

Sound Living

Revelation

Jerry Nelson

The Message of Revelation: Jesus wins!

God, through the Apostle John, encourages His children giving instructions on how to live while they wait for the coming again of Jesus. Some things in life are certain—God will bring an end to time and all wrongs will be righted. Revelation speaks to the subjects of heaven, hell, suffering, the Millennium but all in the context of how to live the Christian life

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*All Scripture taken from the New International Version
unless otherwise indicated. All emphasis added.*

Revelation - An Outline

- 1 Introduction, Doxology and Vision of Jesus as Coming King
- 2-3 Letters to 7 churches of Asia Minor (Western Turkey)
- 4 Vision of Worship of God in His throne room in heaven
- 5 Vision of Jesus (Lamb) worthy to reveal/initiate the future
- 6 First four "seals" describe this present age
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- 15-16a Final description of God's judgment on the earth during tribulation days ("bowls") (compare 6 & 8-9)
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- 20a Millennial kingdom of Jesus on this earth
- 20b Final battle against Satan and the "great white throne" judgment on all unbelievers. Unbelievers thrown into the "lake of fire."
- 21-22a The creation of the new earth – The eternal presence of God with His people
- 22b Conclusion – "Come, Lord Jesus."

Chapter One

Experiencing Jesus Revelation 1

Do you live in a family where any word you speak about the Lord is ridiculed? Do you live as the outsider in your own family because of your relationship to Jesus? Even though you are careful not to wear it on your sleeve at work, is your faith a cause of abuse and discrimination—do you get so tired of it that some days you don't know if you can stand it anymore? Is your own body or the body of a loved one so racked with pain that you would do almost anything for it to stop—you don't know how much longer you can go on? Do you have days when discouragement with life is so great that you don't know if you can make it through another day?

Maybe you are an exception but I think most people hit a "wall" sooner or later in life, or maybe they experience that many times, when life as we expect it, just falls apart. For most of my youth, life was just attractive. My prospects for success in education and employment were good. I had a strong family background and I was reasonably well liked by enough people to feel I belonged somewhere. The future looked bright. I was healthy and energetic, looking for the next challenge. My past experience with life left me expecting the future would be likewise enjoyable, successful and largely pain free.

I liked the positive, aggressive, optimistic approach to life so much and I so wanted everything to keep going that way that I just ignored the things that didn't fit with my approach and my desires. If others didn't share my optimistic outlook it must be because of a character flaw in them—after all, how could anyone in his or her right mind

not see a bright future for all of us? And my naive understanding of Christianity just added to the positive expectations: now we not only had this life of opportunity and enjoyment but we also had the prospect of heaven when this good life was over.

But as I grew older, I was no longer able to ignore the things that didn't go so well in life. I was also faced with the death of people I loved. And I grew increasingly aware of the world around me—places and people whose experiences were very different than mine—people who suffered intensely and intractably. I could only play the part of the emperor with no clothes for so long. Sooner or later our own experience in life, if not the experiences of hundreds around us, begins to make us realize life isn't a succession of success, enjoyment, comfort and freedom from pressure, frustration, pain and suffering.

I've learned that what you hope for and what you trust in are very important.

You can only read for so long the accounts of the Rwandans, Bosnians, Haitians, of the murders, child abuse, and betrayals, before you realize life isn't coming up roses for most people. Even if you ignore all that, ignore the obvious most of your life, the death of a relationship or of a loved one or your own imminent death will finally rip those rose colored glasses from your eyes and stare you starkly in the face. Somewhere along the line unfounded optimism gives way to reality. What do we do then?

No, I've not turned from Tigger into Eeyore. It is not that youthful optimism has given way to pessimism. It is that I've learned that what you hope for and what you trust in are very important. The hope of my youth and the hope of much of the world is misplaced—it is hope in the future but it is a hope in a future that is defined by or that is

contingent on things working out according to our plans or at least working out in a way that leaves us relatively comfortable. When you stand back and look at this world with its beauty and opportunities but also with its wretched suffering, you are forced to attempt to intellectually and emotionally accommodate it all. How do you do that?

There are some people who bravely insist on an unfounded optimism. Listen to this quote from the book, *The Growth of the Liberal Soul*:

"It is perhaps the most deeply ingrained part of our modern outlook that we can, through our concerted efforts, overcome the vicissitudes of the human condition. Nothing stands in the way of a final victory over our own finitude. The path we have already traveled has demonstrated that the meek do not inherit the earth. Only those with the temerity to prevail, to test their wills against the recalcitrant reality can compel nature to yield the secrets by which we become its masters."¹

Do you believe that? Do you believe that by our combined efforts we can overcome life and death? Do you believe that if we persist and we fight for it, we can truly become the captains of our own ships of fate? And that if you are just smarter and try harder you can overcome those obstacles to your vision of the good life? Many people believe it. They would probably not be so audacious as to say it but they believe it and who they put their faith in proves it. And if you don't believe that, if you don't have that optimistic, though unfounded, outlook on life, how can you cope with it? Some people don't. They despair. They curl up emotionally and numbly wait life out, doing the routine and just hanging on, but with no expectations, no joy, and no hope. But there is yet another way to look at life. There is another perspective.

Despair and unfounded optimism are not the only two alternatives. There is a founded, well-grounded optimism.

This optimism is not anchored in a belief that we human beings individually can guarantee ourselves the good life or that we can collectively bring about justice and peace if we work hard enough; this optimism is anchored in our belief that there is a sovereign God who is now ordering all of history and will one day bring it to a just and lasting peace. This optimism is founded not on our ability but on the ability of the Almighty God. This optimism is based on the belief that our story is not over and that when it is over, it will be right and good. The book of Revelation is the rest of the story.

When I was quite young, probably no older than 6 or 7, my father, in addition to running a farm business, worked part-time at a stone quarry—a place where large stones were dug from the earth and then crushed into smaller ones for use in making roads. I loved to go with him to the quarry where the walls of earth were high and the machinery large and awesomely loud. It was nearly overwhelming for a little boy.

One rainy day my father was working high in the air on some conveyor equipment when he slipped on wet metal. He plunged off the machine, falling nearly 40 feet and landed on a caterpillar tractor. When he regained consciousness after momentarily blacking out, he realized he could not move—one hip and leg were grotesquely out of shape. It was then he remembered he was all alone in the quarry.

This is a true story. What would you think if I stopped the story at this point and told you no more about it? Even though it doesn't affect you directly, you'd say the story needs an ending. My father was found hours later by his boss, was hospitalized, surgery was performed and after months of recovery he was nearly as good as new. It was a hard time in the life of our family but God was faithful. I played with not ending the story only to make the point

that when it is our lives we are talking about, when it is our futures that hang in the balance, we desperately long to know the end of the story.

The book of Revelation is the end of the story; it tells us how it all comes out. It assures us that history is not in our hands or the hands of fate but is in the certain hands of Jesus, the Almighty God.

There is a founded, well-grounded optimism and this optimism is anchored in our belief that there is a sovereign God who is now ordering all of history and will one day bring it to a just and lasting peace.

Look at Revelation 1:1: *"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place."* Also look at Revelation 1:19: *"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later."* This is not fanciful conjecture, this is not wishful thinking—this is God telling the end of the story. It has my attention because He's telling my story and yours! When I understand that it is my story God is talking about, my interest is no longer simple curiosity. When the complexity of life, its beauty and its ugliness, finally pierce through to my thinking, I long to see how it can all work out. But God's description of the end is not only intensely interesting; it is preponderantly puzzling.

Who of us has not been somewhat stymied by the references to bowls and beasts, dragons and devils, trumpets and thunders, and seals and censors? Romans I can read with understanding with the help sometimes from a dictionary. But Revelation, with its grotesque images, indescribable beings, and impossible combinations causes us to soon give up any hope of reading with understanding.

But it shouldn't. God through John, the author, is just using a different kind of literary style, called apocalyptic literature. That word apocalypse is taken from the second word of the book. (Revelation 1:1 *"The revelation of..."*) We've heard variations on that word before: "Apocalypse Now," "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," and so on. Contrary to those popular uses of the word, the word simply means "revelation" - hence the name given to the book. This is God revealing what we need to know about where history is going. But the book of Revelation uses so much symbolism and imagery that the very style of writing has taken on the name "apocalyptic literature."

"Can we take Revelation literally?"

Most of us are comfortable with straight prose writing like the apostle Paul's letters. We do well with narrative like the gospels or the books of Kings which tell the stories of historical incidents. We even do fairly well with proverbs and parables. But poetic language begins to stretch some of us because it uses words very symbolically like here in the literary style of Revelation. It's a style of writing that employs not only words with explicit content, but words that describe experience that surpasses words but is nonetheless real. It's like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time—you can tell about it in words but you can't communicate the fullness of the experience with words alone unless with your words you begin to create a picture in the listener's mind. Poor John: he's describing things no one has ever seen or heard. He's describing the indescribable.

Someone might then ask, "Can we take Revelation literally?" And the answer is: "Absolutely if we understand what "literal" means." A literal interpretation understands the use and importance of figures of speech. We might say,

"I was walking along the beach as the sun went down." What do we literally mean? Do we mean that the sun revolves around the earth? Or do we understand "the sun went down" is a figure of speech for describing the rotation of the earth on its axis so that the sun was no longer visible from where you were on the beach?

To interpret the sentence literally is to take into account the figure of speech that is used. So with Revelation, John uses much symbolism, signs, word pictures, and more to communicate what he literally means. When John in 1:14-17 describes Jesus as having white hair, fire eyes, bronze feet and a waterfall voice holding stars in His hands, can he be taken literally? Yes, if we understand it is symbolic language to describe a literal truth; Jesus, in all His glory and power is awesome and awesome to behold.

"How are we to interpret all those fantastic images?"

But the question still remains, "How are we to interpret all those fantastic images?" The answer is "very carefully" - careful to understand the truth John is picturing rather than trying to decipher every detail of the image. Imagine describing a rainbow—you can focus so much on the detail that you no longer see the beauty of the whole. When we read Revelation, we must watch for when John is writing in straightforward prose and when he slips into picture language, and handle each accordingly just as we do when we read any other literature of today.

Why did John write the book? First of all, because he was told to and I suspect that if you or I had been commissioned in the way John was we too would have obeyed promptly. But John had another reason: "*John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia...*" (Rev 1:4) The Christians in western Turkey (then called Asia) were going

through a time of intense persecution. They were discriminated against in the work place, they were ejected from their families or homes, and some were being killed because of their commitment to Jesus. Similar to many in our world today, as testimony before our own Congress is pointing out, these Christians had reason to wonder what would become of them. John's major interest is in writing to encourage these believers. They had reason to be discouraged! From where they stood it didn't look good. But John writes to tell them the rest of the story. And their interest was not idle curiosity!

A.W. Tozer writes, "Some are interested in the book of Revelation but just out of human curiosity. They look upon all the minor details of prophecy as the details of an amazing jigsaw puzzle. They will spend much time and effort trying to put the various pieces together, hoping to be the first to arrive at some new prophetic twist or surprising suggestion. But that motive is improper..."² I call that eschatological voyeurism or peeping toms into the future. Pastor Scotty Smith wrote, "Revelation is not written to amuse us but to transform us."³ And it will transform us if we come to this book to learn what it is God is saying. John was writing to people whose worlds were falling apart.

John wrote to show them Jesus! Jesus, not only as they had heard about Him when He was first here—the lamb of God who came to die for the sins of His people—but also the Jesus who is coming again. In this book John wants us to see Jesus. He doesn't want to give us a calendar of some kind on which we can check off the events as the end nears. He wants to make certain that in the midst of whatever comes (whether in your life now or in the future) you will know in whom you have believed and will be persuaded that He is able to keep what you have committed to Him until that day.

I want to have such a clear understanding and mental picture of who Jesus is, of His power to make His will happen, such a clear impression of His sovereign control of all history that I will not fear no matter what happens—that I will persevere and that I will be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed accounting of what will happen and when it will happen that will quell the fear in our hearts when our world seems like it is coming to an end or actually comes to an end. It is knowing we are safe in the protection of Jesus. John will show us Jesus at every step of the way. And when we finish, we should have one overwhelming cry of hope: Jesus wins and I belong to Jesus!

Why did John write the book? First of all, because he was told to and to encourage these believers.

Look at the Jesus John shows us.

In verses 4-7 we get a short history of the world (from beginning to end).

"John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen. Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."

Here the past, the present and the future are all compacted into four verses. And notice who is central all the way through it!

- Verses 4-5 speak of God eternally existing in the past, present and future.
- Verses 5-6 speak of our current relationship to Jesus through His actions in the past.
- And verse 7 speaks of the future when Jesus comes again.

John was writing to people whose faith was in Jesus, who were trusting Jesus.

In fact, in verses 4-5 we get an even shorter history of the world. After introducing the Father, the Spirit, and the Son in these verses, we have a summary of the work of Jesus in verse 5:

- Jesus came to earth as a faithful witness—God Himself coming to us to reveal Himself to us as the one who would die for us.
- Jesus was the firstborn from the dead—the one who has the power over death itself as demonstrated by His own resurrection.
- And Jesus who now is and will come as the ruler over the kings of the earth.

But the end of verse 5 and in all of verse 6, John makes it very personal. Jesus is not only God who has always existed, who came to earth to die, rose from the dead and is coming again in power, but He is Jesus to you. He loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood. This eternally existent God has chosen to love us—we matter to Him! And, John reminds them, in His love for us, He died to pay the penalty for our sin that we might be freed from the

sentence of eternal death. Not only that, He then brought us into His family and made us part of His kingdom, His people. And not only that, He made us priests: people with direct access into His presence.

John was writing to people whose faith was in Jesus, who were trusting Jesus. And John is reminding them that the Jesus he will show them in a minute is the Jesus who loves them personally and deeply and eternally. So when you see Him, though it may frighten you nearly to death, don't be afraid—He loves you! You belong to Him by His grace.

In verse 7, we see Jesus in the future:

"Look he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be. Amen."

John sees into the future.

Did He promise His first coming? Did it happen? Yes. Does He promise Jesus' second coming? Will it happen? Yes. Can you imagine it? Where will you be when it happens? What will it be like? Will you be in a library studying for an exam, or standing at the kitchen sink washing up some leftover dishes, or driving to make that next appointment, or at your desk trying to decipher what the boss meant by that last e-mail? All of the sudden you become aware of a sound—is that a trumpet? And then it comes to mind—Jesus said He would come. Is this it? Is it true after all? Can you imagine and savor that moment! Can you anticipate it? Everything you believe and hope for has been pinned to this event and now it is happening. Wow!

