

## Creekside Community Church

Aug 9, 2008

**P<sup>2</sup>+F=R** *The last book in the Bible seems to be such a fertile ground for conspiracy theories and confusion. In this 4 part series we'll look at the past, the present, and the future. You may even get some "how-to" tools to crack the code.*

### Part 1, **Roots**

*Thank you for downloading this document. We pray it will add to your experience of this message. The sections in red marked **(Please leave this text on the screen until the next slide – we will not be reading it or referring to it)** is what people at Creekside will be reading on the screen.*

*God bless*

**Jim and Colin**

Welcome to our new series, P<sup>2</sup>+F=R – We'll crack that code sometime this morning, so please don't let any math phobia you have get the better of you.

OK, now I need to take you some places, and we've got a lot of ground to cover. You're going to have no idea where we are going, but hang with me, Okay? Be ready to multitask too, because there will be stuff on the screen for you to read while I'm speaking. If you are listening to this online then please download the PDF file called "Roots" from the website so that you can parallel the experience we will be having here.

We'll start in the city of Ephesus at the end of the first century. **Ephesus Agora1.jpg** This is the Agora. It was a marketplace for the buying and selling of goods.

Ephesus bridged the East and the West as a world trade center. Most of the goods that came from Asia headed to the Western world were bought and exchanged and transported from here.

At the end of the first century Ephesus was ruled by a Roman Emperor named Domitian. **Domitian1.jpg** He believed he was a god who came from a long line of gods.

He demanded that his wife refer to him as, "My lord and my god." So you like him already, don't you?

One of the ways Domitian enforced emperor worship was to require an offering to Caesar before you could buy or sell in the Agora at Ephesus. You would first have to make an incense offering to him, the Roman emperor, and acknowledge him as a god.

There's all sorts of fascinating discussion in the ancient literature about how exactly you could tell who had offered incense and who hadn't. Most scholars believe you were given some sort of mark, maybe even an ink stain on your hand, to show that you had worshiped Caesar and acknowledged him as god. No mark = no buying or selling.

The Jews, who had become Christians at the end of the first century, didn't really go for

this. They believed God didn't approve. For them, anyone who said, "Worship me," other than God, was, in fact, in direct opposition to the real God. And so they said that anybody who says, "Worship me," had to be operating in the power of the devil, whom they referred to as a dragon.

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Revelation 12:9 NIV

The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray.

In some of the literature of the day the devil is called a beast. So the question in Ephesus at the end of the first century was, "Do I take the mark of the beast in order to buy and sell?"

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Revelation 13:16,17 NIV

He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.

Imagine you're a seamstress, and you have five or six kids. You take fabrics from the East, and you make clothing. You make dresses. This is how you feed your family.

You become a Christ follower and join their revolutionary community. You show up at the Agora, and they say, "You don't have the mark. You need to go back to the altar and offer incense." What do you do? What does the farmer do? What does the person who makes shoes do? "I've got to feed my family. They're hungry. Do I take the mark of the beast or not?" This was life at the end of the first century in Ephesus.

Domitian issued an imperial edict that all statues of him had to be made of solid gold. He began letters, "Our Lord and our God commands you . . .". He saw himself as a god on earth. He believed that he was the son of the gods brought to earth to bring about universal peace and salvation. He demanded to be worshiped.

Everywhere he went, he had a choir of 24 singers who would go before him and after him singing and chanting,

"Our Lord and our God, you are worthy to receive honor and glory and power."

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Revelation 4:10,11 NIV

the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.

You can find fragments of Domitian incidents in the historical accounts. One of them says that he was at a gladiator match. He loved to watch death and destruction. One of the gladiators was being heckled by somebody in the crowd, so Domitian pointed to the person in the crowd and said, "You, in the ring. Have him fed to the animals." Just like that. One of the priestesses of the empire offended him, so he had her buried alive.

Once, there was an uprising in a corner of his empire called the Saturnine Revolt. He slaughtered them all.

To make it clear to everyone what would happen if you revolted against him, he invited some of the main ruling officials to his palace for a meal. In front of their plates he set their tombstones. He's just a real warm fuzzy kind of guy. We could go on and on with stories—all evil.

Here's another picture of Domitian. [Domitian2.jpg](#)

In his hand he has what looks like a scroll. A scroll is key to a Caesar's rule. It contained all of the divine names of the Caesar written on both sides.

