

FGBC: Lamb of Thrones: Witness that Wins

Revelation 11:1-13

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Dan Hoffman

In November of 2018, John Chau, a 26-year-old American adventure blogger and missionary chartered a fishing boat to take him out to the isolated island of North Sentinel off the coast of India.

The small tribe of people who live there are among the last totally uncontacted people on earth. And when Chau learned this in Bible school, he began to feel God's call to share the good news of Jesus with them.

Chau had several passions in life. He loved the outdoors and outdoor survival. He loved beef-jerky, and actually became a sponsor for a brand, and he was passionate about his faith. In every aspect of life he sought to shine Jesus' light into the place he had been put.

And so, putting these things together, it wasn't a surprise to many of his friends and teachers that missions became his focus, and his mind was set on what had not been done before.

After significant preparation Chau set out with the fishermen who had agreed to drop him off. They navigated around the coastguard and arrived North Sentinel island a few hours later.

The fishermen refused to get close to the island so Chau used his kayak to paddle to shore. As he approached several people began yelling at him and running for their bow and arrows so he quickly threw some fish he had caught onto the shore as a gift and paddled back to the boat.

The next day he made it to shore and approached one of the huts before he was seen. As people began yelling at him he tried to parrot their words back to them. But then one of the youth shot an arrow at him which lodged in his waterproof Bible. He removed the arrow and gave it back to the youth before retreating to the shore.

His Kayak had been taken so he swam a mile back to the ship. After writing in his journal and spending time in prayer and then bidding an expected farewell to his shipmates he made his third attempt to connect with the Sentinelese and was never seen again.

News of John Chau traveled quickly around the globe because of how strange a story it was. And social media was quick to attack him saying, among other things: "John Chau is not a martyr. Just a dumb American who thought the tribals needed 'Jesus' when the tribals already lived in harmony with God and nature for years without outside interference."

Even Chau's own father criticized his son's actions: "John is gone because the Western ideology overpowered my [Confucian] influence... extreme Christianity... [pushed my child to a [not unexpected end]."

But not everyone was a critic. A friend of Chau's, John Ramsey, defended his actions: "His motivation was love for the [Sentinelese] people.... If you believe in heaven and hell then what he did was the most loving thing anyone could do."¹

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After His resurrection Jesus said "Go and make disciples of all the nations... Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."² Witness that looks like Jesus is witness that wins.

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Today we are delving into one of the most difficult to interpret sections in Revelation – the first 13 verses in chapter 11. Please go ahead and grab your Bibles.

Just before we look at this passage I want to outline the steps I go through in order to understand a passage of scripture. I've mentioned before that I want to be very careful not to start with a theory and then make the text fit with the theory, instead I want to start with the text and allow it to speak for itself. This is called exegesis. The opposite of this is eisegesis which means bringing your own ideas to the text and making it agree with you. In general that's bad.

For example once I was talking with a young man and we were talking about how Jesus is the only path to God. But he responded by saying "Hey, the Bible says 'God is love.' And there is no way a loving God would send people He loves to hell. So I'm not worried too much about getting Jesus wrong. If I'm wrong God will still love me and let me into heaven."

Now this line of thinking fits really well with Canadian culture. In Canada tolerance is our most important virtue. And within this context "love" means accepting people and letting them believe whatever they want. But when we use this context to understand the Bible that is eisegesis. That's making God a Canadian. So how do we avoid that?

Well, 1 John 4 does say:

God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. (1 John 4:16)

But in order to understand this we need to understand the context it was written into. And context includes a few things: So first context means we understand the words themselves.

¹ Quotes in introduction taken from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/03/john-chau-christian-missionary-death-sentinelese> (Accessed February 6, 2020)

² Matthew 28:19-20

In Greek there are three words for “love” and the word used here is “agape”. Agape love describes sacrificing yourself for the benefit of another. It isn’t sentimental or romantic. So God isn’t swept up in emotion for us, He has made a calculated decision to sacrifice Himself on our behalf – that’s the love this passage is talking about.

But there is more. John didn’t write this to 21st century Canadians, so we need to read this like John’s original readers would. And we do this by reading all of 1st John to get the main point. And when you do this you find that John was teaching his church not so much about what God is like, but how to differentiate true believers from people who said they are Christians but aren’t. And John’s point is that sacrificial, beneficial love is the test for this. He says:

Dear friends, let us continue to [agape] one another, for [agape] comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not [agape] does not know God for God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

1st John is about how you know somebody is a Christian.