"Look," John says, "I can see it." So certain is this event that John says he can see it in his mind's eye. Later he will have a God-given vision of it when he doesn't have to just imagine it. But here Scripture informs his imagination and he can just see it!

In the Old Testament, the massing of clouds often indicated the presence of God; even the cloud pillar by day and cloud pillar of fire by night led the Israelites in the wilderness when they left Egypt. Daniel had said that the Lord would be "*coming with the clouds.*" Zechariah said the world would look on him whom they had pierced. God gives John these two Old Testament images together in his mind's eye to imagine the coming again of Jesus. Will it be television cameras focused on His return with people from the entire world watching like they do a space mission or a celebrity funeral? However it is accomplished, the result is that many in the world will mourn His coming; the coming of Jesus will mean that the Scriptures were right all along and it would have been far better to have heeded God's Word earlier because now it is too late—judgment has arrived.

The Jesus who is in control of history past, present and future is without doubt able to save His people. The whole book is centered on Jesus. He is our hope.

"So shall it be." "Amen." is a Greek and Hebrew way of saying, "Yes!" It is a hearty approval of what has just been said—even so come Lord Jesus.

The First Vision

Having reminded us of the centrality of Jesus in all of history, having reminded us of His love for us and that we belong to Him, John now describes the first vision he has. I think the first vision is so intense that his first readers and we should be very grateful that he reminded us of our relationship to Jesus first. In verse 9 John writes that he, like his readers, is also suffering for the sake of Christ. In fact, John is a prisoner on the rocky island of Patmos about 50 miles out to sea from western Turkey where the

churches are. He writes that on the Lord's Day, a Sunday he was *"in the Spirit,"* or in other words he, like Peter when he was in Joppa and Paul when he was in Jerusalem, was ushered by God into a trance of sorts where he experienced what he next describes.

He says, *"I heard a loud voice behind me like a trumpet."* In other words the voice was so clear, so distinct and so loud that it grabbed his attention. John turned around—who wouldn't? He said he wanted to see the voice. And what he saw according to verse 17 caused him to drop with his face on the ground or floor as though he were dead.

"When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.' "

Now I can't begin to adequately describe what John saw. I don't think John can adequately describe what John saw. He says, the one I saw was "like" this and he was "like" that. And furthermore he was "like" and he keeps going on about Him with "like" this and "like" that. We've all seen enough special effects on television or movies to imagine something of what this might have been like. Read it with all your imagination operating:

"Someone like a son of man dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."

Oh, yes it is possible that the robe and sash speak of royalty, that the white hair refers to wisdom, that the blazing eyes speak of omniscience, that the bronze feet speak of stability and the double-edged sword speaks of

justice.

But what's the point? Seeing Jesus in all His majesty, in that incredible display of power, how could anyone doubt He has the might to overcome all opposition, to keep His people no matter what they are experiencing at the moment, to bring about the end He determined? The Jesus who is in control of history past, present and future is without doubt able to save His people. The whole book is centered on Jesus. He is our hope.

As I mentioned, John uncontrollably fell to his face, but look at what Jesus does:

"He placed his right hand on me and said, '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'." (1:17b)

Right from the very start of this book it is not what you know, it is who you know. And if your trust is in Jesus then you trust the one who is in control of life and death. He made it all, He controls it all, and He will bring it all to a conclusion. And with His right hand on you, He says, *"and you belong to me."*

With that vision firmly in mind those early Christians and we can face anything.

End Notes

¹ David Walsh, *The Growth of the Liberal Soul*, 1997

² A.W. Tozer, *Jesus is Victor*, p. 31

³ Scotty Smith and Michael Card, *The Revelation*, p. 23

Chapter Two

Orthodox AND Loving Rev 2:1-7

Have you ever had an annual review—one of those written or oral reports from the boss wherein your work is evaluated? Do you remember your report cards from grade school—not just the letter grades but also the comments the teacher would make about your performance? How about a reference letter—have you ever asked someone to write one for you, one of those letters that summarizes your character and competencies? What did the reviews, the report cards and the references say about you? What is the most accurate description of you? Suppose you were reading a description not of only you but of your organization as a whole. How would it read?

Now imagine that review was being written about Southern Gables Church (SGC) and Jesus was writing it—what would He say about us?

- SGC is strong in love and care for people but weak in doctrine.
- SGC is strong in doctrine but lax in godly lifestyle.
- SGC is strong in sending and supporting missionaries to other places but it neglects people in its own neighborhoods.
- SGC has done a good job in teaching the Bible but is weak in caring about and for the poor.

What would He write? How would He characterize us? What would He affirm or correct? What if in the letter about SGC, He mentioned you in particular—what would He say about how you contribute to His assessment of the church?

“Now in regards to Jerry Nelson as a part of Southern Gables Church, I know him to be...”

The second and third chapters of the book of Revelation are letters to seven churches. And they are letters of evaluation. Jesus writes to each church and expresses His assessment of their character and conduct. Now having said it that way it might sound ominous. I suspect that you, like me, have a certain dread in mind when we think of annual reviews and report cards. What if we don't measure up?

All seven letters are written by Jesus to the people He loves.

Maybe these letters to the 7 churches are better described as letters from a loving and concerned friend—someone who cares deeply for you and who is definitely concerned most of all for your welfare. And if they write something hard it is not out of meanness but out of a genuine desire to help. I've had letters come to me that were virtually identical in content but worlds apart in tone and intent. Often knowing the source will make that difference—one is harsh and vindictive even angry while the other letter, equally confrontive, is loving, healing and corrective. These letters are the latter; they are written by Jesus to people He loves.

All seven letters are constructed in the same fashion:

To: Who the letter is written to.

From: Who the letter is from.

Affirmation: An affirmation of the church's qualities.

Correction: A correction of their faults.

Command: A command to respond.

Call: A call to listen carefully.

Motive: A motive for responding.

Who are these churches, why these churches and why are the letters written in this order? A quick look at a map of the Mediterranean Sea area will help us locate modern day Turkey on the east end.



A little closer look reveals Greece on the left and Turkey on the right. At that time Turkey was called Asia. Why these cities?

- Because of John's relationship to them. Prior to his imprisonment on the island of Patmos, John was likely an itinerant pastor/preacher, maybe even a bishop to the churches in this area.
- Each of these cities, in that day, was a postal center for the surrounding villages and towns. You get a letter to each of those cities and it will be spread to all the other churches in that area.

Why this order? Why Ephesus first and Laodicea last? Probably because of the highway on which they were situated. The highway ran in a somewhat circular route and each city is named in succession. And why start with Ephesus? Because that was the commercial and social center of the region and the city in which John had spent most of his time.

Now before we look at the first letter, let me show you another feature of this book that helps us understand the significance of the letters. Some have wondered how these letters in chapters 2 and 3 fit with the rest of the book. When we think of the book of Revelation we most often think of the mysterious and sometimes bizarre images depicting the end of the world. How then do these letters fit with that?

Earlier we looked at Revelation chapter one with its description of Jesus in all His glory and power. We saw a Jesus who is more than sufficient to cause history to turn out exactly as He wishes. We also saw a Jesus who loves His people to the extent that He certainly causes their histories to turn out exactly as He desires.

In every letter Jesus reminds them of who He is and of His control over all history to the very end, including their histories.

That Jesus is the Jesus who is writing to these churches and if you look at the "from" section of each letter, you notice that Jesus each time refers to Himself by mentioning what He has already told them in chapter one. For example, in Rev. 2:1, *"These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands"*

Where did we see that before? In chapter one's description of Jesus: *"and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man...and in his right hand he held seven stars..."* (1:13,16)

At the beginning of each of the seven letters, words are used to tie the reader back to the powerful Jesus who was depicted in chapter one. Notice something else: If you go to the last section of each letter you will notice that Jesus ties His words in each case to the last part of the book. For

example, in 2:7b, *"To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."*

Where will we see that again? In Chapter 22:2b: *"On each side of the river (on the new earth) stood the tree of life..."* At the end of each letter there is a tie-in to what will happen at the end of this world and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth described in the last chapters of the book.

What's the point? In every letter Jesus reminds them of who He is and of His control over all history to the very end, including their histories. These letters, like the entire book, were written to encourage these people to persevere, to "hang in there" even through the worst of times, even through the times described in the middle of this book, knowing that Jesus is in control and will bring history to its proper conclusion. These letters are written to encourage the individual churches—the people in those churches, and us.

With that background in mind, let's go back to the first question asked: How would Jesus describe Southern Gables and you as part of it? When He writes to the church in Ephesus, how accurately is He describing us? The letter begins in 2:1 with these words:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus..." The word translated *"angel"* can just as accurately be translated "messenger." So is the "messenger," the "angel," one of God's heavenly created beings that was sent to that church? It is not crucial to an understanding of the text but most scholars think instead that the "angel" or "messenger" is a reference to the leader of the church as representing each church. So the letter from Jesus through John is to each church via its pastor. I have affection for that interpretation because it is the only way I'll **ever** be called an "angel." ("To Jerry Nelson, the angel of the church in

Littleton.”) So how does Jesus describe this church and with what are we to compare ourselves as a church?

In the last half of verse 1, Jesus describes Himself as the one who is writing to them. But what description does Jesus give of this church? To the angel of the church in Ephesus He writes: *“I know your deeds...”* (2:2)

When you imagine Jesus looking at our church or even at us individually and saying, “I know your deeds,” what emotion comes to mind? Is it an uneasiness, apprehension, or even fear?

Too often I have heard sermons or lessons from these letters focusing on how everybody is doing something wrong—how we are messing up. When I hear, “I know your deeds,” I can only imagine what negative words will get said next. But Jesus’ intent is not to demean them or defeat them, but rather to encourage them.

Affirmation

Notice that when He says, *“I know your deeds,”* He quickly says what He knows: *“I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.”*

You can almost hear of sigh of relief when the first words out of His mouth aren’t condemnation but affirmation.

“I know about your hard work.” These people had a heart for the kingdom of God. The “hard work” here is a word describing toil which exhausts the person. This “work” is the work that someone else assigns. God had assigned them the task of serving faithfully and energetically and they were. Many people serve the kingdom with leftover time. They serve the kingdom of God when it won’t overburden them, when they decide to and in the way they decide to. Imagine an army wherein the soldiers decided when and how far to march and fight!

One of our pastors sent a note to me two weeks ago in which he described calling a man and woman in our church to ask them if they could help with something. Their response was (listen carefully): "Yes, what can we do?" The pastor asked if it would be ethical to clone such people. By the way, these happen to be very busy people. No, I'm not making a case for always saying yes but I am making the point that these Ephesian Christians had the kingdom of God as their highest priority and they worked like it. That is a fine commendation by Jesus.

Jesus' intent is not to demean them or defeat them, but rather to encourage them.

Not only did they work hard but they persevered. Jesus said, *"I know your hard work and your perseverance."* This word "perseverance" does not describe just coping with things, or just waiting them out or even just bearing up under circumstances; it describes a person who grabs the situation and by God's grace makes good come out of it. It is best described as "Triumphant fortitude."¹ Someone once said, "Suffering colors life, doesn't it?" And the response was, "Yes and I intend to change the color." Beethoven is reported to have said when deafness descended on him, "I will take life by the throat." This is a "triumphant fortitude, which transmutes suffering into glory."²

Look at verse 3, *"You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."* These people lived in a city where being a Christian who lived by biblical standards and values was not popular. This city of 250,000 had one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—the temple to Diana which covered more area than two football fields and had 127 impressive 50-60 foot columns all along one side of it all in marble each overlaid

with jewels, carvings and gold. The temple practices were immoral and before those Christians at all times.

Diana (Artemis) was the ancient goddess of fertility—she was a dark, squat, repulsive figure covered with breasts with a club in one hand and trident in the other. Worship of her included weird, hysterical, and ecstatic happenings. To shouts and wailing and incense the worshippers would work themselves into a frenzy and then in the darkness, practice the most despicable and shameful things. There is a letter from that time describing a darkness as one approached the altar in the temple and stating that the morals of the temple worshippers were worse than dogs, for even promiscuous dogs do not mutilate each other. The letter writer said that he was perpetually sad because he lived among such wretched immorality.³

Jesus doesn't say they're perfect but these Christians apparently have matured in their faith to the point they largely resisted those temptations

Those believers had to walk and live among that temptation at all times just like you have to walk past newsstands or checkout counters, or flip through the TV channels or select movies very carefully so that you don't get desensitized to immorality and succumb to forms of it yourselves. Whether it is immorality, or unethical behavior, or degrading humor, or greed, it is always in your face and it is not always easy. Jesus doesn't say they're perfect but these Christians apparently have matured in their faith to the point they largely resisted those temptations; they withstood the subtle and not-so-subtle attacks from colleagues or neighbors or even family. And so focused on the kingdom of God and so committed were they to Jesus' Word and will that they didn't even complain about how

hard it was.

Apparently many of them had been in situations where their commitment to Christ put them in a real bind with their families, their employers, some of their friends, their instructors, or whoever and they had to make a choice and they chose to be faithful to Jesus. How many times in the high school or university classroom does it happen? How many times in social settings? How many times in work situations are we asked to compromise? They were under those kinds of pressures also and they remained faithful. They didn't give up or develop martyr complexes or whine; they just believed and pressed on.

Not only that, look at the last half of verse 2: *"I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false."* Many years earlier the apostle Paul wrote to this same church and warned them to beware of teachers who would come among them and lead them into false doctrine that would result in sinful living. These people responded to that warning and they were theologically astute and doctrinally sound. They had a commitment to the Scriptures; they would test every thing that is said and suggested to see whether it complied with God's word. They were sensitive to false teaching in its slightest forms and they were quick to point it out and correct it. And if those who didn't hold correct doctrine wouldn't repent of it then this church was quick to put such people out—discipline was swift and certain.

So committed to the Word of God and so opposed were they to false teaching or living that they, *"(hated) the practices of the Nicolaitans which Jesus also hates."* (2:6) As best we can tell from ancient history, the Nicolaitans were followers of a man by that name, just as in our day there are Lutherans or Wesleyans. But the founder of this group who purported to be a Christian, twisted the idea of

Christian liberty to allow for anything; they actually made idol worship and immorality part of their “Christian” practice. But these believers in Ephesus would have nothing to do with it.