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**Revelation 5:1,4 NIV**

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

Names were important. So sometimes Caesar would have a scroll, that was symbolic of all the names, reasons, rights and entitlement he had to rule.

And the scroll was symbolic of the fact that this Caesar was the only one who was worthy to open the scroll, meaning figuratively: to rule human history.

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**Verse 5**

Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

There's only one Caesar, and this Caesar alone can open the scroll, can declare his God-ness, and can rule and direct the course of human history.

Domitian inaugurated a celebration in a series of Olympic games, which he creatively called "The Domitian Games." (His own Olympics in his honor.)

Picture a stadium filled with 60 to 80 thousand people who came to his Olympics. At

first leaders of the various provinces come to report and appear before him. He would then address each of the leaders of the various areas.

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Revelation 2:1-7 NIV

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ... I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance ... Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first . . . He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

He would say to a leader, "To you, the leader or the elder of such-and-such province, I have this for you," and he'd list some things, "and I have this against you. If you do not stop doing these things, I will come and snuff you out. I will take care of you." So he would go through and address each region in order.

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Verse 8

"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

Verse 12

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

Verse 18

"To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

Revelation 3:1

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

Verse 7

"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

Verse 14

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

Then they would start worshipping Domitian. He had a group of priests who were employed to lead the masses in their worship of him. The priests, and those who attended the games, all wore white. And the priests also wore crowns of gold on their heads.

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Revelation 4:4

Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads.

These crowns had the divine names of Domitian on the front to remind everybody that the priests' job was to lead all the people gathered in worshipping Domitian. And so you would stand with 60 to 80 thousand people, and you would shout and cheer and

worship Domitian in the midst of his games.

Let me show you some of the things that were part of the worship liturgy of Domitian.

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Revelation 4:10, 11 NIV

the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

They would shout, “Great are you our Lord and God. Worthy are you to receive honor and power and glory. Worthy are you, Lord of the earth, to inherit the kingdom. Lord of lords, highest of the high, Lord of the earth, God of all things. Lord God and savior for eternity.” This is not a man who had an ego problem.

So imagine you’re an eight-year-old kid. You get to go to these games, and you take part. You see the priests dressed in white with gold on their heads. You hear the people shouting. He addresses the various regions, reminding them all of his power and strength and his ruling. Then you chant and shout with the priests leading you.

This was the Domitian Games. One other highlight of these Games was a horse race involving four horses of four different colors.

This was Domitian, and this was his empire.

He employed poets whose only job was to write about how great he was. One wrote, “May I gaze upon thee, hope of mankind, and favorite of the gods.”

This was Domitian, the ruler of Ephesus and the Empire at the end of the first century. When you want everybody to worship you, you’ve got to have a headquarters. And he decided, for various reasons we don’t have time to get into, to pick the city of Ephesus, “neo koros”, as this headquarters for his world worship.

He also understood the power of image. So he built a platform and temple to himself in Ephesus, [Domitian platform.jpg](#) Do you see the arches, the openings below the platform? See what looks like statues etched in the columns? There are 24 of those, and they represent the 24 gods and goddesses of the Greek/Roman Pantheon--Zeus, Poseidon, Hermes, Apollo, Demeter--the main gods.

Domitian designed this to stand on the backs of the gods. He’s telling you something. In the ancient world, especially the Eastern world, pictures and images and metaphors are how you communicate things. He wants everyone to know that he stands over them.

On top of that, he built a 27-foot tall statue. [Domitian statue.jpg](#). Here’s a picture of the head and part of the arm – the arm is around nine feet long.

Now, the idea behind the platform was if you came by a sea, or land to Ephesus the first thing you would see is this statue of Domitian standing on the back of all the other gods reminding you that he is Lord of Lords and Lord of heaven and earth.

But Domitian had a problem in Ephesus. Although he was powerful, wealthy, and could kill anybody who got in his way, there was a small group of people who refused to bow down to him. And this made him furious.

An historian, Ethelbert Stauffer, said this, “Domitian was the first emperor to understand that behind the Christian movement there stood an enigmatic figure who threatened the glory of the emperors. Domitian was the first to declare war on this figure.”

So he had incense altars built in Ephesus. Domitian would come through, (and some believe it was on his birthday.) The 24 priests went with him. “Our Lord and our God, you’re worthy to receive glory, honor and power.”

