

Apocalypse Now: Session Six

The Throne Over the Glassy Sea: The Father's Sovereignty Over Evil in Revelation

Before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

- Rev 4:6a

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

- Rev 15:2

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

- Rev 21:1

A Theology of Evil and God's Sovereignty

- What is sin?
 - o "Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in the world he created, rebelling against him by living without reference to him, not being or doing what he requires in his law—resulting in our death and the disintegration of all creation." – *New City Catechism*, Q. 16
- God does not commit sin or entice us to sin
 - o "You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin." – 1 John 3:5
 - o "Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." – James 1:13
- God *permits* sin and uses evil for His own good purposes
 - o "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." – Gen 50:20
 - o "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil (*ra'ah*) way, God relented of the disaster (*ra'ah*) that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it." – Jonah 3:10

An illustration from the creation of Middle-Earth:

Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Ilúvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined. . . . And thou, Melkor, wilt discover all the secret thoughts of thy mind and wilt perceive that they are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory.¹

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, p. 5

God's Use of Evil in Revelation

- God's implicit use of evil through the "divine passive" voice
 - "...a crown was given to him...Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth...he was given a great sword...they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill" – summary of the divine passive voice for the four-horseman in Rev. 6
 - "Whenever the clause "it was given" or "he was given" (or an equivalent phrase) appears in Revelation, God is the implied subject of the passive verb (6:2, 4, 8, 11; 7:2; 8:3; 9:3, 5; 11:1, 2; 13:5, 7, 14, 15; 16:8; 19:8; 20:4)" – Schreiner, *ESVEC*
 - God is the one giving, granting, and permitting the wicked abuses of authority in the book.
- God's explicit use or permission of evil
 - "Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been." – Rev 6:11
 - "And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations" – Rev 20:7-8a
 - "And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled." – Rev 17:16-17
 - "The purposes of God in such events do not cancel out the authenticity of human choices and decisions, for the hatred of the ten kings and the beast for the harlot is no charade (17:16). The kings and the beasts are not puppets and marionettes whose strings God pulls. We see the same phenomenon in Isaiah, where Assyria fulfills God's will while clearly doing what it desires to do (Isa. 10:5–34). So, too, God rules over what the beast and the kings do to the harlot, yet he is not morally blameworthy or indicted for the evil the kings and beast perform. We see elsewhere that God can predestine evil events so that his purposes are fulfilled, while remaining unstained by evil. The supreme example of this is the cross of Christ: Jesus' death was predestined by God, but those who killed him were held responsible (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). We are reminded here that God rules over history, that evil empires and kings, though culpable for the horrific evil they carry out, are never outside the hand of God. Nor should they boast as if they accomplish anything apart from his purposes." – Schreiner, *ESVEC*

The Final Triumph of Evil

- The glassy sea in Revelation

- The sea can serve as an image of chaos, disorder, or evil in the Bible (cf. Gen 1:2; Gen 6-9), a power that only Yahweh has mastery over (Ex 15:4-10; Ps 89:9-10; Ps 65:7; Job 38:11; Ps 74:13-14; Is 27:1; Is 51:9-10).
- As in Daniel, it is out of the sea that the terrifying beast of Revelation 13 arises (Rev 13:1; cf. Dan 7:1-3)
 - Also, note that the dragon pours out a “flood” of waters from its mouth after the woman in 12:15, likely representing false teaching.
- Before God’s throne, “there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.” (Rev 4:6).
 - The chaotic sea is still and subdued before the throne of God.
- At the final judgment, “And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.” (Rev 15:2).
 - The chaotic sea is subdued before the praise of the Church victorious.
- Evil’s final end: a fiery sea.
 - “These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.” – 19:20
 - “...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” – 20:10
 - “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” – 21:8
 - “Evil carries within itself, by God’s design, the seeds of its own destruction so that it unravels from within.” – Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing*, p. 98
- The New Creation: the erasure of evil
 - “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” – Rev 21:1