion. His disciples didn’t know or understand, they were devastated at His arrest, unjust trial and sentencing. As they took His body off the cross and placed His lifeless form in the tomb and walked away, even in that moment, they didn’t know why all this was happening, but there was a bigger story that was taking place.

So often in our lives, things happen that we simply cannot understand or make sense of. In these times the greatest question we have is why? *Why God is this happening? Why this? Why now? Why ever?* Of course this is understandable and we have all been there, asking the question why, haven’t we? When we feel this way, it’s important to remind ourselves that there is always more going on than we can see in the moment and there is more going on than we can know.

This leads to a second truth and something that we can know about spiritual battle and the bigger story that God is telling. ***We can always have hope.*** 1

John 4:4

But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world.

In the midst of all of the imagery that is found in Revelation 12 the word “thrown down” is used six times and all in reference to the dragon. Look again at verse 8. And the dragon LOST THE BATTLE. This is why, even in the midst of great heartache and turmoil, we can have hope, because the enemy has been defeated. Darryl Johnson in his book, ***Discipleship on the Edge***, which we have referred to many times in this series already, puts it this way

– *the war that is behind every war has already been won.* The great dragon, the ancient serpent, the devil or Satan has been thrown down and defeated! This does not mean that the battle does not continue. We're going to get to this in just a second, but the war has been won.

The truth is that our enemy is fatally wounded, and in his anger, our enemy seeks to wound. Let me take a couple of minutes to pause here and speak about a couple of things that come to us from this passage that I think are important for us to highlight as we think about the battle we fight with our enemy. In Revelation 12, the dragon or the devil is identified in two key ways. In verse 9 he is called the deceiver, the one deceiving the whole world. And in verse 10, he is called the accuser, the one who accuses us day and night.

These are the types of wounds our enemy seeks to inflict upon our minds and hearts, wounds of deceit and wounds of accusation. Deceit is often masked in half-truth or distorted truth. We see this right from the beginning of the Scriptures when Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. "Did God really say you must not eat from any of the trees in the garden? You won't die! In fact, your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil." Deceit, trickery...half-truth. Too often we have the impression that our enemy wants to create bad people. But this just isn't the truth. Our enemy doesn't want to make people bad, he simply wants to deceive and keep good people from knowing and experiencing the truth. Our enemy's strategy is one of deceit. It is to bend or distort the truth and keep us from Jesus.

And when deceit doesn't work, our enemy accuses. Who do you think you are? You aren't good enough. You aren't that valuable to God. You're unworthy, you're guilty, you're too far gone, what you have done is unforgivable, who you are is unacceptable and there is no hope for someone like you. This is more than deceit. These are words of slander, guilt and shame. Accusations like this do not come from the heart of God, never from God, they come from the enemy. In his woundedness, he seeks to wound. And I have no doubt that each and every one of us here today have felt the stinging, searing wounds of deceit and accusation that come from the enemy. But Revelation 12 reminds us that

the enemy has been thrown down and defeated and therefore the truth is this: the enemy does not win and the enemy does not have the final word. In the end, truth will stand and the truth will not imprison you. The truth will set you free because the truth of who we are is only found in Jesus Christ. God's voice - the voice of truth speaks to our lives these messages: you are valued, you are loved, you are wanted, you are forgiven and you can always have hope because you are redeemed! Deceit and accusation are the tools of the enemy, but they are no match for the truth of God's love.

Now, we have to move on through our passage, but before we do, let's make sure that we notice how the enemy is defeated. Verse 11 says that our enemy is defeated by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony. This verse is the cause for hope and it is the centre of the book of Revelation and it is the centre of the entire gospel message. The enemy has been defeated by the blood of the Lamb and it is only through Jesus and the deep love of God that victory is achieved.