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And finally we need to read this passage through the lens of the rest of scripture to make sure what we think it says agrees with everything else. So we know from the rest of scripture that God has lots of attributes. He is holy and righteous, He is faithful and trustworthy, He is graceful and merciful and all sorts of other things. And we learn that God loves, and He also hates. God hates injustice. God hates sin. God hates it when people destroy themselves by rejecting Him in favor of being the gods of our own lives.

And so when we put this together we find that it is a wrong interpretation to conclude that because God is love He won’t require repentance from us and punish those who reject Him. You can’t make the Bible line up with whatever you want it to say.

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Now I tell you all this because we’ve come across a very difficult passage of scripture with several different interpretations. And after looking at several commentaries written by people who are way smarter than me I feel confident in telling you “I’m certain I do not understand everything that’s going on here” – how’s that for confidence?

But just because this is a difficult passage doesn’t mean we can’t read it the same way we read the rest of scripture – hoping that God will speak. Do you believe that God speaks through the Bible? I do. So many times I’ve been reading the Bible and the very passage I’m reading speaks directly into the questions I’ve got. Do you read the Bible? Friends, God knows what you are facing and He has ordained that this is the passage we would be looking at today. Prepare to hear His voice. Would you stand as we read Revelation 11 starting in verse 1:

[Read Revelation 11:1-13]

I probably don’t need to tell you that there are a ton of different pictures in this passage. But I do feel I need to tell you “don’t panic.” We can read this in the context of apocalyptic literature.

So every different kind of literature has rules for reading it. A biology textbook has words, but it reads very differently than the lyrics to a song do. So “I Believe I Can Fly” by Robert Kelly was one of the most popular songs in my grad year.

“I believe I can fly
I believe I can touch the sky
I think about it every night and day
Spread my wings and fly away.”

I’m not going to win any awards for singing that, but Kelly won a Grammy. And not a single person criticized him saying “Kelly, you don’t have wings.” Why? Well we all know that good music makes you feel something it isn’t trying to make a scientific statement.

And there are different kinds of literature in the Bible too, and each of them needs to be read literally – like the kind of literature it is. So for example in Daniel, which is another apocalyptic book in the Bible, king Nebuchadnezzar has a dream about a giant statue. It has a gold head, its chest and arms are silver, its belly and thighs are bronze, its legs are iron and its feet are a combination of iron and clay.

This was the vision that God gave the king. But if you take this to mean “watch out for some strange statue that is going to pop up somewhere” – you’d make a mistake. To read apocalyptic literature “literally” means to expect symbols and imagery. And indeed Daniel interprets the dream. There is no statue, it is a picture of a string of kingdoms.

Here’s the point: In order to read Revelation the same way we read the rest of scripture we have to understand its context. We have to expect imagery and symbol. And this passage and the chapters that follow are absolutely packed with pictures. And they are pictures we see throughout the rest of scripture.

Now there are differences of opinion on how to interpret this, and it would be impossible for me to lay them all out – plus it would kill you. So what I want to do with the rest of our time is look at a couple of images from a perspective that makes sense to me. And my goal is not to teach you interesting stuff. I want us to hear the voice of Jesus. But some imagery first.

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So, in verses 1 and 2 John is asked to participate. He gets told: “Go and measure the temple of God.”

Now as John’s writing Jerusalem has already been destroyed by the Romans and the temple with it. And Jesus said this was going to happen. He said:

“Do you see all these buildings? I tell you the truth, they will be completely demolished. Not one stone will be left on top of another!” (Matthew 24:2)

So the temple was gone and it wasn’t coming back. In Revelation 21 – this is where the story ends – we read:

I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. (Revelation 21:22)

So the temple that John gets told to measure can't be a literal brick and mortar temple, it has to be something else – so what could it be? Well the point in Revelation 21 is that wherever God is present is His temple. And this lines up with the way the rest of the New Testament talks about the temple. So Paul writes:

Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? (1 Corinthians 3:16)

And

For we are the temple of the living God. As God said: "I will live in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they will be my people. (2 Corinthians 6:16)

So the temple of God is right here. This building isn't the temple – there is nothing sacred about this space – we are the temple; our bodies are sacred. And that's because God's Spirit lives inside everyone who has been bought by the blood of Jesus - we are the place where God is present in Prince George. We are the temple.

That's great news and a great responsibility. But here there's also a warning: Jesus says as God's temple we can expect hardship. John sees that the Gentiles in the outer court of the temple are going to trample the holy city for 42 months while God's witnesses prophecy for 1260 days in sackcloth and ashes.