I want that kind of commitment to God’s Word and to truth to be ours at SGC. To have it said of us that **we are people who know, teach, and live** life according to the Word of God, would be a high tribute indeed. We dare not be sloppy about what truth is. Yes, we can differ on minor theological issues but we cannot, we must not, give an inch on the fundamental truths of the gospel:

- Jesus is fully God who became fully a human being to die in our place.
- There is no other name given among men whereby we may be saved than the name of Jesus.
- Faith in Jesus is the only condition for salvation—not faith plus anything.
- Only the death of Jesus (nothing else) could cover our sins

It could be said of the Ephesian church and I want it to be said of us by Jesus, *“they are people of the Book.”*

Correction

But Jesus has some correction for the Ephesians.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”(2:4)

Now I know this is a serious charge and I don’t want to underestimate how important it is to respond to what Jesus is saying here but neither do I believe Jesus is here beating these people up the way I have sometimes heard this passage preached. When I consider the intention of the book and when I see the Jesus depicted in Revelation 1, I do not here see a Jesus carrying a big stick and wandering

through His church seeking out whoever doesn't have the right attitude so He can punish them.

The Jesus who says, "*you have forsaken your first love*" is the same Jesus who we are reminded in 2:1 holds the seven stars in His right hand. It is that right hand that Jesus used in 1:17 when John was scared to death and Jesus said, as He touched him, "*Do not be afraid...*" It is in that tender right hand Jesus holds those churches and that word "holds" is not the one used of someone holding a large book where you have hold of just a piece of it but like someone holding a small coin, fully protected in the hand. It is that Jesus who affirms them for their doctrinal integrity—their commitment to the Bible—but now lovingly corrects them for a loss of love.

***I want to have it said of us that we are
people who know, teach, and live life
according to the Word of God.***

When Paul wrote to these Ephesians years earlier, he commended them for their love. What happened? A new generation had grown up (older ones were still there but younger ones were in the majority). These did not know Jesus in the same way—was it a whole class of second generation Christians? On the surface the church looked the same—the same institutions, services, by-laws, practices and same commitment to truth, but something was lacking—love.

Centuries ago someone wrote: "The first generation will be holy, the second will be learned (knowledge without love) and the third worldly." Were these Christians too quick to quarrel about theology? It was said of some 17th Century French Protestants: (paraphrased)

"I was amazed at their labor and learning. They understood the Scriptures well. They were ready always to argue their

case well. They were engaged in much good religious activity - teaching and helping others. But something was missing—their prayers were hollow, their lessons accurate but dead, and always too ready to pounce on anyone who didn't agree with their point of view."⁴ Their attention to rooting out false doctrine made them susceptible to being critical, a sharp eye and tongue that was not tempered by grace and love for each other.

What about our love for Jesus—has it grown cold, academic?

Discipline became punitive rather than reconciling. Discussion of doctrine became a basis of separation rather than enlarging their understanding in humility and love. This group might even have read this book and fought over when the rapture would take place and whether there would be a literal millennium or not. Their religion had lost its heart, its tenderness, its affection, and its openness to others in the church. They had so satisfactorily dotted all their theological "i"s and crossed their doctrinal "t"s that anyone who didn't agree with them on nearly every point was odd-man out. This is not a plea for doctrinal sloppiness or an inclusivism that disregards heresy but it is a plea for battling for the faith with gentleness and humility.

Has someone sinned in our midst? How do we treat them? Do we rise up to expel them, to ostracize them, or make an example of them? Are we more concerned with being right about our understanding of doctrine and morality than we are about the brother or sister in the Lord who has sinned? And what about our love for Jesus—has it grown cold, academic. We know who He is. We believe who He is. We trust who He is. We even pray telling God what we need. But we don't spend time with **Him**. We don't enjoy Him; we just use Him.

Jesus says, "Remember what it used to be like—how tender our relationship was when you first knew the freedom of sins forgiven? ("Remember the height from which you have fallen") Remember how you couldn't get enough of My Word? Remember when you longed to tell people about Me? You are orthodox but your love toward Me and each other has grown cold."

The Solution

Then in verse 5 we also see the remedy: Jesus says, Remember, repent and return (or, said another way, do the things you did at first). When Daniel Webster was a young lawyer in New Hampshire he met a lovely young woman named Grace Fletcher. She was his first love and he couldn't seem to spend too much time in her presence.

With her parents as the chaperones he would spend hour after hour in her home holding skeins of silk as she unknotted the thread—anything to be near her. After months, on one visit her parents stepped out of the room for a minute and Webster found the courage to ask her, "Grace, we have been untying these silken knots for weeks together. I think it is time we tie a knot which will not be untied for a lifetime." Speechless, wide-eyed and with a pounding heart Grace watched Daniel take a piece of red ribbon and tie an elaborate knot in it. He handed it to her and she, with trembling hands and heart, added a knot of her own to his – "this silent act was the ceremony of their engagement."

They were married for 21 years before her death. And although he lived for many more years, he never forgot his first love. After his death, a box was found marked "Precious Documents." In it were the letters he and Grace exchanged during their engagement and marriage. They were well worn, having been read and re-read many times through the years. And in the box was one other item—a

length of red ribbon with that intricate knot.⁵ Apparently, time and time again he went back to the beginning.

I'm not arguing for sentimentalism—I'm urging a return to first things:

- Pour over His Word,
- Reflect on His love,
- Engage Him in prayer, and
- Spend time in His presence.

Repent—turn away from the busyness that keeps you from Him. Today find the time to get into His presence. Let your love be rekindled.

Let Him say of you and of us, "Southern Gables Church and its people are orthodox and loving."

End Notes

¹ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, p. 22

² Ibid, p. 23

³ Ibid, p. 17-19

⁴ Richard Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to The Seven Churches in Asia*, p. 87

⁵ Ray Stedman, *God's Final Word, Understanding Revelation*, p. 23

Chapter Three

Would I deny Jesus? Revelation 2:8-11

It was a time when Christians were known as “atheists” — not because they didn’t believe in God but because they refused to worship the Emperor who had proclaimed himself to be god. And because of their refusal to worship the Emperor the crowds asked to do away with the Christians.

“Under (the Emperor Domitian A.D. 81-96) emperor worship was made compulsory for every Roman citizen. Failure to comply meant death. Each year every citizen had to burn incense on Caesar's altar, after which he was issued a certificate. To be without a certificate, as must have been the case for Christians obedient to Christ, was to risk discovery and the death penalty.”¹

When a man named Polycarp was brought before the officials he was given a choice to either sacrifice to Caesar, denying Christ or be put to death. His response was “Eighty and six years I have served Christ and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?” Again he was threatened but again he replied:

“You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, for you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come and in everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come do what you will.” So angry were the people that even though it was the Sabbath, the Jews joined the crowds in carrying wood (contrary to their laws) to fuel the fire to burn Polycarp.

As the fire was started Polycarp prayed, “O Lord God almighty... I bless you that you have granted unto me this

day and hour that I may share among the number of the martyrs...”

Have you ever wondered what you would do if you were faced with such a situation—a situation wherein you were forced to choose between death or renouncing your faith in Jesus? Polycarp, the man whose death I just described, was the Bishop of the churches of Smyrna.

Smyrna, you will recognize, is one of the seven churches to whom the Apostle John wrote in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation. Smyrna was in what we, today, call the country of Turkey. It was on the site of what is now the modern city of Izmar about 35 miles north of the city of Ephesus. It was then a city of about 200,000 with a flourishing trade business on its harbor on the Mediterranean. Because it had sided years earlier with Rome against other armies, Rome gave permission for a special temple to be built in Smyrna—a temple to the Emperor. Emperor worship was strong. Not only were the Christians subject to discrimination and persecution from the Romans in the city but also from the Jews. There was, apparently, a sizable Jewish population in the city that equally hated the Christians. Christians were losing their jobs, their homes, and their lives—all because they had committed their lives to Jesus Christ. What would you say if you were writing to them to encourage them?

I have a friend who is very near death. I meet with him and talk about how he deals with the pain, the doubts and sometimes even the fear of death that grips him. Put yourself in his place—what would help? What would you need to hear? French novelist, Albert Camu (Camus) wrote that death is philosophy’s only problem. I’m guessing many of you watched the marvelous film *Shadowlands* with Anthony Hopkins as C.S. Lewis. That movie explored the depths of the problem of death. What do you say at a time like that? What can make any difference? What would

Jesus say to C.S. Lewis, to my friend, and to the believers in Smyrna?

"To the angel of the church of Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."(Revelation 2:8-11)

Have you ever wondered what you would do if you were faced with a situation wherein you were forced to choose between death or renouncing your faith in Jesus?

As I pondered this text, it occurred to me that I could have a problem with application—the “so what” of a passage. Only some here are acquainted with real grief—the former or anticipated death of a loved one. Only few, if any, here are acquainted with persecution—discrimination maybe for some but persecution not likely. When we think of persecution we think of the Coliseum in Rome and the Christians being fed to the lions in an age long ago. What if you knew that in 1996 over 156,000 Christians were killed for their belief in Jesus?²

Last September, the U.S. Congress passed a concurrent resolution that began:

“Whereas oppression and persecution of religious minorities around the world has emerged as one of the most

compelling human rights issues of the day. In particular, the worldwide persecution and martyrdom of Christians persists at alarming levels. This is an affront to the international moral community and to all people of conscience.”³ Our own State Department released an unprecedented 83-page report in 1997 outlining the religious persecution occurring around the world in at least 78 countries.⁴

In southern Sudan in the colorful marketplace of Manyiel local African Dinka people gathered around the Arab stalls bargaining for clothes and other items. In this town, 19 year old Neema tells her story.

In many countries it is a crime, punishable by death, to convert to Christ.

“She was almost 11 when Moslem invaders from the north swept into her Christian village and carried her off into slavery.” She told of the day when the Arab militia came kidnapping children and killing almost everyone else. Neema was literally thrown across the back of a horse and carried away.

She spoke softly of what happened that day. Neema was taken north and sold to a man to be used as a servant. They gave her a Moslem name and forced her to participate in Moslem rituals. When the man’s wife was gone, Neema would be used for other purposes and when the wife discovered Neema was pregnant, she chased her out of the house, giving her a chance to escape. Someone asked how she got back to her home and Neema said that slave traders brought her back and sold her to her family. ‘But now I cannot marry. I have been with a man, and I have a child. I am no longer free to marry a husband.’”⁵ This is not an isolated incident.

The Baltimore Sun last year ran a series of stories on Christians being sold into slavery. Two reporters went to Sudan and captured on film their purchase of two slaves for \$500 each. Christian agencies are now involved in attempting to purchase as many of the child slaves as they can to return them to their families. This is not 1797—this is happening now. In Sudan it is a crime, punishable by death, to convert to Christ.

Nina Shea is a Roman Catholic who heads the Puebla Program of the Freedom House Foundation. Freedom House was established by Eleanor Roosevelt and Wendell Wilkie nearly 50 years ago to be advocates for people around the world who lived in repressive regimes. In the opening of her recent book on the persecution of Christians she writes, "Millions of American Christians pray in their churches each week, oblivious to the fact that Christians in many parts of the world suffer brutal torture, arrest, imprisonment, and even death—their homes and communities laid waste—for no other reason than that they are Christians. The shocking, untold story of our time is that more Christians have died this century simply for being Christians than the first nineteen centuries after the birth of Christ. They have been persecuted and martyred before an unknowing, indifferent world and a largely silent Christian community."⁶ These are our brothers and sisters in the Lord—what are we to say?

On April 16, 1996, at 5:00 in the morning, a large group of authorities came to a church in Cuba where the members had gathered at 4:00 for a prayer meeting. The people were dragged from the building while the police destroyed the building and the furniture in it. In the name of Fidel Castro's government they carried off anything they thought had value.⁷

On February 5, 1996 in the Punjab province of Pakistan, a mob of several thousand invaded a Christian section of a

city burning down churches, homes and businesses, schools and clinics—nearly 75% of the Christians were homeless after the fires.⁸

In Guerrero, Mexico members of the Protestant church in town have been told to revert to the Catholic Church or leave town. Three men have been jailed for “professing the Evangelical Religion and refusing to carry out stewardship duties in the community’s Catholic festival.”

On May 14, 1996 in Pedapalli, India the Hindus who were fearful that the entire village would become Christian burned the thatched roof of the Christian church. About 4 years ago the first family became Christian and since then over 40 families have converted.

In the State Department report I mentioned earlier, China was singled out as the place where the most widespread persecution of Christians is taking place. I quote from our own government: “Local authorities (in China) used threats, demolition of property, extortion, fines, interrogation, detention, and reform-through-education sentences in carrying out this campaign.”

In November 1995, two pastors of the Word of Faith church in Uzbekistan were arrested along with 62 members of the church. For 12 days they were incarcerated in a cell not large enough for them to lie down and they were fed only every other day. Their crime was holding worship services.

These are real people in real places—today! This is not 1st century Smyrna, this is 21st century Mexico, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cuba—places Americans travel to every day. What do we say to these believers who are enduring such atrocities? There are several organizations in our country and around the world attempting to mobilize Christians in free countries to speak out for those who are persecuted. The desire is to put enough pressure on our governments that they take this persecution into account when they deal

with other governments. The desire is also to call God's people to prayer on behalf of these who are being terrorized and killed for their faith.

I want to recommend two books that will give you a greater awareness of the problem and how you can be involved in prayer and other actions to help confront this very real problem: *In the Lion's Den* by Nina Shea is a good primer. And *Their Blood Cries Out* by Paul Marshall is a more comprehensive treatment with the names, addresses, and e-mail addresses of several good organizations taking the lead in these matters.

In Pedapalli, India the Hindus who were fearful that the entire village would become Christian burned the thatched roof of the Christian church.

This lengthy excursus on the persecution of Christians in the world today was for the purpose of helping us realize that Jesus' words to the church in Smyrna are not out of date, but are real in the lives of thousands, and even millions today. And His words apply not only to those who are suffering persecution but are applicable to anyone who realistically faces his or her own mortality. But I find Jesus' words to these suffering Christians very interesting. Maybe, to these American ears, even puzzling.

