

XXL - The revelation at Pathmos.

And he said unto me, these words are faithful and true; and the Lord, the God of the holy prophets, hath sent his angel to show his servants that which must shortly come to pass. REV. 22:6.

Whilst we are delving into the doctrine of the last things, this second series must not be concluded without a further explanation of what the Revelation of John shows us about the Kingship of Christ. It should be emphasized here that the visions given to John on Pathmos were primarily intended for the Christians living at that time. Their fate was hard. They stood as a small circle, in the full sense as the little flock, in the midst of a world that turned against them with its governmental power, its learning, and its social striving. If those first Christians had been content to occupy a modest place alongside the life of the world, they would have been tolerated. Why should there not have been a place for the Christian religion next to the various religions of the day? The Christians, however, were not content with this. No, it was not their intention to allow their Christian religion to take its place alongside the heathen and Jewish religions, as if they were one and the same. Their intentions went much further, their aims much higher. They were the King's people, and Christ, their King, had to rule over all people and nation. All other religion had to be destroyed. The Christian religion was the world religion. The only true, the only pure, the only form of worship to be tolerated. And therefore, all temples had to be demolished, all priesthoods abolished, all idols exhibited in their absence, and all the souls of men claimed for the honor of Christ. There could be no coordination. Even subordination to the other religions could not suffice. All other religions had to disappear as sinful and offensive to God. Nothing but Christianity had to remain, and the rule of the King of Christendom over all the earth had to be recognized and honored. Originally, therefore, it was not the pagans who attacked the Christians, but the Christians who, in their confession, attacked all existing religions. Peace was thus unthinkable. There had to be a struggle, and in that struggle either Christianity or paganism had to succumb. A struggle between the Christian King and the Emperor. A struggle between the Christian confession and pagan philosophy. And likewise, a struggle between the Christian moral teaching and the moral teaching of the heathen society. This struggle, especially in the first century, seemed desperate for the Christians. What was their little flock compared to the power of Rome's emperor? How did not all kinds of pagan philosophy penetrate the Christian confession already in the first century through the teachings of the Nicolaitans, the

Doctors and the Gnostics? And above all, how did not their holy conception of life, especially in the younger generation, risk being weakened and poisoned by the lower moral teachings of pagan society?

In this state of affairs, the Christ appeared to John on Pathmos, in order to show him in a series of visions the course of history, the suffering of the Christians, but also their final triumph in fascinating images. Give assurance that the end of the fearful struggle will be a final triumph; remove all doubt as to the outcome of the struggle; Show in clear signs how the course of history will necessarily lead to that desired outcome, - and the weakest will feel heroism rising up within him, and he who must die as a martyr in that struggle will die with a cry of jubilation on his lips, and before he climbs the funeral pyre or is thrown to the wild animals, will find comfort in the strength of his soul. The entire Revelation on Pathmos must therefore be viewed from this perspective. It addresses itself first and foremost to the then living race of Christendom; it wants to make known to this suffering Christendom the certainty of the final triumph, and it wants to enliven sinking hearts by that certain future, and to comfort those who go down in the struggle. Everything comes down to that certainty. There must be no room for doubt or hesitation, and hence the appearance of the Christ Himself, hence the repeated declaration that this is how it will happen, and hence again at the end the solemn declaration: "These words are faithful and true, and the Lord, the God of the holy prophets, has sent His angel to show His servants what must shortly come to pass. A statement reinforced by the declaration, that "if any man shall depart from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall withdraw his part from the book of life, and from the holy city." Standing in the midst of a struggle that according to human calculations could only end in the total defeat and extermination of the Christians, the Christianity of that time needed firmness of conviction, the certain knowledge that the outcome would be just the opposite, and the unshakeable hope that the final triumph would remain with Christ its King. And that certainty, that certain knowledge, that foundation of her hope is what that King gave to John on Pathmos, and through him to the suffering and persecuted and hard-pressed Christianity. Those visions have been one of the means for the triumph of Christendom.

These visions had to meet two requirements. First, through the whole of history, they had to show the end and, in that end, the final triumph; and second, they had to emphasize the initial triumph that was already, immediately, awaiting. That is why these visions dioramatically provide a view through the entire course of