It is **so** easy to get swamped by the imagery here, but hang in there. The outer court of the temple was where Gentiles were allowed to enter. Only God's people were allowed inside – and in the Old Testament that was the Jews. But in the New Testament "Gentiles" refers to two groups. Sometimes it is non-Jews and other times it is non-believers. So Galatians says:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

In Revelation 11 it seems to me that "Gentiles" is being used as a picture of people who are outside the believing community. I think Jesus is saying the church is going to be surrounded by people who want it destroyed – And does that sound a little bit like the world we live in? In 21st century Canada pretty much the only thing everyone agrees on is that the church is an oppressive and outdated, chauvinistic organization that should be pushed out to make way for human progress. And culture rejoices that secularism is taking ground.

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Now Jesus says this will happen for 42 months while a couple witnesses who are actually olive trees and lampstands prophecy for 1260 days. After this they get killed by the beast and lie on the street 3 and a half days before being resurrected.

What is going on here? Well tons of numbers and tones of pictures for sure. Here's what I want you to see: First some math 42 months is 3 and a half years. And 1260 days is 3 and a half years so 1 idea. And these numbers are all over the Bible.

So Israel journeys from Egypt to the Promised Land in 42 stages – that's Numbers 33. And 42 months or 3 and a half years is how long it didn't rain when Elijah called the nation to repentance. In Daniel, 3 and a half years shows up twice. And in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus we get 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus.³

So 42 or 1260 or 3 and a half are numbers in the Bible that mark the period of time between a start and an end. Egypt to the Promised Land. Abraham to Jesus. So here, because we are talking about the church, many commentaries think this is referring to the time between when Jesus started the church by shedding His blood, and the day when the new city, without a temple, comes down out of heaven.

Now there are differences of opinion here, but I think it would be strange not to take into consideration the parallel imagery from the rest of scripture that pops up here.

And then we get the witnesses. Who are these guys? Well throughout scripture Jesus followers are describes as His witnesses. In Acts Peter is preaching and says:

We are witnesses of these things and so is the Holy Spirit, who is given by God to those who obey Him. (Acts 5:32)

And John says these witnesses are the two lampstands. And we've seen lampstands before. This is the word Jesus uses to describe the churches He writes letters to. And there were 2 among the 7 that were faithful – Smyrna and Philadelphia. The other five failed and of them Jesus said things like:

If you don't repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches. (Revelation 2:5)

So we have two witnesses – Jesus' faithful church – proclaiming His message with power for 42 months – the period of time between when Jesus established the church and when He will return.

And Jesus says the Beast is going to opposes the church during this time. And it's going to look like he wins – this is what Revelation 12 and 13 is all about. The church is going to suffering. The faithful are going to give their lives for their message. And the world is going to rejoice as it appears the pesky church has been defeated. But Jesus' church will not die. God always breathes it back to life.

Now there is so much more that could be said here and so many other interpretations. But I don't want to get lost in the details. I want to draw our hearts to Jesus because that's the point of this passage and every other passage in the Bible.

³ Darrell Johnson "Discipleship on the Edge" (pg 204)

Here's the encouragement: don't lose heart as you look out at society around you and see how hard it is to be a faithful witness for Jesus. Don't lose heart that it appears the church is losing ground. Everyone here finds themselves in a family, a workplace a classroom a neighbourhood where standing up for your faith is difficult. In this world people who seek to follow Jesus' commands look foolish. Don't lose heart that powerful forces seem to be bearing down. All of this has been foreseen. Jesus has got this. This has always been His plan.

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2000 years ago Jesus could have had it all. Jesus could have done anything He wanted in Rome. He could have walked up to Caesar and taken the crown from his head. He could have had power and wealth, and everything else the mind can imagine.

But Jesus calculated – God decided – that His kingdom was going to be a kingdom of agape love. And this means it would be won, not by conquest, but by laying down His life in love for people who had spent their lives rejecting Him.

Jesus won us for Himself, while we were sinners, by loving us. But Jesus' love didn't tolerate our wickedness, it showed us that the path to abundant life we all want is through Him. That's the message of the Bible. That's the gospel!

And here's the call in Revelation: when we embrace this message as our own; when we sacrifice our comfort and safety and even lives in order to share the love of Christ with those around us we tap into the power of God that is above the understanding of the world.

Verse 13 ends telling us that the same people who rejoiced when the church appeared to die end up giving glory to the God of heaven. When people suffer for the gospel Jesus' kingdom overcomes – this is witness that wins.

Friends, things are not what they seem. Jesus is building His kingdom. In spite of all the terrible and crazy things we see going on around us He is in control of this world. Jesus wins and He has already won – death is defeated.

So be bold. Don't cower as a Canadian because culture says our faith shouldn't affect our lives. Commit yourself to sharing the message of Jesus' love with the people He has put you beside. And do this the way Jesus did it – your life for theirs. This is what it means to be a faithful witness of Jesus Christ.