I believe there are passages of Scripture that give Christians the right and even the obligation to make every effort to change society, to change the culture, to change laws and even governments when they are corrupt and repressive. I believe it is right that Christians around the world attempt to pressure governments, beginning with our own, to act on behalf of believers around the world. I believe it is our obligation to pray asking God to change the

circumstances of those who undergo such inhumanity. I believe it is right that Christians rise up in “holy horror” at the atrocities being perpetrated on Christians. But do you, also, notice that these actions are absent in this message from Jesus to the suffering church in Smyrna?

I want you to know who I am, I want you to know I'm in control and I want you to know the ultimate outcome.

Read His words again:

"To the angel of the church of Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death." (Rev. 2:8-11)

Do you hear Him? Yes, I know you are suffering and I'm telling you that you will suffer more and some of you will die in the midst of it. Where is the promise of intervention, of changing the situation, of making the evil go away, of justice prevailing, or of Americans riding in to save the day? I want a message that says God will intervene and the persecution will stop! But reality is that the persecution may not stop. The reality is that loved ones still die. The reality is that we will die—not necessarily violently but we will die.

What about when circumstances don't change, can't change—what do I hold on to then? Jesus writes through

John to these believers who are in the midst of real persecution, with some losing their very lives and He says:

I want you to know who I am, I want you to know I'm in control and I want you to know the ultimate outcome. Put your faith in anything less than these three truths and you will ultimately despair; anything less than these truths will fail you when life is hardest.

Who I Am

First, who does John say He is? He refers back to chapter one and the vision of Jesus that John sees there. But out of that fuller description, Jesus selects two things about Himself that He wishes them to remember in this life-and-death time. He writes, I want you to remember I am *"the First and the Last."* Those words are taken from the book of Isaiah. Three times God reminds the people of Israel of who He is.

Israel and Judah were fearful because of the invaders who were destroying their land and carrying their people off into slavery. But God said *"This is what the Lord says, He who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you: Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant... This is what the Lord says... the Lord Almighty: **I am the first and the last**; apart from me there is no God."* (Isaiah 44:2ff)

And later he says, *"Listen to me, O Jacob, Israel whom I have called, I am he; **I am the first and I am the last.** My own hand laid the foundations of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they all stand up together."* (Isaiah 48:12-14)

- Who was there when the earth was formed?
- Who was there in the garden of Eden walking with Adam and Eve?
- Who was there when Noah needing saving from the

flood?

- Who was there with Abraham providing for him in a new country?
- Who was there protecting Moses as he fled with 2 1/2 million people from the Pharaohs of Egypt?
- Who was there when, under Joshua, the Israelites conquered a new land?

Who has always been there—providing, caring, correcting and saving His people? Who has been there from the beginning of your life?

Several years ago I received a tape from a woman in my church. Driving in my car I listened to it but it was a couple of minutes into the tape before I realized the event recorded. It was an infant dedication from 18 years earlier as I held their son in my arms and prayed for him asking God's protection, guidance and saving grace on his life.

At the end of that section of the tape I heard the voice of their son now grown, telling how God had gotten hold of his life. God was there all the time. So Jesus says to these Christians in Smyrna, *"I am the first and the last,"* I have always been there and you can therefore believe I WILL always be there.

Not only is He the First and the Last but He is the one "who died and came to life again." Of what are they to be reminded when He says that? Two things:

The first is that this Jesus who is the eternally existent "I AM," who has always been and always will be, loves them so much He died for them.

Ravi Zacharias of India wrote recently of a conversation he had with a Belgian interpreter. As they were driving to the next meeting the man, whose name was Wilfred, told him of how severely his relationship to Jesus had been tested.

"The hymns resounded all day on the reality of heaven, and the speakers expounded on it. I was basking in the greatness of this hope and enjoying the promise of such a destiny. Quite unexpectedly, my name was called during the meeting to go immediately to the office as there was an urgent call awaiting me. I did just that and picked up the phone to hear the somber and sobbing voice of my wife, Faith, informing me that our nine-month-old baby had, without warning, died in his crib a short while ago."

Who has always been there—providing, caring, correcting and saving His people?

He recounted that the news brought him to the lowest point in his life. The devastation defied description. The anguish and anger built up within his heart to volcanic proportions, threatening to spew out his uncontainable grief. A cry within him wanted to sue God for contempt of human life. He packed his bags, bought a train ticket, and sat alone in his seat looking out through the window where nothing seemed to ease the ache.

Across the aisle from him sat a man reading his Bible, opposite whom sat two young people who did not try to hide their disdain toward so-called religious books. The man holding the Bible finally responded to their taunts, and their discussion took on some heavy philosophical jousting. Finally, one of the young men, anger unmasked, leaned over and said to the man, "If your God is as loving and kind as you say He is, tell me why He lets the innocent suffer? Why does He permit so much warfare? Why does He allow little children to die? What kind of love is that?"

The questions, especially the last two, stabbed Wilfred in a way he had never felt before, and he caught himself on the verge of blurting out, "Yes, you religious zealot! Answer them and me, and tell us why He lets children die. What

sort of love is that?"

But a strange mental transformation took place in Wilfred's own mind. He awaited the other man's answer, and then he looked at the two young men and found himself saying, "Do you mind if I enter into your conversation? I'll tell you how much God loves you; He gave His only Son to die for you." The young men abruptly interrupted him and argued that it was easy for Wilfred to make such platonic pronouncements disconnected from the concrete world of death and desolation.

That is the kind of God I am—I love you enough to die for you and even when you were sinners.

Wilfred waited for the appropriate moment because he needed every ounce of courage and conviction to say it once, but to say it clearly. "No, no, no, my dear friends," he said. "I am not distanced from the real world of pain and death. In fact, the reason I am on this train is because I am heading home for the funeral of my nine-month-old son. He died just a few hours ago, and it has given the cross a whole new meaning for me. Now I know what kind of a God it is who loves me, a God who willfully gave His Son for me."⁹ Jesus writes to those suffering Christians, "That is the kind of God I am—I love you enough to die for you and even when you were sinners."

But Jesus also wants to remind them of another powerful truth: He is alive. He was dead but He **is** alive—not just metaphorically, not just philosophically, but actually, flesh and blood alive. What gave those first disciples, Peter, James and John, the courage to face a hostile world? What made them willing to give their lives for what they were preaching? They believed it! They had seen Him with their own eyes.

In another letter John wrote he said, *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life"*—Jesus. Think about it for a minute. Do you believe Jesus is literally alive today? He who is the first and the last, the one who loved you so much He died for you is actually alive and actively aware and involved in your life today. When you face persecution or when you face death itself, Jesus says remember who I am.

I Am In Control

But Jesus also wants them to know He is in control. Several times He writes, *"I know..."*

"I know your affliction and your poverty..." "I know the slander..." against you. And He tells them what will yet happen: *"Some of you will be put in prison."* *"You will suffer persecution for ten days"*—that is, for a limited amount of time.

Jesus says, I know your situation like the back of my own hand. I know everything about you even before it happens. I know you personally, I know your limits, and I know what I'm doing. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 10:29,30, *"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."*

Donald Barnhouse wrote: "What though we be unknown to the world? We are known to God!" And He is in control.

The Final Outcome

But lastly He says I want you to know the ultimate outcome: *"He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be*

hurt at all by the second death."

Except for those who are still alive on this earth when Jesus comes again, we will all die. We may die comfortably in our sleep in our own bed or we may die violently at the hands of persecutors, or a thousand ways in between, but we will all die. The Bible teaches that this is the "first" death—the one we experience here on earth. And though the bodies are buried, the spirits of those who are trusting in Jesus go directly into the presence of the Lord awaiting the day when our bodies are resurrected. The spirits of those not trusting in Jesus do not go to be with Christ but await the resurrection of their bodies when they will experience the second death.

Here is what God says later in Revelation:

20:6 - *"The second death has no power over" them (those who belong to Jesus).*

20:14 - *"The lake of fire is the second death."*

21:8 - *"But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars - their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."*

Jesus' words to these suffering Christians is that they can absolutely count on something: they will not, definitely not (Jesus uses a double negative here for emphasis) be hurt at all by the second death. Instead as He tells them in verse 10, *"I will give you the crown of life."*

Nothing less than those three truths could bring real comfort to these Christians. Nothing less than those three truths can bring real encouragement to you when the pressure is on and even when death is imminent. I sat by my dying friend's bedside recently and we together rehearsed these truths. These truths are what will see a

person through. Cling to these truths.

End Notes

¹ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7—An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 160

² *Regent University study*

³ Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den*, p. 111

⁴ *Christianity Today*, Sept. 1, 1997, P. 74

⁵ Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*, p. 18

⁶ Shea, *Ibid*, p. 1

⁷ Voice of the Martyrs, WWW news briefs

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Ravi Zacharis, *Can Man Live Without God?*

Chapter Four

Am I too Tolerant? Pergamum/Thyatira Revelation 2:12-29

He called early and asked if he could have lunch with you that day. He said it was urgent and so you changed an appointment to accommodate him. When he showed up at the restaurant it was obvious he was distressed and as soon as the food was ordered he came right to the point. He wanted to know if he could move into your basement for a while until he found his own place. Your heart sank as you just knew what was coming. You'd been friends with him and his wife long enough to notice that things weren't what they were supposed to be between them.

He said he'd finally decided to leave his wife—it had been a long time coming. And then he spilled out a sad story of love-less-ness that existed almost from the beginning. He said he thought he loved her when he married her but it soon became apparent that he was just temporarily infatuated. The truth is they never had much in common and it wasn't long before they just drifted apart.

Yes, she had tried to get them to see the pastor or talk to a friend about what they might do to re-ignite their relationship but he admitted he wasn't interested. He went on to say that his wife was a nice enough person but he just didn't want to be married to her anymore. Yes, he knew that sounded pretty lame but certainly God didn't expect him to go through life living with someone he didn't love. He was sure, in the long run, it would be better for her as well—after all, she shouldn't have to be tied to a guy who didn't love her.

What do you say in a situation like that? What do you do? Do you let him move into the basement? This is your

friend; do you challenge him? Do you intervene? What if he persists in this decision and moves out—how do you treat him then? Since you are both members of the same church and claim to be Christians should you contact one of the pastors or elders of the church? What should the church do if the man persists and divorces his wife?

In the second and third chapters of Revelation, John records messages Jesus gives to seven churches—seven churches in Asia Minor or what is now called Turkey. As Jesus spoke next to Pergamum and Thyatira, He told them there was a problem.

God's people were turning deaf ears and blind eyes to the sin going on in their very midst.

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.” (Revelation 2:12-20)

What’s the problem? You have people in both churches who are teaching and acting in ways that are directly contrary to God’s will for His people—idolatry and sexual immorality. Was everyone in the church doing this? No. To the church in Pergamum He writes, *“You have people there who hold to the teaching Balaam.”*

To the church in Thyatira He writes, *“You tolerate that woman Jezebel...By her teaching she misleads my servants...”*

What was Jesus’ criticism of the churches? Was it that there were people in the church who sinned? Yes, but what was the bigger issue? I want you to see, when you look at the text that the bigger issue was the church tolerating open sin! God’s people were turning deaf ears and blind eyes to the sin going on in their very midst. They were not challenging unholy conduct in the lives of people who claimed to be Christ-followers. What’s the problem? Godly people were doing nothing about sin.

Why do I call them “godly people”? Look at Jesus’ commendation of them in Pergamum and Thyatira:

First of all Pergmum: *“I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city,*

where Satan lives.”(2:13)

As we noted about Smyrna so here in Pergamum, Christians were a despised and persecuted minority. Emperor worship was so strong that anyone who refused to confess that Caesar was god was subject to penalty and even death. Imagine yourself in that place—a place like some places in our world today where declaring yourself as a Christ-follower could mean death. No wonder it was called the place where Satan has his throne; they were in the middle of anti-Christian activity. So real was this threat that one of their own, a man named Antipas, had actually been killed for his faith in Jesus. Now that would get your attention. But Jesus says to the church in Pergamum, “you have not renounced your faith; you have remained true to My name.”

To the church in Thyatira He similarly writes, *“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.”* (2:19)

These godly believers were not only remaining true to Jesus but were increasing in their spiritual maturity and service. These are not spiritual drop-outs. But Jesus has something *“against them.”* There is something going on in these churches that is so serious that, in spite of their progress and faithfulness, Jesus must correct them.

What was going on in the lives of some of the people in the church that was unchallenged? Specifically in both cases, Jesus speaks of two categories of sins:

Those who *“sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.”* (2:14b, 20b) In both letters He likens those who lead the people into this sin to Old Testament characters. He likens these renegade leaders in Thyatira to Jezebel. Jezebel was the queen of one of Israel’s worst kings—Ahab. And she was worse than her

husband. In I and II Kings, we learn that she led the people into idol worship and all sorts of immoral practices.

Jesus likens the renegade leaders in Pergamum to Balaam, another Old Testament character. In Numbers 22, we find the beginning of the report on this man, Balaam. When Moses and the Israelites were on their way from Egypt to Canaan—the Promised Land—they had to pass through the territories of Midian and Moab. The leaders of those countries were so terrified of the Israelite army that they formed an alliance against Israel. But still frightened, they called on a man from yet another country, a man named Balaam, who apparently was known to have the power of a sorcerer—a man who could call on the gods to curse Israel and give the leaders of Moab and Midian an advantage.

***You have not renounced your faith; you
have remained true to My name.***

Balak, king of Moab, sent for Balaam and offered him money if he would put a curse on Israel. Balaam was apparently willing but God stopped him. At one point God literally stopped him by sending an angel to stand in the way of the donkey Balaam was riding. The story is humorous because the donkey sees what Balaam doesn't, and the donkey refuses to move even though Balaam beats it.

Finally the donkey, unable to move forward at Balaam's urging pushes up against the high rocks on one side of the road and pinches Balaam's foot. At that, Balaam is so angry he threatened to kill the donkey. Then God gave the donkey the ability to speak and the donkey told Balaam what Balaam should have known all along—God was stopping him. When he finally reached the place where Balak, the Moabite King wanted Balaam to be to curse the Israelites, Balaam was only able to bless them. That

happened at least three times until finally Balak sent Balaam away in frustration. As we finish that part of the story in the book of Numbers it appears to be the end of the plot to curse Israel. But evidently, Balaam was so enamored of the reward Balak offered that when he couldn't satisfy Balak's request one way, he used another.

In Numbers 25 we learn, *"While Israel was there, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with the Moabite women, who invited them to sacrifice to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the (idol-god) of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them."*

What happened is that they thought they could have it all—they could belong to God and still live any way they chose.