history, and through all of this draw the final triumph so clearly from afar that they become the resting point for the searching religious gaze. The downfall of Jerusalem is shown, and from that fixed point the line of history goes straight on to the final point, when Christ returns, all opposition is broken by him, the Last Judgment enters, and glory is revealed. Whether years or centuries lie between is indifferent. Are not a thousand years with the Lord as one day? What it comes down to is showing that the power of the King is already beginning to work. Not only in a later century, but already now, immediately, in the fall of Jerusalem, and later in the fall of pagan Rome, and that the faithful, from there peering through the diorammatic course of history, have before them the final triumph of Christ our King as a vista in clear outline. For the first you have the continually repeated statement that it is shown "what must shortly take place. A revelation of power is shown in these visions, which will not come to pass centuries from now. No, that revelation of power will begin immediately. The visions do not refer to what will only begin to work much later, but they clearly and distinctly point to a beginning of that revelation of power, which is immediately at hand. The two great powers against which the first Christians found themselves confronted were Judaism and the heathen imperial power. Well, both these powers, represented by the one in Jerusalem and the other in imperial Rome, would be attacked right away, and both their fall is shown in clear images. By the addition of the words "where our Lord was crucified" (11:8), the city outside whose walls Golgotha lay is referred to, and in 17:9 the words "the seven heads are the seven mountains on which the woman sits" are just as definitely an allusion to ancient Rome, which was known everywhere as the city of the seven hills.

Even this visionary announcement of the fall of Jerusalem and Rome must not be understood in such a way that the effect of Christ's royal power was not already at work beforehand, as if it were only manifest in such great events. It goes without saying that in ordinary life, too, Christ's royal power is constantly and unremittingly at work, both in the destinies of the churches and in the personal lives of believers. Just read how Jesus himself in his letters to the Churches in Asia-Minor constantly testifies to what he, as the Head of all, will do, and how he, precisely for the protection of those Churches, also acts on private individuals. You can see this clearly in the letter to Thyatire, where it says of the woman Jezabel: "I gave her time to repent, and she did not repent. Behold, I will put her to bed, and those who have committed adultery with her, in great affliction; and I will put her children to death, and all the churches will know that it is I who test hearts and

kidneys." But although it is clear from this that the Revelation of John in no way intends to overlook or underestimate the silent impact of Christ on everyday life, yet the intention to make the power of our King shine through in the great and mighty world events, which are set out like milestones on the path of history, and in which the course of things, visibly turning around, takes a noticeable turn. In this way everyone looks at his own life, and attaches the most importance in the memory to what has brought significant change in his life and his destiny. In this way each people shows its history by recording for the future precisely those events that dominate the situation of the country and lead it in new directions. And in this sense it is the intention of these visions at Pathmos, to encourage and comfort the Churches in their anxious strain, especially to draw all attention together to those coming revelations of Jesus' power, which by a surprising intervention in the course of history made the irrefutable character of Jesus' everlasting victory stand out before all eyes. If it is now certain that Christianity, at its entrance into history, found in Judaism and paganism, represented by Jerusalem and Imperial Rome, the two principal powers opposite it, over which it had to triumph or under which it had to abate, then nothing could have so splendidly illuminated the Christ's royal power as the fall of Jerusalem in the first century, and the imminent infliction of the mortal wound on the imperial power of Rome.

But in this the vision could not rest. With each struggle the odds could go up and down. Even though it appeared later that the Christian people were about to see Jerusalem and Rome fall, this in itself was no guarantee that the chance of happiness could not turn. And what would it profit Christ's royal power that Jerusalem and Rome should fall, if other powers were soon to arise and attack the Christian religion with a new and complete defeat? And for that reason alone, could these visions on Pathmos adequately strengthen the congregation of the living God, as it was clearly shown that not only triumph in the beginning, but also total victory in the end, was to come. However long and dark the line of sight through which, from Jerome's and Rome's fall, one saw through to the end, that end itself had, in the farthest point of the diorama, to be seen in a perfectly clear light, and, at whatever historical distance, it had to be seen as if before one's eyes, How in that end all unholy power would gather against our King, and all instruments would turn against him to destroy his Kingdom, but how our King with irresistible majesty would attack and throw down successively each and every one of those unholy powers, until one day every enemy would be subdued at his feet. And from behind the battlefield on which this final struggle was to be fought,

the full radiance of the kingdom of glory was to appear before the soul's eye, in order to make manifest in the wedding of the Lamb, or should you say in the new Jerusalem and in God's paradise, the salvation for which heaven and earth had been eternally determined by God's counsel. And this is precisely what the faithful of those days received in the visions on Pathmos. Announcement of the imminent triumph over Jerusalem. Then the fall of imperial Rome. And then the long, dark history that would lead to the end. But that end mapped out in clear, animated images. Attractive in its beauty, enchanting in the gigantic struggle in which their King would triumph, and restful in the complete certainty with which that final triumph was to be sealed.

Yet it did not stop there.

