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Session 38 – Excursus: Revelation #3

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we're diving into one of the most famous and, let's be honest, most confusing books ever written, the Book of Revelation. For centuries, it's been read as a roadmap to the end of the world.

But what if it's not about that at all? Right, so when you hear Revelation, your mind probably jumps to beasts, plagues, and this super detailed script for how the world is going to end. But what if that's a modern lens we're putting on it? What if the book's original message was for a very specific audience, with a purpose that we tend to miss today? Okay, the absolute key to unlocking Revelation is understanding its language. This isn't a crystal ball.

It's a book packed with powerful symbols- political, theological, you name it. And it was written to give hope and courage to Christians who were living under the thumb of the Roman Empire. So to see how this symbolic stuff actually works, let's zoom in on a really key story from chapter 11: the mysterious tale of the two witnesses.

These two witnesses are really fascinating figures. They show up doing miracles, just like the ancient prophets Moses and Elijah, and they're standing up to this terrifying beast, which for the original audience was a super clear symbol for Rome. And yeah, they get killed, but the story makes it very clear that God gets the final say.

So this isn't a prediction that two literal guys are going to show up someday. Nope. These two figures are actually a powerful symbol for the role of the church itself.

They represent the call for all believers to be a witness during this time of intense conflict. And this just nails the core message, doesn't it? The whole point of this vision was to encourage those early Christians. Their mission was to be a faithful witness to what they believed, even when it was incredibly dangerous and costly.

So just imagine you're a Christian back then, wondering if you should just compromise with Rome, you know, maybe participate in a little emperor worship to make life easier. This chapter is a clear no. It says, stay strong.

You might suffer for it, but your faithfulness is worth it because God, not the empire, will prove you right in the end. And that's a pretty powerful message for anyone in any time who feels pressure to just go along with a system they believe is wrong. Now, this whole theme of ultimate vindication leads us straight to one of the most famous and frankly, most debated parts of Revelation: the millennium, that thousand-year reign we hear about in chapter 20.

For centuries, people have argued about what this means. And they've come up with all these complex timelines. Does Jesus come back before this thousand-year period to set it up or after it? Or hey, is the whole thing just a symbol for what's happening right now? But

again, what if we're asking the wrong questions? I mean, instead of getting all tangled up in timelines, what if we asked, what was the purpose of this passage for the people who first read it? And the answer is really powerful.

The thousand years isn't supposed to be a literal entry in a calendar. It's a symbol of total victory and total justice. It's the author's way of saying that for those who are faithful witnesses, for those who suffered, their sacrifice was not for nothing.

They will be rewarded, and God's justice will win completely. And finally, this theme of vindication really brings us to the central conflict of the entire book. You could pretty much sum it all up as a tale of two cities.

On one side, you have Babylon the Great. And since it's described as sitting on seven hills, well, that was a very common nickname for Rome. It was a clear code name depicting this corrupt, arrogant system that seduces the world.

And on the other side, you have its alternative, the new Jerusalem, which represents God's perfect community of people. The readers are given this really direct command. They have a choice to make.

They can either participate in the corrupt, idolatrous system of the Roman Empire and share in its downfall, or they can separate themselves from it. It's this powerful call to nonconformity, a challenge to really question which city, which system of values, has our ultimate loyalty. But here's the cool part.

It's not just a command to leave something behind. It's an invitation to join something so much better. If you resist the pull of Babylon, you're promised citizenship in a far greater city, the new Jerusalem.

And the description we get of this incredible new city, well, it's all built around one single, highly symbolic number. 12. The city has 12 gates for the 12 tribes of Israel and 12 foundations for the 12 apostles.

Its measurements are all multiples of 12. This isn't an architectural blueprint, you guys. It's a symbol.

It represents the complete people of God from all of history, finally brought together in this one perfect community. So what is the final destiny that this incredible vision of a new city promises? Well, it might not be what you think. I mean, our culture is full of these images of the afterlife, right? This idea of a disembodied spiritual existence where we escape the physical world and just float on clouds forever.

But the vision in Revelation is radically different. It's not about escaping the earth. It's about the restoration of the earth.

The ultimate destiny here is a new physical creation, a new earth where humanity lives in a renewed world with God dwelling right there with them. So when we put all these pieces together, we see that Revelation isn't really a roadmap of the future. It's a book of resistance.

It unmask the pride of any human empire that tries to set itself up as the ultimate authority. It calls people to be faithful witnesses, reminding them where their true allegiance belongs. And it promises a future that isn't an escape, but a beautiful, renewed creation.

And all of that leaves us with a really powerful question. This ancient book challenged its first audience to identify and resist the demands for ultimate allegiance from the empire all around them. So what does that challenge mean for us today?