So brazen was the immorality that one man even brought a Moabite woman with him right into the Tabernacle of God. The judgment of God fell on the people that day and not only were that man and woman killed but 24,000 people died in judgment.

Look at how Balaam engineered this defeat of the Israelites. Chapter 31 says a group of Midianites, *"were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people."*

What Balaam couldn't accomplish by direct means he accomplished indirectly—by encouraging the people to have both their relationship to God and their relationship to those things contrary to God.

I want you to notice that what happened in Israel in Balaam's day, what happened in Pergamum and Thyatira in John's day and what happens in the church today IS NOT

that people who formerly called themselves Christians “chuck ” it all and leave the church. It is that they think they can have it all—they can belong to God and still live any way they choose. Those Israelites in Numbers hadn’t left the people of Israel—they even still came to the Tabernacle/Temple to worship. But they wanted their idol worship, their immorality **and** their relationship to God.

Those Balaam/Jezebel followers in Pergamum/Thyatira hadn’t left the church—they just didn’t see any contradiction between what they were doing and what they said they believed, or it didn’t matter that there was a contradiction. Of course they believed in God, in Jesus—that He died for them, and that they were forgiven by His grace through faith. In fact, that gave them all the more security—they belonged to God by grace; it didn’t really matter if they did things that might otherwise be inappropriate. And of course the difficult circumstances of living in their city made it much more true that to “get along you have to go along.”

They separated their actions from their belief system. They separated life and faith. They compartmentalized themselves so that in one compartment they held Jesus and their beliefs about Him and in another they held the real world in which they lived. And as long as they had the two separated they could live in the real world pretty much as they pleased without being bothered by what they said they believed.

What does it look like today? Too many even in the church say they believe in Jesus but they aren’t Christ-followers. And when truth and ethics are disconnected, when belief and conduct are separated, morality breaks down. Price gouging in business is okay as long as everybody is doing it. Just this week I had a funeral home in the area charge a family \$860 to rent a hearse and have two guys show up and stand here at Southern Gables for two hours. When I

asked them about the exorbitant amount the excuse was that everyone does it.

How many Christians will sell defective homes or automobiles or other things to unsuspecting buyers in order to get as much as the traffic will bear and think that is just the intelligent way to do business in America—after all, that's free enterprise at work.

How many think nothing of jockeying for position in their business or job or socially by casting aspersions on someone else's character, just so they will be thought of more highly. Who in our churches are twisting the Bible texts to get us to think that homosexual practice isn't wrong as long as two people are committed to each other? How many are trying to get us to believe that sex outside of marriage is all right if the two people truly love each other? Even recreational sex is okay as long as nobody gets hurt.

How many Christians are regularly putting their hobbies, their sports, their work, their recreation, or just their self-indulgence ahead of Jesus' clear desire for His people to regularly meet together for worship and encouragement? How many Christians are feeding on the profanity, vulgarity, immorality, and unholy attitudes, ideas and behaviors portrayed in so much of television and movies today, with no thought for the damage it is doing to their own souls—to the damage their modeling is doing to others, and the affront it is to a holy God?

While it is true that God accommodates divorce in those cases where adultery or dissension occur, for some in our church, as in the culture at large, divorce is now perceived as perfectly legitimate, even the best thing to do, for almost any reason. The test of the legitimacy of divorce today is in how it makes a person feel. "It feels right," "I'm happier," "My kids are happier," "I've never been closer to God," and a lot of other rationalizing drivel is spouted by

those who have disconnected their beliefs from their lives. No, maybe idol worship and temple prostitution aren't part of our everyday culture but self-indulgence and immorality are still very present.

Who is willing to step up and say "This is wrong!"—"This is an affront to a holy God. This mars the image of God in people, and scandalizes the church of Jesus Christ?" And Jesus' challenge to the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira was that they, the churches, the Christ-followers, were doing nothing about it. Why not? Why were these practices going unchallenged? Apparently as in our day, they had convinced themselves that toleration is a greater virtue than holiness or love. After all didn't Jesus say, "He who is without sin should cast the first stone?" Isn't He the one who said, "Judge not lest you be judged." If you read Matthew 7 carefully you see clearly that Jesus' condemnation of judging was a condemnation of "judgmentalism." Jesus was opposed to proud, holier-than-thou, criticism of others. He was not opposed to correction of others; in fact, He urged gentle, loving correction of each other.

***When belief and conduct are separated,
morality breaks down.***

Have we become so afraid of being regarded as judgmental or legalistic that we are afraid to call sin "sin"? Is it possible that fear is not the reason we don't care about the rising disregard of God's word in our churches but rather that we don't care enough what will happen to Christians who live that way? Or is it possible that our own sense of right and wrong has been so corrupted, has become so vague that we don't know where we stand on many issues? Has "live and let live" become the modus operandi of the evangelical church?

- Parents are not willing to tell their children when things are wrong.
- Friends are more concerned about being liked than confronting in love.
- Churches are more afraid of being perceived as rigid, legalistic, fundamentalists than caring enough about the people to call them to holiness.

Remember, it is not those Christians who were living unholy lives that Jesus here chastised—it is those Christ-followers who were doing nothing about it.

What does Jesus say to do? Repent! Do things differently. What does that mean? Go on a “witch-hunt”? Set up little

Jesus makes it clear that the purpose of correction is to correct—the purpose of discipline is to heal.

KGB units throughout the church? Encourage children to tell on their parents? Publicly chastise everyone who is doing anything wrong? Of course not! Jesus makes it very clear in the Bible what we are to do. I won’t take the time to spell this out but read just some of what He says we are to do:

*“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him **gently**.”* (Gal. 6:1)

In your correction of a brother, “forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by sorrow. I urge you therefore to reaffirm your love for him.” (2 Corinthians 2:7)

Even in one of the strongest passages in the Bible on discipline of a believer, God says, correct him *“so that...his spirit (may) be saved on the day of the Lord.”*

(1 Corinthians 5:5)

And in the longest and most detailed instruction on Sound Living

discipline in the New Testament, Jesus makes it clear that the purpose of correction is to correct—the purpose of discipline is to heal. (Matthew 18)

Pity the child who has a parent who doesn't love him enough to say "no" and back it up with loving discipline. Pity the man or woman who doesn't have a person who is friend enough to say "no" and back it up with loving correction. And Jesus says, pity the church that doesn't care enough for its people to say "no" and back it up with gentle, affirming, loving, and yet firm discipline.

I well remember a woman who, after attending our Partnership classes and learning our policy on church discipline, called me to say the church has no business knowing or commenting on how people live their personal lives. She quit the class and stopped coming to church. Try as I would, I could not convince her that love is a higher value than toleration. In the church of Jesus Christ we are to love people enough to care about their lives.

We get a sense of how important this is to Jesus when we hear what He says to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira. I think I'm right when I say Jesus' warning is, "You begin to care enough to discipline and bring about a change or I will come in judgment not only on those who violate God's laws but also in judgment on the church."

I know it is not politically correct to threaten or warn but no matter how I try to get around it, to me, it looks like a warning and it comes from God. God is calling us to be concerned about sin in our lives and the lives of those who call themselves Christ-followers. And the concern is to be expressed not in judgmentalism but in caring enough to confront—loving enough to correct.

What about the man who is leaving his wife and asks to stay in your basement? What do you say and what do you do? I don't know specifically but I do know that saying

nothing and doing nothing is not an option. What is the church to do about those who claim to be Christians but are willfully, flagrantly, and defiantly ignoring God's will? We must confront. God help us do it and do it with the love and grace of the Lord Jesus. Do we love God and each other enough to call sin "sin"?

Chapter Five

Dead or Alive? Sardis Revelation 3a

I was in another city and it was Sunday morning. The night before I looked through the “yellow pages” and found a church relatively close to my hotel. So that Sunday morning I left the hotel with sufficient time to arrive early and participate fully in the worship. As I arrived at the church building I was pleasantly surprised—the facility looked to me, like a church ought to look. I was seeking a time of meeting with God and being in His presence and even the architecture lifted my eyes upward and gave a sense of grandeur—something of a reflection of the greatness of my God.

Waiting for the service to begin I sat down and paged through the hymnal and to my delight, the hymns and readings accurately described the great gospel truths of the Bible. Since it was a more formal, liturgical denomination I looked forward to the next minutes of speaking, singing and thinking through a recitation of greatness and glory of my God with the rest of the congregation. But I found myself quickly and increasingly distressed. The person who stood to lead us in worship verbally and non-verbally expressed no emotion, no conviction in the things he said. There was an air of the mechanical, just going through the motions. And then when the congregation responded in singing or in spoken words, it seemed flat, routine, and thoughtless.

I could see people in front of me talking, looking around as if bored, or what, at least appeared to be, only absent-mindedly saying the words. The words of the hymns were so biblically accurate, the words of the liturgy were so

beautifully reflective of the truths of God and our relationship to Him, but it felt lifeless. When the pastor stood up to preach, he took only about 10 minutes and the essence of his message was that animals are God's creation also and therefore we must treat them with respect. And since animals, too, will be in heaven, we must treat them here as we would expect to be treated. Though treating animals in a humane manner is certainly appropriate, I thought to myself, when do we hear from God's word? When do we hear the gospel themes, the claims of Christ on our lives, the call to repentance and faith? Animals are fine but there are much larger issues to deal with—when do we hear those? In fact many of the things he went on to say were an outright contradiction of the songs that had been previously sung and the liturgies just intoned.

Again I couldn't help but notice by seeing the expressions on the faces of those near me—it was as if nothing was being said. No one seemed to be paying any attention and worst of all, I got no sense either then or after, as I listened to people's comments, that anything was wrong with what had been said or not said. The conversations I overheard going out were no different than the ones I overheard coming in—the service of worship was nothing more than a brief interlude in an otherwise uninterrupted focus on their own agendas. I couldn't help but ask, "Did God ever show up in this place this morning?" "Did anybody notice?" "Did anybody care?" I walked away with an empty feeling. The architecture said to me that this was a place for meeting with God. The printed material said God would be experienced here. The people went through all the motions as if God were truly listening and speaking—they spoke, they sang, they nodded, they said "amen" at the right times, they stood, they knelt, they sat, but it was as if there was no life—just form.

Have you ever had the uneasy feeling of walking into a

house with the lights on, the fire burning in the fireplace, the dishes on the table, as if just used, and finding no one there? Something clearly was missing? The essential element to make it a home was missing—the people. I walked out of that church feeling the lights were on, the table was set, but there was nobody truly there. All the structures, the forms, the appearances of religion were there but it felt spiritually dead.

I couldn't help but ask, "Did God ever show up in this place this morning?"

Is it possible for a church to have all the outward appearances of spiritual life but be dead? Is it possible for a person to have all the outward appearances of spiritual life but be spiritually dead? In our on-going study of the Book of Revelation we come to what I think is a very disturbing text. As most of you know, in these opening chapters of Revelation, Jesus is addressing 7 churches in what was then Asia Minor and is now called Turkey. These churches were probably started during the days of the Apostle Paul's ministry some 30 years earlier. Jesus writes a brief letter to each of these seven churches, four of which we have already discussed, bringing us now to the letter to the church in the city of Sardis.

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not

soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”(Rev. 3:1-6)

***A nominal Christian is one who...
would call himself a Christian, or be so
regarded by others, but who has no
authentic commitment to Christ based
on personal faith.***

When Jesus wrote to the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, He said, *"I know your deeds - I know your love and faith, your service and perseverance, I know you have remained true to my name."* Even though Jesus goes on to tell them very forcefully that there are things that need changing, He nonetheless affirms them for what is right in their churches. But look at this letter to Sardis; what does Jesus say of them?

- *"I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."(3:1)*
- *"I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God."(3:2)*

There is no affirmation here! It isn't a matter of some things are going well but they need to make some adjustments. This church is in serious trouble!

Jesus' description of the trouble is penetrating: *"You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead."*

The word "reputation" can also be translated "name"—"You have a name of being alive but you are dead." The church was known for being truly Christian. The people of the church would gladly own the name "Christian"—yes, I'm a

Christian! The reputation was that they belonged to the family of God. The expectation of them from their reputation was that these people were Christ-followers. But what does Jesus say? *"You are dead."*

Notice please there is no reference here to persecution of the Christians, no reference to the emperor worship, no reference to idol worship or overt immorality, no reference to the Balaamites or Nicolaitans or other false teachers here. By many outward appearances this was a good Christian church made up of good Christian people, but they were dead. Donald Barnhouse said it this way:

"It was not scandalous wickedness, but decent death;
the form retained, the heart gone;
Christ owned in word, ignored in deed;
creeds correct, conduct respectable, life departed;
sound doctrine and outward propriety...affections not only
waning but gone. His name held, His word read, His truth
owned, Himself forgotten."¹

Several years ago the Lusanne Congress on Evangelism offered a definition of a church and people that are Christian "in name only"—nominally Christian. "A nominal Christian is one who... would call himself a Christian, or be so regarded by others, but who has no authentic commitment to Christ based on personal faith. Such commitment involves a transforming personal relationship with Christ, characterized by such qualities as love, joy, peace, a desire to study the Bible, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, a determination to witness faithfully, a deep concern for God's will to be done on earth, and a living hope of heaven to come."² In the church in Sardis all named the name but few had an authentic commitment to Christ. Oh yes, there were some who were authentically Christian:

"You have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their

clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”(3:4)

There were some who had not compromised their faith by only retaining an outward form of Christianity while disregarding God in the rest of their everyday life. Those few who were walking with Christ would eventually wear white—symbolic of the forgiveness and thus the clean hearts they possessed by God’s grace. Their names would be in the book of life (symbolic of belonging to God’s family) and Jesus would say their names (admit that they belong to Him) just as they, by their lives, have acknowledged His name.

But in contrast to the “few,” what about the most? They are Christian in “name” only. And what is a Christian? By that question I am not asking “How does one **become** a Christian?” A person becomes a Christian solely by God’s free grace through faith in Jesus and what He has done to forgive our sin and give us His life. But what is a Christian? Yes, it is one who trusts in Jesus but read the Apostle John’s description of a Christian.

“No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.” (I John 3:9-10)

In its context, the verses do not say that only the perfect belong to God but they do make unmistakably clear that when a person is a Christian their lives will change—they will increasingly obey God.

"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to be in him must walk as Jesus did."
(1 John 2:3-6)

But what is a Christian? Read the Apostle John's description: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God."