It was not enough to show what was about to happen and how glorious the final triumph would be. Also, what would lie in between had at least to be indicated. Hence the repeated attempts to find details of the entire history of the world in the visions of Pathmos, all through the ages up to the present. The after-effects of these attempts are still to be found in the canticles of our Staten transposition. Now this is true, that all that has occurred since Pathmos, and until Jesus' return is yet to come, is actually contained in the visions which trace the course of history, and only in so far did they err in trying to apply verse by verse to certain facts of history, where after all these visions could give us nothing but a summary of the characteristics which would continually, and in an ascending process, emerge in this struggle of the ages. Jesus' firm statement that no one knows anything about the hour of judgment, neither the angels nor the Son of God, because the Father has placed the times and occasions in His own power, leaves no other interpretation of these visions. The visions form a whole, for they arise from "the Book with the seven seals," and in the successive appearance of the seven angels, the seven trumpets, and the seven vials, a historical course is undoubtedly announced. But it is quite a different matter whether in such a revelation, century by century and year by year, the coming events are foretold, or whether the character is drawn to us that will reveal itself in the course of the centuries, continuing and progressing. Faith is not concerned with years and names and a few facts, but with the spiritual struggle that will manifest itself with increasing clarity in the course of history, and it is precisely the latter that presents itself in these visions of Pathmos. The character of this struggle can be seen mainly in these features: 1° there is an ascending process. The same thing happens again and again, but with each return the same struggle is shown with increasing intensity. The outpouring of God's wrath begins with the

usual phenomena of rising wars, fearful pestilence and fearful famine. But with the surge of history, the destruction becomes more and more incisive. At first the destruction affects only a part, often a third. But then it goes on and on, until at last nothing is resisted, nothing is spared, and everything goes under, in connection with which the destructive powers are more and more fearful in nature. 2°. Alongside this character of the ascending process there is just as steadfastly this sharp trait, that the battle is not only fought spiritually, but also violently, and that not only the human world, but also nature, in the firmament and on earth, is included in the struggle. The power of the King of the Kingdom of God is not limited to the realm of the mind, but also affects nature and the world of visible things. The sun and moon, the sea and rivers, the bodies of men and animals. It is becoming increasingly clear that a struggle is going on that encompasses all creation, the whole earth, and ultimately the entire universe. 3°. Besides this continually ascending process, and the increasingly all-embracing nature of the struggle, a third feature is that the apostates are still constantly given the opportunity to repent and give glory to God. With the sunken believers this succeeds in part, but the world hardens itself, and when our King still again and again calls the apostate world to repentance by His judgments, they harden themselves in evil, blaspheme God who brings them these plagues, and chew their tongues with pain, while they go on cursing the Almighty. 4°. It is equally clear from these visions that the anti-Christian power is again and again given the opportunity to show what it can do. It organizes itself more and more powerfully. It erects its anti-Christian kingdom opposite the Kingdom of Christ. It imitates in its own kingdom the kingdom of Christ. She works through kings and through false prophets, and ends by imprinting a mark on all her followers, finally excluding even those who do not bear the "little mark of the beast" from ordinary life and from trade and business. It is the man of sin who in the end poses as God in the temple of God and claims the whole world for himself. Christ will triumph, but first his enemy must be given the opportunity to bring his full power against the Christ into the field. Only when the anti-Christian power has exerted itself to the utmost, and has unfolded all its unholy power, will the final battle be worthy of Christ, and in the destruction of that fully unfolded power will he celebrate his fitting triumph.

To this is added, in the fifth place, that characteristic that dominates all visions, that what is done, whether by the Antichrist or by our King, even though it is played out on earth, nevertheless receives its driving force not from the earth, but

from the world of spirits. This is the case on the part of Christ, for he sits at God's right hand. He does not fight alone, but with the hosts of God's angels. And everything that our King does is based on what happened in the palace of our God in the heavens. The whole of the sacred drama is performed according to that which is written in the Book of the seven seals, and each new impulse for the performance of the drama emanates from the throne of the majesty of God. It is not from this earth that life rises to the surface, but the vision begins each time to move us in the heavens near God's throne, and each new movement in the stupendous drama proceeds from God's throne. But that is precisely how things are on the side of the antichristian power. Here, too, it is not the sin of mankind from which the action against Christ arises. The battle that breaks out on earth against the Kingdom of Christ is merely the result and consequence of the enmity in which Satan persists against the living God. This is clearly indicated by the casting down of the red dragon (Satan) from the spirit world onto this earth. Even before that moment, Satan's many effects on the world of men also go on before that moment, but it is only from that moment on that Satan agitates and works on the earth itself. He imitates the incarnation of the Word by incarnating himself in a human being, and in the most God-awful manner he substitutes the worship of Satan and his image for the worship of God Almighty and of the expressed image of His own independence. Thus, first the false conception of man is set against the real conception of man, the false prophet against the true prophet, the king anointed by Satan against the king anointed by God. And only now can the great battle between Christ and Satan be decided. Demons and angels, Satan and Christ, death and life, sin and holiness, hell and paradise, thus come to stand against each other in principle for the first time, and both in the full development of their power. It cannot go any further than that. History ends here. No more history can follow. Time has ended, eternity has begun. And the final outcome is that God will be all and in all, and that all unholy power will sink into the lake of destruction.