He would parade through the city, and then he stopped at the altars and the crowd would all bow down and acknowledge him as Lord and God. [Ephesus altar.mov](#) **This is a short movie clip** Then they would proceed to the next altar, stop, and the crowd would bow down again. And if you didn’t bow down, he would kill you. He wasn’t messing around here. You can’t let somebody defy you publicly. It might lead to anarchy. So kill them. Show up and bow down to Domitian, or die.

So the question at the end of the first century was, “What do I do? Domitian is coming to town. His birthday is tomorrow. And everybody from my guild—“I work with stones” or “I’m a seamstress” or “All the other mothers from the school--everybody is showing up.” You have to show or you die. What do you do?

Domitian knows about this small group of people in Ephesus who don’t buy into the idea that he is god. They worship a God-man named Jesus. Some sources allude to Domitian undermining this group by meeting with their pastor and eventually sending him into exile. He reckons that if you could get rid of their leader, you could leave them without a guide, and eventually they would just dissipate.

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**Revelation 1:9 NIV**

**I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.**

The pastor’s name was John and, while he was in exile, he wrote letters to his church and six other churches. I brought a copy of it with me today. It’s called Revelation and you’ve been reading parts of it on the screen.

Right here is where I want to crack the code on the series title because Revelation tells us what to look for:

### Revelation 1:19 NIV

"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.

What you have seen – the past – the first “P.”

What is now - the present – the second “P.”

What will take place – the future – The “F.”

This is a huge deal. Some people want to take the whole book and say it's all about what happened in the past. Others say, “No, the whole book belongs in the future.” This is a “both and” deal. The book is rooted in history and stretches into the future, ending with God setting up a new city. Some of the keys to cracking the code of what will happen in the future are found in what this book meant for the first readers.

**So key number 1 is:** Revelation is set in a specific time and place and God uses language, symbols and experiences that the people totally understand.

The letter is addressed to Ephesus and six other churches and each one gets a specific personalized message. I love that about God. He reaches out to you exactly where you are. He touches your life in a way that totally suits your personality, temperament and circumstances. This is a huge deal. Maybe today you're going: “God doesn't get what's happening to me.” The beginning of Revelation says you and I can have confidence that God knows how to relate to our circumstances.

However, God is not locked into our circumstances or limited by them. He takes what Domitian does and gives it a whole new meaning. He uses those descriptions of the Domitian games and worshipping him and puts them in a whole new context.

### Revelation 4:1 NIV

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

I love this verse – I think the people back then must have read Rev 4 and wept with joy and relief. God is saying there is more going on here than what you realize. Domitian thinks he is really something and you may feel that he's running your life. Meanwhile there's another reality in heaven. It is the absolute counter point to everything Domitian stands for, and it's all about the God man Jesus.

This brings us to **key #2** - Revelation is set in a specific time and place and God uses language, symbols and experiences that the people totally understand.

Revelation is primarily a symbolic book. As we have been talking and you've been reading over my shoulder, I'm sure you've made the connection that this book is written to real people living in real times and real circumstances. It's clear that he's speaking in code that Christ followers would understand. He never mentions Domitian by name because that would be really dangerous for the Christ followers.

In fact the second sentence in the book tells us that he is going to speak in symbols.

Revelation 1:1 NKJV

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants - things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified *it* by His angel to His servant John,

The word, translated “signified” is telling us that this is a symbolic book, a symbolic representation of present and future events.

This is a big deal. When the first readers saw the word “dragon” they weren’t looking for some fire-breathing monster. When they saw the word “beast” they knew it was a symbol for a political ruler or power that opposed God. Some of the symbols get a lot weirder. It’s important to understand that these are symbols and to look for the roots of their meaning in the way the first readers would have understood them.

There are some literal things in Revelation. e.g.: The seven churches were in seven real cities. Jesus is a real person. The principle is to take the language of Revelation symbolically unless it’s obvious that it’s literal.

Today we’ve looked at two keys to unlocking the code. Next week we’ll look at 3 more.

God says something really amazing about Revelation.

Revelation 1:3 NIV

Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

This is talking about reading with understanding. This book is to be understood throughout history. While it is fascinating to connect with the history, there’s way more than that. God wants us to get what this book is about. As we do, we receive the great experience of being blessed. I know people who are way ahead of me on the “getting Revelation” curve and they tell me what they are experiencing and I want that too.