Doesn't get much clearer than that does it? Christianity consciously and deliberately follows Christ and does what He would do. Here's the way the Apostle James said it:

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."
(James 1:27)

Genuine Christianity Results in Life Change

The author of Hebrews said, *"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."* (Heb. 12:14)

Real Christianity is concerned with holiness—holy living.

And here is the way the Apostle Paul said it:

"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of

place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person...has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”(Ephesians 5:3-5)

Elsewhere he wrote:

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”(Gal. 5:19-21)

Authentic Christianity results in a different life.

Here's the way Jesus said it:

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.”(Luke 6:43-45)

Genuine Christianity is known by the fruit of the life.

Jesus also said,

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”(Luke 14:26)

Jesus is saying that anyone who values anything else more highly than they value their relationship to Him is not a disciple.

What is a Christian? **A Christian is a Christ-follower.** In Sardis there were only a few Christ-followers even though many called themselves Christian. There were only a few branches but many birds. The branches are truly connected to Christ. The birds just show up and rest on the branches. Eugene Peterson wrote:

"The church attracts to itself persons who like to live in the atmosphere of the holy but have little interest in being holy themselves. They find delight in working on committees and find security in ordering their lives within the reassuring traditions of the fathers. They are faithful in showing up in church on Sundays and are fortified by listening to the moral instruction of their leaders. But they have no appetite for holiness, or joy, or love. They are wholly conventional and entirely dull. The church is sought out as a sanctuary for living in pious sloth."³

What is a Christian?
A Christian is a Christ-follower.

When the church in Sardis received this letter can you imagine what they thought? Jesus was saying that their church was largely made up of people who were Christian in name only. But there is more here—what about the church as a whole? Jesus says, "*I have **not** found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.*" Were they doing the right things but for the wrong reasons and in their own wisdom and strength? Did they have a correct doctrinal statement? Did they conduct proper worship services? Did they engage in a certain amount of good religious behavior—giving money to missions, helping the poor, providing wholesome activities for the children and youth? Yes, Yes, and Yes.

But their correct doctrine had more to do with heritage and pride than with orthodoxy. Their proper worship had more to do with wanting to feel good than with honoring God. And their religious behavior was motivated more by self-interest (them, their families, and feeling good about themselves) than about advancing the kingdom of God.

This is sobering stuff to me. What about our own church? To what extent do we have all the forms of evangelical

Christianity but we don't have the life—we don't have the power? We like to sing about the presence of the Holy Spirit but is He here? Do we truly just come into His presence when we worship or do we try to manufacture a mood, create an atmosphere, or work ourselves into a feeling of spirituality? Are we going through the motions or are we meeting with God? Is much of our church activity little more than a "Christianized" version of the Boy Scouts, United Way and the Kiwanis club or is it actually led and energized by the Spirit of God and focused on the Kingdom of God?

***What does Jesus tell them to do?
"Strengthen what remains and is about to die." "Remember therefore what you have seen and heard; obey it and repent."***

To what extent do we have all the appearance of the real thing but it is in Name only? We should not to come into this place to just have a worship service but to meet with God. We should not go to our Sunday school classes just to be with friends but to pay careful attention to what Jesus is saying in His word. We should not have Tuesday night or Wednesday night student activities to keep kids off the streets but to engage them in a dialog with Jesus about why He created them and what He is calling them to do with their lives. Oh God, may it not be true of us – "In name only." Oh God, may it not be true of anyone that they are Christian "in name only."

What does Jesus tell them to do?

Wake up!

"Strengthen what remains and is about to die." "Remember therefore what you have seen and heard; obey it and repent."

The “wake up” is a call to pay attention, to become aware again, to look, to think and to act. Rouse yourself out of your sleep. Consider that your religion may be nothing but a facade.

Strengthen what Remains

This is the greatest news in this entire letter—hope is not gone. Right now is the time to respond. I think His statement that they are to, *“remember what (they) have received and heard”* is what remains. They are to consider what they know to be the truth. They are to rouse themselves and think about what they have been taught from God’s word—salvation is by grace through faith only and to be a Christian is to be a Christ-follower.

Christian in name only is **not** Christian.

Obey and Repent

And what are they to do with what they remember? “Obey it and repent!” What does that mean? Some here need to be saved—you need to be born again. For those who have been Christian “in name only,” this is the time to become a genuine Christian. Others of us need to get on our knees and invite the Spirit of God to take control—yield our lives to Him; decisions about jobs, hobbies, recreation, money, relationships, given to Him and obeying Him one step at a time. We realize this change is by grace, but we ask for such grace and act in such grace. Others need to repent of a slothful, lazy, just sliding along Christianity and get into a small group, a Sunday school class, a huddle—someplace where you can begin to think about how God’s word intersects with your life, lived in the everyday.

I don’t know where this letter to the church in Sardis intersected with your life but if it did, will you take the first step now? Will you respond to God?

Prayer of Confession

I've included a prayer of confession for any of us who know we need to respond to God's warning:

"Forgive me for mainly meeting with other Christians to get a blessing rather than being or giving one to You and others.

"Forgive me for coming to worship to get something from You, or earn favor with You rather than coming to express my joy in You.

"Forgive me for serving because of social obligation, or institutional pressure, or to gain favor for myself with others rather than a love for those I serve.

"Forgive me for desiring to see our class, our small group, our church grow in size largely because of how successful it will make me the leader appear, or how proud I can be of our group rather than desiring mostly to see Jesus lifted up.

"Forgive me for giving not because I want to but because I feel I must or I might fall out of favor with You. My giving is too often out of a desire to earn or a fear of retaliation rather than out of a love that wants to take what is most precious to me and give it to You.

"Forgive me for thinking of the financial support of missionaries, the building of new buildings or my service to others mostly in terms of how negatively it will affect my time or financial situation instead of how it will affect the kingdom of God.

"Forgive me for tolerating simply a measure, a modicum, a respectable amount of morality and ethics so that I don't feel guilty and I am perceived as reasonably conformed to Biblical standards instead of having a desire for holiness that is willing to give up all forms of sin—no matter how small I want to think of them.

"Forgive me for indulging in any manner of sin and help me to call it what it is.

"Forgive me for using the name of Jesus and then so carelessly ignoring His will for my life and His desire for my conduct."

End Notes

¹Donald Gray Barnhouse, *Revelation, An Expository Commentary, God's Last Word*, p. 66

²Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization
<http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=14285>

Chapter Six

Grace for Nausea: Laodicea Revelation 3c

Evangelist Bill Fay often asks a very telling question when he is talking to people about Christianity. After the person says what he believes about Christianity, Bill asks, "If what you believe is not true, would you want to know it's not true?" Interestingly, some people pick up on the point of the question very quickly and in a burst of honesty say, "No." What they are saying is, "The truth about Christianity doesn't matter to me because frankly it is all quite irrelevant." Their allegiance to a religion is of the same kind as their allegiance to a sports team—It's convenient, it's socially acceptable, it demands little, and it doesn't make much difference in their lives.

It is such people Jesus addresses in the letter to Laodicea. If ever a letter demanded a response, it is this letter. The description of the problem is in graphic, even earthy language and the call to take action is clear and precise. If you read the text with any intellectual honesty at all you have to ask, "What is the author saying to me and what is my response."

Have you ever written a letter to someone with the purpose of challenging something they had said or done? Maybe they did something to offend you or someone you care about. Maybe they **didn't** do something they should have done. And you wrote to them to correct them, to challenge them, to rebuke them—to ask them to make something right and do it differently next time. I think that usually when we write such a letter we try to soften the criticism by saying something pleasant or affirming as we begin the letter. Before we tell them their honesty was hurtful maybe

we tell them we appreciate their candor. Before we tell them their actions were wrong we tell them how much we appreciate how hard they tried. We attempt to soften the criticism by an affirmation. But this letter doesn't do that. It gets straight to the awful truth; like a slap in the face, it gets our attention.

After introducing Himself, Jesus gets right to His opening point:

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth." (3:15-16)

There you have it—not very pretty, not very gentle, and not couched in softer language. Jesus says, I feel like spitting you out of My mouth—it is more literally translated, "I am about to vomit you out of my mouth." What is it that nauseates Jesus? Spiritual lukewarmness!

Do you know what a veneer is? In furniture it is the thin layer of fine wood that covers the coarser wood beneath. In people it is a thin disguise of respectability or religiosity that hides a different interior. What nauseates Jesus is people with a veneer of Christianity—people for whom Christianity doesn't make much difference. It's tempting to assume Jesus is talking about people other than us, isn't it? But don't you want to know for certain? Jesus' words are rather offensive. Do you suppose He meant them to be, in order to get our attention?

Jesus actually used different metaphors: hot, cold and lukewarm. Hot is good, even warm to almost hot is good. Cold is good, even cool to almost cold is good. But there is an in between that is nauseating. Jesus knew His readers would know what He was talking about. They lived in a city with no close water source. Their water had to be piped in from several miles away. The closest source was the hot

spring at nearby Hieropolis. But by the time the water ran through the pipes, exposed to the middle-eastern sun, on its way to Laodicea, it was probably lukewarm. I couldn't find this out for certain about the springs that fed Laodicea but sometimes hot springs have a sulfur, rotten eggs, smell. If you ever driven past Pagosa Springs in the southern part of Colorado or driven through some of the springs of Yellowstone Park you know the smell. Whether it was just lukewarm water or lukewarm water with a sulfur smell, Jesus knew they would understand when He spoke of something that makes you sick to your stomach.

What nauseates Jesus is people with a veneer of Christianity—people for whom Christianity doesn't make much difference.

But obviously these were metaphors, describing something. What made Jesus want to throw up? People who are lukewarm toward Him. I struggled for some time in my study attempting to determine if Jesus' remarks were aimed at people in the church who call themselves Christians when they aren't or aimed at people who are Christians but who just aren't serious about their faith. I concluded that Jesus probably had both in mind, for the same rebuke is appropriate to both.

When Jesus says that some in the church are "lukewarm," what does He mean? The answer is found in the following parts of the letter:

"You say, I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." (3:17)

They have the trappings of being Christians and they think they are doing well as Christians but they don't have a real relationship with Jesus. They are lukewarm in that they have taken on some degree of Christianity—they call

themselves Christians, they attend Christian religious services, they do some of the things Christians are supposed to do, but they haven't gone all the way—they have not come in abject humility to gain what only Jesus can give—a relationship with Himself. They haven't sold out to Jesus and yet they are convinced they are okay. This was a people who had it all together. When it came to living in the "real" world, they weren't dependent on God. They saw themselves as self-sufficient. (Editor's Note: See the end of this chapter for further descriptions of being "lukewarm.")

These are the men and women who sit in church Sunday after Sunday who have never admitted their real need for a Savior and have never turned in repentance and faith to Jesus.

Why then did they call themselves Christians? Maybe for the same reason some do today? They **wanted enough of Christianity** that they could claim to be on the right side if the end turned out the way some said it would but they **didn't want so much Christianity** that it would interfere with the way they wanted to live their lives in the here and now. It really didn't matter if they had Christian friends because discussion of spiritual things made them uncomfortable. Reading the Bible as God's letter to them was something they didn't think about. Prayer, evangelism, and world missions were mostly irrelevant. Occasionally they would give a few dollars for good causes but not out of any conviction. To be honest, they get irritated when anyone in the church talks about money. They'd rather have kidney stones than intentionally show up for a prayer meeting. They are able to sit through sermons about living for Christ but it has no place in their lives when it comes to business, leisure activities, and investments. Their

assessment of themselves is that they don't have any need that they can't take care of themselves. They don't actually need God except in some mystical sense of everybody needs a little divine help—something like luck.

These are the men and women who sit in church Sunday after Sunday who have never admitted their real need for a Savior and have never turned in repentance and faith to Jesus. But Jesus' words are not only to the person who comes to church but isn't actually a Christian but His words are also to some who truly are Christians. For some of us, somewhere along the line we slid into complacency, a dullness, a grayness about our relationship with Jesus. Spiritual power is lacking in our lives but we don't care anymore. Revival doesn't come to our own souls, to the church or the community but it doesn't really matter. Hundreds around us don't know Jesus but it is not a priority with us. Our relationship with Jesus has been on hold for years and our spiritual life is at best lukewarm.

How common is this story in our church? As a young man at school, he was a faithful Christian, eager to witness, disciplined in his devotion to Jesus Christ. He went off to college where his faith was strengthened as he shared fellowship and ministry with other Christians. He graduated and moved on to a profession and up the promotional ladder. Out came the attaché case and smart suits; up went his mortgage and lifestyle; down went his trust in the Lord as he managed more and more income; and out went his time with God's people. Now he can help the Lord with his new money and influence...His enthusiasm for Jesus is neither hot nor cold.¹

We become blinded to our **real need** by our apparent lack of need. Material wealth gets confused with spiritual wealth and God's favor. Doctrinal correctness is confused with spiritual life. We are being blessed thus we must be right and all must be right with God. Jesus makes an interesting

observation when He says He wishes we were either cold or hot rather than lukewarm. Does He mean it would be better if we were cold? Apparently in Jesus' mind, spiritual "coldness" was preferred over lukewarmness. There is more hope for the openly antagonistic person than for the lukewarmly indifferent. Jesus always found that the openly sinful were more responsive to the gospel than the self-righteous. The hardest person in the world to help is the one who is convinced he has no need.

The motive behind Jesus' rebuke comes shining through. He loves us!

But Jesus says you lack the one thing that is most important in life: a relationship with Him. The former CEO of Chrysler Corporation, Lee Iacocca, wrote in his book entitled *Straight Talk*, "Here I am in the twilight years of my life, still wondering what it's all about...I can tell you this, fame and fortune are for the birds." Jesus would say, "That's right." *"The real riches you need, the forgiveness of sins and righteousness you need to wear to stand before a holy God, and the ability to see your need and the savior can only come from me."* (3:18)

As I said earlier, the people of Laodicea were apparently relatively affluent but Jesus says you are poor beyond description and what you need is the wealth I can give you—richness toward God. Not only were the Laodiceans affluent but also they were known for the wool they grew on their sheep and processed in their city. But Jesus says that in spite of your fine clothing, you are spiritually naked and you desperately need the covering of forgiveness and righteousness that I alone can give you. And not only that, but although you are famous for your eye clinics and medicines you are blind to the truth about yourselves and you need the sight I provide.