Our enemy is still trying to deceive and accuse us. Essentially this is what chapter 13 reveals to us. A battle not waged in the heavens but on the earth. It's a battle for allegiance, it's a battle for trust and it's a battle ultimately for hope. Let me summarize chapter 13 in this way. Chapter 13 describes two beasts of power that come. One is out of the sea and the other out of the earth. These beasts are described in the same way other strange multi-layered images in the book of Revelation are. The beast of the sea has seven heads, ten horns and ten crowns. It looked like a leopard, with the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion and one of the heads had been wounded but then was healed. Of course there is much speculation over the exact meaning of these things and most scholars believe this beast of the sea represents political powers, nations that rise up in power to rule, often with oppressive consequences.

Over the course of history, there have been many ruling powers like this - Rome, Persia, Babylon, Greece. Of course some like to think of what ruling nation of power this represents today, but in my opinion, this isn't the point. All of them fit the imagery in one way or another. The important underlying thing to understand is where the beast gets its power or authority. Verse 2 of chapter 13 says that the dragon gave the beast his own power

and throne and great authority. And with this power, the beast blasphemes God. Multiple times in chapter 13 we see that this beast is in opposition to God.

The same is true for the beast who comes from the earth. The beast of the earth again is laden with imagery. It has two horns like those of a lamb, but it speaks with the voice of a dragon. This beast is said to have all the authority of the first beast (which we know comes from the dragon) and the beast from the earth acts as a hype man or a glorified PR rep for the first beast.

Revelation 13:14

And with all the miracles he was allowed to perform on behalf of the first beast, he deceived all the people who belong to this world. He ordered the people to make a great statue of the first beast, who was fatally wounded and then came back to life.

Power that comes from the enemy and a purpose that mirrors the strategy of the enemy as well. The beast deceives all the people who belong to this world.

These beasts are prophetic images and they hold some truth in the past, the present and the future and you can get lost in searching out the particulars, but this is where I feel our focus needs to be on two things. **One: these beasts get their power from the dragon.** They do have power, but remember, as we have said earlier, the war is won. Their power is not ultimate. The dragon has been thrown down and defeated, we cannot forget that. This power of the enemy is a defeated power, overcome by the blood of the Lamb. **Two: these beasts act with the same strategy of the dragon – deceit and accusation.** They blaspheme the Almighty and call people to worship them and their power instead of God. Their goal is to deceive and pull people away from God. Did you notice how the beast of the earth is described? With two horns like a lamb but with the voice of a dragon. A deceit-filled wolf in sheep's clothing. These beasts call for the faith, trust and hope of the people to be placed in them and in their power, but in the end, for all the promises they make, they cannot deliver.

At the end of chapter 13 comes one of the most iconic images of Revelation, the mark of the beast. Here is what it says in verses:

Revelation 13:16-18

He required everyone—small and great, rich and poor, free and slave—to be given a mark on the right hand or on the forehead. And no one could buy or sell anything without that mark, which was either the name of the beast or the number representing his name. Wisdom is needed here. Let the one with understanding solve the meaning of the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man—His number is 666.

Wisdom is needed here for sure. So many people have gotten swept away with trying to understand what this mark is, but again I think that our focus is better spent on understanding the wider reality of what the imagery speaks to. For Jewish readers of John's prophecy, the location of a mark taken on the right hand or on the forehead would immediately take them to the Jewish practice of Shema and writing the truth of God on their hands and head.

Deuteronomy 6:4-8

“Listen, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength. And you must commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these commands that I am giving you today. Repeat them again and again to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up. Tie them to your hands and wear them on your forehead as reminders

The Shema was a daily reminder and a physical reminder that there is one God and we are to worship God alone – with the actions of our hands and the thoughts of our minds. So this is about allegiance the beasts and the dragon want. The actions of our hands and the thoughts of our minds, but we are to devote ourselves to God. So more than the actual mark, this has to do more with how we live out our lives. Do we live for God? Where do we place our faith, trust and hope? And about the number itself – 666? We must take a similar

approach. It's less about the actual number but what the number represents. Of course there can be much speculation on this, but I really like Darryl Johnson's perspective on this when he points out that the number six is one less of seven and we have seen so many sevens in the book of Revelation so far. Seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets and the number seven is an image that represents completeness. Johnson says that the number six is then seen as falling short or incompleteness. He even says that often the number three is seen as a number of completeness, so he says that the number six repeated three times can be seen as being completely incomplete. And I like that the powers of these beasts, their deceit and their accusations will ultimately fall short, completely incomplete, the enemy has been defeated.