Here are some of things that God has been speaking to me about. I am sure you have more:

1. God speaks to each of us in ways that fit our circumstances.
2. I don’t want to be too dogmatic about my understanding of God and of this book. It’s easy to see a few things and then go, “I know what I’m talking about.” That’s the way to miss out on a whole lot of amazing stuff.
3. Revelation is like playing a computer game. There are puzzles to solve and as you solve some, you discover that there’s a whole new level of puzzles and another and another.

Let’s go back to Ephesus and the Agora.

You remember you had to take the mark in order to buy and sell? And you had to offer incense. There were a group of Christians who came along who said, “Come on! Just offer the incense. It’s not that big a deal. I mean, you’ve got to live. You’ve got to eat.

It's not like he's really a god. You know the whole thing is just a fake. It's just a guy with a really big ego and a lot of money and power and big armies."

"Just take the mark. It's not a big deal. It's not like in your heart you really believe he's a god, but you have to eat, man! Come on. Forget the worship/sacrifice elements. Just do it, because you've got to feed your family." And so they were encouraging people to just go through the motions on the outside in order not to cause a stink. "Don't draw any attention to us. Just go through it. You don't really believe it in your heart."

We have a lot of Domitians around us, don't we? You've got them in your world. I have them in mine. And they say, "Bow down." And often there are these moments when everybody around you is bowing down, and you don't understand. "This is the way our business works. Everybody does it. It's the only way to make a living."

Are their things you do in life and the best reason you can give is? "Everybody does it."

"Everybody talks like this. Everybody is cynical. Everybody has a little edge. You have to always be ready to put the person down. Everybody does it this way." "But you don't understand! I have to have all of this. Everybody around me has all of this. My kids have to have all this stuff. You have to have this. That's just how it is."

We're surrounded by Domitians. And sometimes we feel like saying, "I'm the only one." And John says to them, "Whatever you do, don't bow down."

I think this raises some fascinating questions. If the people of Ephesus could speak to us today, what kind of perspectives would they have for us? What would they say about the kinds of things we complain about?

"Let me get this straight: Traffic? Hmm. You had to what? You were inconvenienced? You were caught in a backup in the parking lot? How do you go through that kind of thing?" For us, the question is whether or not you would be beheaded in the parking lot, correct?

I would say that they would speak to us very strongly about what it means to be a community.

I imagine another thing they would say to us is they would say, "Be clear on the Domitians that want you to bow down--the Domitian of how thin you are, the Domitian of how rich you are, the Domitian of how smart you are, the Domitian of how good you look, the

Domitian of how much you've accomplished, the Domitian of how much you can crush your enemies, the Domitian of how quick your tongue is and putting down people who might threaten you--they would just say, "You can do it."

"You don't have to bow down to that." Those voices that tell you, "Listen, end it."

Those voices, those addictions that call out for us to compromise our values say, “Bow down. This is where you’re going to find that hole filled.”

Yet we all know only God is going to fill that hole. I assume they would say to you, “Don’t bow down. You can do it.” Right?

They would say, “We had a whole string of Casers before Domitian, they all claimed to be god and they are all dead. Our pastor John wrote to us and told us something powerful and life changing. He told us He had seen Jesus again. Domitian thinks he is all that, but Jesus is:

**Revelation 1:5 NIV**

**the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.**

He also told us that Jesus spoke to him and said;

**Revelation 1:17,18 NIV**

**"Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."**

Those Domitians in your life will end up dead like all wannabe gods. Jesus is the real thing. And He has a plan.

Remember John never uses the name “Domitian.” He doesn’t bash. He paints a picture of something better. I believe in our culture each of us can learn something from this.

Anybody can point the finger and bash, correct? But what John does is he paints this beautiful picture that’s better. It’s a clear picture of NOT BOWING down to anyone except the true God of Revelation. We need to identify the Domitians in our world. We need to see them for what they are, and may we never ever bow down to them! Because you’ve seen the throne, and you’ve seen Who’s on it.

May those of you who are struggling, who are thinking about ending it, whose lives and relationships are unraveling, may you be reminded that God is on the throne and we are going to make it. Be reminded. See the throne of God. Don’t forget that Domitian and his empire are a pile of rocks. And the revolution of Jesus is going stronger than ever.

And may you be the kind of person who, in kindness and love and compassion pulls people aside and says, “Hey, I’ve seen the throne. Can I tell you what I saw?” And may you be a voice of hope and truth in this world full of Domitians.

**PRAYER**