Up to this point Jesus' words have been sharp and indicting. But at verse 19, the motive behind Jesus' rebuke comes shining through. Like a father who truly loves his children enough to discipline them, so Jesus says His rebuke and disciplinary words are because He loves us. If Jesus is who we say He is, isn't it remarkable that He would care about what happens to us? Why would Jesus care about those who are lukewarm toward Him? Some would audaciously say that it is God's job to love and forgive. But I would say it is God's job to serve justice—love and forgiveness are the unexpected overflow of His mercy and grace. That He yet reaches out to any of us who have been for so long only lukewarm, half-hearted, and indifferent to Him, is almost unbelievable.

And yet look at verse 20:

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me." I used to join with those who have said this verse is used out of context if it is used to offer salvation to an unbeliever. But oh have I changed my mind. I am convinced that Jesus makes this offer to both the Christian and the one who is not a Christian. The offer is as broad as the need. For Jesus summarizes a great theological truth in this simple invitation: lukewarmness can be overcome only one way—by a true and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ. And Jesus says He's ready if we are. That's remarkable!

Look again at the beginning of this letter:

"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation." (3:1)

Jesus describes Himself in two ways.

First, the word "amen" means, "so it is." It indicates that what has just been said is absolutely correct—it conforms completely to reality. The next words confirm that first

description: "Faithful and true witness" refers to what is completely reliable. For Jesus to refer to Himself as the "amen" is to indicate that He is the last word—who He is and what He says and does is perfectly right and unchanging.

Secondly, He describes Himself as the ruler or originator of God's creation. Here is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe, who is Himself, the unchanging, completely reliable and perfect expression of all that is right and good, saying to you and to me, "I want to have a relationship with you." Jesus said, *"I will come in and eat with him and he with me."* In the ancient world to eat in a person's home was evidence of affection, confidence and an intimacy of relationship. It is to be loved, known, and cared for, and protected and given purpose—to become fully human as God intended. If He is who He says He is, isn't it logically ridiculous to refuse? If this is His offer isn't it spiritual suicide to resist?

Half-hearted, lukewarm, indifferent, complacent Christianity makes no sense at all. If Christianity is true then it is impossible to be too enthusiastic about it. Lukewarmness is not partially right—it is totally wrong.

While the letter applies to all ages and both genders, I'm addressing primarily the men. What I have written I think applies most particularly to men because I think men are more prone to a pride that makes it difficult for them to admit a need—at least to admit a need of the proportion I have described. We, men, will admit our need for a little help to augment our own ability, but to admit total, complete, helpless-without-intervention need is a different thing. What am I asking men to admit? That Jesus hasn't meant much to them. There might have been a time when we were devout in our relationship with Jesus, zealous about service, but we have grown lukewarm—we just don't care anymore.

So what is the remedy? The first step is to admit our need. It's like a doctor who has described your condition for months and every time he sees you he asks you to sign the release that allows him to do surgery, but each time up until now you have walked out of the office without signing, even though you know it has to happen. Now is the time:

- Sign the release.
- Consciously and deliberately, make your move—turn to Jesus Christ.
- Stop trying to convince yourself that you are okay the way you are.
- Agree with God that, on your own, you won't ever be good enough for God and that you need what He alone can supply—forgiveness and life eternal.

How many men will spend eternity in hell because they were too proud to admit they weren't Christians after years of pretending they were? Oh God break through such pride!

Here is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe saying to you and to me, "I want to have a relationship with you."

Today, if you truly are already a Christian, do you recognize that you must stop the spiritual slide that has been going on in your life for months or years? You recognize that your relationship to Jesus Christ has been on hold for years—that your spiritual life is at best lukewarm, rather nauseating to you and certainly to God. And today you recognize that you are in dire need of His gracious intervention—you can't make it on your own. You'll never be a good enough Christian; you've tried so many times and failed so miserably. You need Jesus' intervention in your life to turn you around—to give you spiritual light and health. Are you ready to humbly admit you can't fix it; you

bring nothing to the table but a willing heart.

Someone asks, "What will I have to do if I have that kind of relationship with Christ?" My answer: That is not the proper question. If you are still confident enough in yourself that you can bargain with God then you don't yet know how desperate you are. Someone asks, "Will I become some kind of fanatic if I have that kind of relationship with Jesus?" My answer: Wrong question again. The issue is do

To have a relationship with Jesus we come with no conditions, no bargaining, no bartering, nothing in our hands or thoughts with which we think we can guide the relationship.

you realize how destitute you truly are so that you will trust Jesus no matter what? To have a relationship with Jesus we come with no conditions, no bargaining, no bartering, nothing in our hands or thoughts with which we think we can guide the relationship. Instead we come totally dependent on Him, falling at His feet, wholly at His mercy, giving up and captured by His love. We're not talking about a program to follow—we are talking about a relationship established. Jesus says, open the door and I will come in. Are you ready? Are you done with lukewarm?

End Notes

¹ Terrance Kelshaw, *Send this Message to My Church: Christ's Words to the Seven Churches of Revelation*, p. 169

Indications of “Lukewarmness”

1. When prayer ceases to be a vital part of your life.
2. When the quest for biblical truth ceases and you grow content with knowledge you already have.
3. When biblical knowledge is treated as external fact and not applied inwardly.
4. When earnest thoughts about eternal things cease to be regular and gripping.
5. When to you the services of worship lose their delight.
6. When pointed spiritual discussions are an embarrassment.
7. When sports, recreation and entertainment are a large and necessary part of your life.
8. When sins of the body and of the mind can be indulged in without an uproar of your conscience.
9. When aspiration for Christlike holiness cease to be dominant in your life and thinking.
10. When the acquisition of money and goods becomes a dominant part of your thinking.
11. When you can mouth religious songs and words without heart.
12. When you can hear the Lord’s name taken in vain, spiritual concerns mocked, and eternal truths flippantly treated and not be moved to indignation.
13. When you can watch degrading movies and television and read morally debilitating literature.
14. When being “at odds” with other believers causes you no concern.
15. When the slightest excuse keeps you from spiritual

duty and opportunity.

16. When you become content with your lack of spiritual power.
17. When you pardon your own sin and sloth by saying the Lord understands.
18. When there is no music in your soul and no song in your heart.
19. When you adjust happily to the world's lifestyle.
20. When injustice and misery exist around you and you are unbothered.
21. When the spiritual condition of the world declines and you don't notice.
22. When you are willing to cheat your employer.

From Richard Owen Roberts *Revival* 1982

Chapter Seven

The Majesty of God Revelation 4

Gerald Sittser in his book entitled *A Grace Disguised*, tells of a fateful night in the fall of 1991. Jerry, his wife Lynda, their four children and Jerry's mother piled into the Sittser's mini-van and left Spokane, Washington to visit a Native American reservation just across the state line in Idaho. They had a great evening participating in an authentic pow-wow.

About 8:15 that night, when the children were making it plain they were done, the Sittsers climbed back into the van to make their way home. Ten minutes into the trip home Jerry noticed a car approaching them. It was coming very fast on a curve in the road and as they met, that other car, driven by a drunk driver, swerved into their lane and hit them head on. Jerry writes that in the first moments after the accident it was as if everything were in slow motion. With three of his four children, some of them seriously injured, Jerry looked at the carnage before them—the unconscious and broken bodies of the fourth child (four year old Diana Jane), his wife Lynda, and his mother Grace. In spite of every effort, he watched those three members of his family die.

He writes, "I (later) felt wild with fear and agitation...I could not stop crying. I could not silence the deafening noise of crunching metal, screaming sirens and wailing children. I could not rid my eyes of the vision of violence, of shattering glass and shattered bodies. All I wanted was to be dead.

"Over the next months I thought I was going to lose my mind...the foundation of my life was close to caving in. I

wondered whether I could survive another day, whether I **wanted** to survive another day.”¹

Have you been there? Have you ever had the bottom drop out of life? Maybe for you it wasn't sudden like for Gerald Sittser, but it was the steady deterioration of your resources until you didn't know if you could go on. In either case, have you ever doubted God? How can you read of an African who escaped his country to avoid ethnic hostility and is gunned down on a Denver street simply because he is black and not wonder where justice is—where is God? How can you watch the pain on a young wife's face as she bravely sits through the funeral of her policeman husband and not ask, “Why God?”

The Lord Jesus, through John, wrote to encourage them—to give them information that would sharpen their perspective and enable them to persevere.

Gerald Sittser said he had always believed in the sovereignty of God—that God is in absolute control of everything that happens. God's sovereignty follows logically from who He is—He is God. But Sittser writes, “This positive inclination toward God's sovereignty may come to a sudden stop in the face of severe loss.” He was now faced with actually attempting to reconcile his belief in a sovereign God with the injustice and suffering he was experiencing. He said that he avoided even thinking about God's sovereignty after the accident. Do you believe in the sovereignty of God? Do you believe that He is truly in control of all history, including yours?

The Apostle John in the Book of Revelation was writing to Christians who lived in Asia Minor. As we have already seen, these churches were experiencing a great deal of

persecution. Of the church in Ephesus Jesus said, *"you have endured hardships for my name."* (2:3) To the church in Smyrna he says, *"I know your afflictions...Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer."* (2:9-10) To the church in Pergamum he writes, *"You did not renounce your faith in me even"* when some were put to death for their beliefs. (2:13) These people were facing the loss of their homes, their jobs. They were faced with imprisonment and sometimes even death. Can you imagine bearing up under that kind of pressure? How could those Christians in Ephesus and Sardis and the others make it?

The Lord Jesus, through John, wrote to encourage them—to give them information that would sharpen their perspective and enable them to persevere. In chapter 1, in both verses 1 and 19, Jesus said He was giving these words to John to write so that they would know what was ahead.

"The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place." (1:1)

"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." (1:19)

But before doing that Jesus addresses each of the seven churches individually in letters. And so in chapters 2 and 3, which we looked at before, we find seven short letters addressed to the specific situations of these churches with application to us today. Now in chapter 4 we come back to the stated purpose of the book:

"Come up here and I will show you what must take place after this." (4:1)

And beginning with chapter 6 we see a description of some of the things that will take place just before and during the time when Jesus comes again to earth. Chapters 6-18 describe the events that will occur just before Jesus comes again. And then chapters 19-22 speak of the coming of Jesus and the new heavens and new earth that will be

ushered in for eternity.

But before Jesus tells John all that, He lets him see into heaven. Chapters 4 and 5 are a picture of heaven. Why? Why, again, interrupt the description of what **will** happen?

Because, this scene in heaven will prepare them for what they will see next in Chapters 6-18 and it will prepare them for what they would experience in life even before that time. There's no way God's people could make it through life or the end of the age if they don't have one truth firmly fixed in their minds and hearts: "Jesus wins!" That's what this whole book is about, in two words: Jesus wins. In light of what those first century Christians were experiencing in Ephesus and Sardis and Smyrna and what God's people would experience in the future, they desperately needed to be certain of what chapters 4 and 5 declare.

We need to come to grips with our stated beliefs in the sovereignty of God.

Another way of saying "Jesus wins" is to speak of the "sovereignty of God." This chapter sets forth one idea: The whole world will literally blow up one day. And your world may blow up even before then. But know this: Under it all, is a sovereign God—things are not out of control. Everything about this chapter was designed to reinforce this truth: our God reigns supreme. Now remember the relevance: when life as we desire it to be falls apart and when the end of the age as God describes it comes to pass, we will want to know the answer to the question: "Is God truly in control?" Or as Gerald Sittser put it, "...over time I realized that the trajectory of my grief had set me on a collision course with God and that eventually I would have to wrestle with this most complex of issues. I knew I had to make peace with God's sovereignty OR I had to reject God altogether, OR I had to settle for a lesser God who lacked

the power or the desire to prevent the accident."² Sittser knew he needed to come to grips with his stated belief in the sovereignty of God.

So what did the Apostle John see in Revelation 4 and what did he tell those Christians in Turkey that he expected would give them peace in the midst of their chaos? What captured his mind and heart so that confidence, not doubt, could dominate? John described the indescribable! I want you to engage your imagination. John paints a word picture that creates images in our minds. This picture is more like impressionistic art—not every detail is clear but the focal point of the picture can't be missed. John wrote, *"At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it."* (4:2) As he entered this space called heaven, his attention was immediately captured by one thing—the throne.

I've had occasion to be in court (not often for crimes I had committed). But when it was for something I had done, I was most impressed with one piece of furniture in the room—the judge's desk. It rather dominates the room. And when justice is in the balance, that desk looms even larger. So it was with John—the throne grabbed his attention. There is no doubt the throne spoke of one thing—authority. It loomed large in the eyes of John.

"And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne." (4:3)

Eugene Peterson reminds us that light is full of color. We don't naturally see but a fraction of that color. Precious stones are precious because they collect and intensify light. "A stone, selecting certain colors out of the air and intensifying them, shows us the deep glory of the color that was in the light all the time. The ancient world valued stones not for decoration but for their capacity to reveal and deepen the colors of light."³ What John apparently saw

was the most awesome light show imaginable—Heaven. The colors were brighter and more varied than anything he had ever seen before.

Not only that but according to verse 5, *"From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder."* Have you ever been camping in a tent in the mountains when one of those summer thunderstorms rolled through? Seldom do I feel as little and vulnerable as at those times. It is frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

What must John have felt? The most incredible colors emanating from the throne and then also lightning the likes of which he had never seen before along with a thunder that rattled everything. And at the same time John also saw seven lamps that were blazing and also a sea of glass, clear as crystal, stretching out before the throne. Now certainly these descriptions remind those who read the Old Testament of the holy place in the Temple. But without going into detail on them, what's the impression being made? There's light everywhere. It's brilliant in its color, it's flashing like lightning, and it's reflecting off everything. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy that God dwells in unapproachable light (I Tim. 6:16).

But the scene in heaven is not only of a throne and light everywhere. John also saw 24 other thrones around the main one. And on those thrones are seated 24 "elders" dressed in white and wearing crowns of gold. Now we can't be certain if these are angels or human beings. And while it is not crucial to the point of the passage, it seems to match other Scripture best to see the "elders" as representing all those who trusted God through the ages. It is probably significant that there were 24 priests who represented the people of God in the temple. So the people of God are present in this throne room in heaven.

But there was more:

"In the center around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings." (4:6b-8)

What John apparently saw was the most awesome light show imaginable—Heaven. The colors were brighter and more varied than anything he had ever seen before.

This is strange to us but when we compare this with a similar vision Ezekial had (recorded in Ezekial 1) we realize that these creatures were representative of all creation.