Wow! Are we done? Listen, I'll be honest with you these passages are not easy to preach, they aren't easy to understand and explain - much wisdom is needed. Our approach to all our preaching here at North Park is to approach God's Word with humility. There is so much depth and mystery to God's Word and the ongoing revelation of His great story of love and redemption for the world. My hope today is the hope of North Park always - that we would humbly and whole-heartedly point each other to Jesus. All of Scripture finds its centre in Jesus, and so I want to conclude today with three quick applicational guides to take our focus and place it squarely on Jesus.

One - I have said this a number of times today already, but it really is the ultimate message of God to our hearts as we live by faith in a broken world...*victory is found in Jesus*. The enemy is defeated; the war is won. I'm not sure what beasts you're facing in your life today and I'm not sure what messages of deceit or accusation they are speaking to you, but I can tell you this - *that today's current reality is not God's ultimate reality*. No matter what you're facing, the victory is found in Jesus and it isn't just found in some distant future, it can be found in the faithful endurance of today. Victory comes through the blood of the Lamb and by the proclaimed hope that comes from our testimony of faith.

Two - *Truth is found in Jesus*. The enemy's tactics are deceit and accusation - trickery that takes us away from the heart of God. Sometimes like the

beast of the earth, we can see what appears to be a lamb, but its voice is that of a dragon. As Christ followers, we are called to look deeper, beyond the outward appearance of things, beyond the enticing spectacle of power and prestige. Often the truth of God is found in the most unexpected of places. God does not look at the things humanity looks at - humanity looks on the outside, but God looks at the heart. How many times do we miss seeing the truth of who Jesus is because we focus on outward appearances? This is what Jesus continually challenges the Pharisee's with in the New Testament - you look so righteous on the outside, but your hearts are far from me. What do you need to look deeper at in your world today? What appearances of truth perhaps needs to be challenged? Is Jesus at the centre? Are our lives marked by truth; by the works of our hands and by the thoughts of our minds?

Three - *Jesus is worthy of our worship*. So much of chapter 13 centres around the fact that the beasts of the sea and the earth call us to worship, but unless it is worship of God Almighty, it is misguided worship! The enemy has been defeated by the blood of the Lamb and there is only one who is worthy of our worship, it has come at last - salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ. Jesus is His name and Jesus is worthy of our praise.

Points to Ponder

Unveiling Hope – A Study of the Book of Revelation

Revelation 12-13 (Jesus at the Centre)

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. What kinds of images or thoughts come to mind when you hear the phrase “spiritual battle”? What emotions does the thought of spiritual battle bring to the surface for you?
2. Read **Revelation 12:1-12**. What stands out to you about John’s vision the most? Do you find the idea of a war in heaven unsettling? How does it make you feel to know that “the dragon lost the battle”?
3. Satan uses the two strategies of deceit and accusation to attach us. How have you seen these strategies at work in your own life? How have you seen them at work in the world around you?
4. Read **Revelation 13:9-10**. While the war is won, the battle continues. What does it mean to you that “God’s holy people must endure persecution patiently and remain faithful”? If you are willing, discuss a time when you (or someone you know) has lived this reality.
5. Of the three applicational truths that were discussed, which one is easiest for you to hold onto? Which one is the hardest?

Victory is found in Jesus

Truth is found in Jesus

Jesus is worthy of our worship

6. What lessons in life and faith is God teaching you through this message that you can apply to your life this week?

Prayer and Action Item

Take a few moments and read **Deuteronomy 6:4-9**. These verses tell us to repeat truth, to talk about truth, to tie truth to our lives and to write truth out where we can see it each day. Spend a few moments reflecting on one truth of God that you hold onto. Repeat this truth to yourself quietly for a few moments, then speak this truth out loud, next write the truth down on a piece of paper (being as creative as you would like) and find a place in your home to keep it where you will see it and be reminded of this truth.