- The lion representing the wild kingdom.
- The ox representing the domesticated animals.
- The face of a man representing humans, and
- The eagle representing the birds of the air.

The idea of "Four" (as in four creatures) is used many times in the Bible to mean from one end of the earth to the other—the whole earth—the four winds, the four corners of the earth. So we have all God's people present, we have all creation present and when we get to chapter 5 we see millions and millions of angels present as well.

Can you imagine the scene? We saw pictures of the Washington Mall when Promise Keeper's men were rallying there. It looked like every street, sidewalk, and square foot of grass had a person on it—a sea of people. That was only a little over a million—imagine 100's of millions. And what are they doing? Bowing. Bowing to whom? To the One on the throne.

What then becomes your impression of the one on the throne? If the light and sound didn't overpower you, certainly the scene of millions upon millions on their faces captured your attention—whoever is on that throne is awesome indeed! But it is not only what he **sees** that lends to that understanding but what he **hears**:

"Day and night they never stop saying: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is, and is to come.' "
(4:8b)

"Holy" is so different from us, so "other" as to make us uncomfortable because we can't fit it into what we know and can control. God is Holy .

Just by experiencing what he had already experienced John would know this, but now it is explicitly stated. In heaven all the inhabitants are saying what every one of us needs to know and believe about God: He is holy, He is all-powerful and He is eternal. R.C. Sproul in his book, *The Holiness of God*, tells of Rudolf Otto, a German scholar who early in this century tried to study what the holy is. He discovered that people in all cultures believe in the holy. But they also have difficulty describing it. It is something beyond description because it is in part beyond our experience. We know it when we are in the presence of it but we can't define it. Otto called it the *mysterium tremendum*—the awful mystery. By "awful" he didn't mean bad; he meant full of awe. Sproul reminded me of a radio program I loved to listen to as a kid. It was called "The Inner Sanctum." The music and sounds that introduced the program were eerie to say the least. They were of a large and heavy door being opened into a secret place of danger. "Inner Sanctum" means "within the holy."

"Holy" is mysterious and fear producing because it is so unknown. It is so different from us, so "other" as to make us uncomfortable because we can't fit it into what we know and can control. God is Holy—He is so "other," so different, so awe-inspiring that we can't safely categorize Him. "When we meet the Absolute, we know immediately that we are not absolute. When we meet the infinite, we become acutely aware that we are finite. When we meet the eternal, we know we are temporal. To meet God is a powerful study in contrasts."⁴ God compared to us. The "Holy" compared to us.

But the millions in heaven not only described God as "Holy" but also as "The Lord God Almighty." Again and again the term is used in the Bible to describe the unlimited power of God. That power was displayed in the extrication of the Israelites from Egypt. Time after time God controlled the forces of nature to display His power culminating in the Israelites dry-land crossing of the Red Sea. He showed His power in the time of Joshua when without a hand laid to them, the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. He showed His power when Jesus was here in the healing of the sick, the stilling of the stormy sea, and the resurrection of Lazarus. And here in this glimpse into heaven we see the emphasis on the power of God in creation:

"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." (4:11)

Consider the great expanse of eternity before creation, when nothing existed but God: before angels, before the world, before the stars or galaxies, before animals, dinosaurs, before everything except God. God could create things however He chose. He could call into existence a million different kinds of beings or He could create a million of the same. He could make the heavens so vast that no one other than He could ever know the limits of it. He could

make some things so small and so intricate that nothing but the most powerful microscope could ever see it and then be left wondering if there were smaller particles still.

Why planets of different shapes, and stars of different brightness? Why so many colors? Why wind, why rain, why lightning? Why animal diversity, why birds and fish in such variety? Why does one plant flower a dozen times a year and another blossoms only once every hundred years?

Because God willed it! Psalm 135:6 says, *"The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth..."*

He is Holy, He is powerful and He is **Eternal**.

"...who was and is and is to come," they sang! There has never been a time that God wasn't and there will never be a time that God isn't. He will be there no matter what happens to everything else, because He is the uncaused cause and He IS. He called Himself, "I Am"—do you get it?

Lest we miss the point of the statement of the God *"who was, and is and is to come,"* John says in verse 9, *"the one who sits on the throne and who lives **for ever and ever.**"*

And again in verse 10, *"the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives **for ever and ever.**"* Handel in the *Hallelujah Chorus* from the *Messiah* makes the same point gloriously when we are invited to sing the words, "Hallelujah, Hallelujah, for ever and ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah. And he shall reign forever and ever and ever. King of Kings and Lord of Lords—hallelujah." Never ever failing God. Majestic, Sovereign, Lord. That's the God who says to the Christians of the Apostle John's day, "Trust me!" That's the God who says to us, "Trust me!"

Do you believe in the sovereignty of God? Gerald Sittser wrote that following the death of his wife, daughter and mother that night in Idaho, "the issue of God's sovereignty (was) no longer a mere abstraction to" him.⁵ He said that

he had to deal with the idea that maybe God didn't exist. Atheism or at least agnosticism was tempting until he thought it through. He wrote, "However difficult belief in God can sometimes be, belief in atheism is more difficult still... The trail of atheism I followed therefore led me right back to belief in God..." He said he is still bewildered by aspects of the sovereignty of God. He has found no simple explanation for the ways of God. But this was his conclusion of the matter:

"The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth..."

"Loss may call the existence of God into question... In our pain we are tempted to reject God, yet for some reason we hesitate to take that course of action. So we move toward God, then away from him. We wrestle in our souls to believe. Finally we choose God...We decide to be in a relationship with God. And then we discover that God in his sovereignty, has already decided to be in a relationship with us."⁶

There are many reasons to believe in the sovereignty of God but I am convinced unaided human reason alone will never convince us. God has revealed Himself for who He is—He is the eternal, holy, all-powerful, sovereign God. Do you trust Him? Will you? As we face life and as we face the end of the age as described in Revelation—when life unravels, our only anchor will be the sovereignty of God.

End Notes

¹ Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, p. 16-19

² Ibid, p.135

³ Eugene Peterson, *A Distant Thunder*, p. 63

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*

⁵ Sittser, *Ibid*, p. 138

⁶ Ibid

Chapter Eight

Worthy is the Lamb Revelation 5

When the Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation and in particular this 5th chapter, what do you suppose he expected his first readers to do as a result of it? When they read chapter 5 what would be their response? To answer that, remember who was first reading it: These were Christians. What was happening in their lives at that time in history? They lived under constant threat for their livelihood and even their safety. Christians were unwelcome in those cities.

So John wrote to encourage those Christians and all Christians through the ages who would face temptation to give up or give in. Is it worth it to be a Christ-follower? Is the final outcome worth the price paid to get there? And even if Christians persevere, how do they know the outcome will be what they hope for? John wrote to show us the end—how all history would finally come out.

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place."(1:1)

"Write therefore what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later."(1:19)

Clearly the intention of the book is encouragement—real encouragement. To those first century Christians and to us he wrote:

"...To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God."(2:7)

"...He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."(2:11)

"To him who overcomes I will give the right to sit with me on my throne..."(3:21)

In seven different ways to the seven churches he has repeated, "Yes, it is worth it. If you persevere, if you keep on believing, if you remain faithful, you will discover that the end more than makes up for the difficulties of the journey." There is a day coming when it will be obvious that it was worth it all. Paul said it this way in Romans 8:18, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."*

Many through the years have cynically described what I have just said as "Pie in the sky bye and bye!" Their claim is that Christianity holds out an unreal picture of the future duping people into believing something better is out ahead so they must keep the faith.

Is there something better ahead? Do you believe in life after death? Do you believe in heaven? On what authority do you believe in such things? Who says there is a heaven? Why should those Christians in Ephesus and Smyrna and Laodicea believe that if they overcome they would eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God?

In this chapter, John laments the hopelessness of an uncertain future and contrasts that with the certainty and authority of Jesus Christ. The setting in chapter 5 is the same as in chapter 4. God ushered John into the future to see a picture of heaven. He saw what will happen. The first thing that grabs his attention is a throne as we saw in chapter 4. There was someone sitting on the throne but what John described was a powerful display of light. The combination of light and sound that emanated from the throne left no doubt that it was God who was seated there and He was majestic. Around the throne were 24 other thrones on which were seated 24 elders, representative of all the people of God from all the ages. Closer to the throne were 4 living creatures representative of all creation. And

together they were praising God for His sovereignty—His authority over everything and all history. John was reminded that this is the God they trust—the God who reigns supreme.

When we come to chapter 5, we have the same setting but someone new appears on the scene.

"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." (5:1)

***There is a day coming when it will be
obvious that it was worth it all.***

What was written on the scroll? When we come to chapter 6 we will see that the scroll contains information about the end of the age; it represents the end of history.

"And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?' But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside." (5:2-4)

The scroll, as we said, contains the end of the age. The scroll is the last chapter of history. The scroll is the culmination of life as we have known it for thousands of years and the ushering in of the new age—the fullness of the kingdom of God.

And at the beginning of chapter 5, the whole universe and everyone in it was summoned to listen up. The question was posed, "Is there anyone who has the authority to bring life as we know it to an end? Is there anyone out there who has the power to stop history? Anyone who can change the way the human race is going?" And the answer was, "No one! No one could do anything about it!" When John

realized this, he wept and wept! Why? John was personally acquainted with suffering. He was, as he wrote this book, sitting in a prison on a rock in the Aegean Sea. He knew of the destruction and death being suffered by those he loved. He believed that following Jesus and teaching others to follow Jesus would be worth it but now what does he see? He sees a scroll representing the future and sees that no one has the authority to bring a different future to pass. Must life in the future be nothing more than what life has been in the past? Is it simply life and death, life and death, in a never-ending cycle?

Doesn't history repeatedly reveal the utter failure of people to bring in the paradise they crave? John cries at the very thought that this life is all there is.

John cries because all his life he has believed in the "blessed hope"—that a new world was coming, brought in by Jesus Himself, but now it appears that won't happen. Are we left to our own devices to make this world a better place because this is all there is?

"Men have repeatedly exerted themselves to work out their own salvation and the salvation of the world. Systems of thought, world-systems of philosophy, have been built up by human minds one after another to show the way to true peace and righteousness and to establish an imitation of the kingdom of bliss. But they have all met with utter failure and disaster."¹

How many have tried and failed: Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, Caesar, Charlamagne, Napoleon, Washington/Jefferson, Lenin/Stalin, Mao Tse Tung? Maybe we need a League of Nations, or a United Nations? Maybe we need to restructure the elements of culture by driving out prejudice, redistributing the wealth, and removing

restraint? Doesn't history repeatedly reveal the utter failure of people to bring in the paradise they crave? John cries at the very thought that this life is all there is. The world would keep on revolving, time would continue, injustice and suffering would continue forever if God didn't intervene and put a stop to the whole thing. That the world would never end is a frightening prospect—that justice would never prevail. To think that we would forever be subject to our own inventions and capacities is devastating. 6000 or more years of human history and we are still just as capable of murdering, stealing, raping, and hating each other in this century as in any century in the past.

Will this world never come to an end? Are we condemned to live in this sunrise/sunset for eternity? That would make any thoughtful person weep! Listen to the hopelessness of this age expressed by a N.Y. taxi driver—listen to the despair that knows no future:

Jose Martinez, New York taxi driver wrote: "We're here to die, just live and die. I live driving a cab. I do some fishing, take my girl out, pay taxes, do a little reading and then drop dead. You've got to be strong about it. Life is a big fake. Nobody cares. You're rich or you're poor. You're here, you're gone. You're like the wind. After you're gone, other people come. It's too late to make it better. Everybody's fed up, can't believe nothing no more... People only care about one thing and that's money. We're gonna destroy ourselves, nothing we can do about it. The only cure for the world's illness is nuclear war - wipe everything out and start over... Life is nothing."² That's life without a future. That's life if God doesn't intervene. That's history repeating itself endlessly and that's what we get if we reject God. Steve Turner, an English Journalist, depicts the emptiness of our age, an age that rejects God's picture of the future, in a satirical poem.

"We believe in Marx Freud and Darwin.
We believe everything is OK
as long as you don't hurt anyone,
to the best of your definition of hurt,
and to the best of your knowledge.

"We believe in sex before, during and after marriage.
We believe in the therapy of sin.
We believe adultery is fun.
We believe sodomy's OK.
We believe that taboos are taboo.

"We believe everything's getting better
despite evidence to the contrary.
The evidence is investigated
and you can prove anything with evidence.

"We believe there's something to horoscopes,
UFOs and bent spoons;
Jesus was a good man just like Buddha, Mohammed, and
ourselves.
He was a good moral teacher although we think
His good morals were bad.

"We believe that all religions are basically the same -
at least the one that we read was.
They all believe in love and goodness.
They only differ on matters of creation, sin, heaven, hell,
God and salvation.

"We believe that after death comes nothing
Because when you ask the dead what happens
They say nothing.
If death is not the end, if the dead have lied,

then it's compulsory heaven for all.
Excepting perhaps Hitler, Stalin, and Genghis Khan.

"We believe in Masters and Johnson.
What's selected is average.
What's average is normal.
And what's normal is good.

"We believe that man is essentially good.
It's only his behavior that lets him down.
This is the fault of society.
Society is the fault of conditions.
Conditions are the fault of society.

"We believe that each man must find the truth that is right
for him.
Reality will adapt accordingly.
The Universe will readjust.
History will alter.
We believe that there is no absolute truth excepting the
truth
that there is no absolute truth."

This is the postscript to such a world view:

"If chance be the father of all flesh,
disaster is his rainbow in the sky,
and when you hear:
State of Emergency!
Sniper kills ten!
Troops on the rampage!
Whites go looting!
Bomb blasts school!
It is but the sound of man worshipping his maker."³

Why wouldn't John cry? If this is all there is then everyone should cry.

"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 worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals.'" (5:5)

Wait a minute, John. Stop crying! Don't despair, thinking all is lost and all is hopeless. There is One who is worthy to reveal and usher in the end. There is One who can set history right—who can bring justice.

Who is it? The *"Lion of the tribe of Judah."* Who is that? Jesus! The "Lion" metaphor appears again and again in Scripture symbolizing power and ability to accomplish its will. In Genesis 49:9-10 it was used of one of Jacob's children, Judah, 1500 years before Christ came to earth.

"You are a lion's cub O Judah...Like a lion he crouches...The scepter (the kingdom) will not depart from Judah...until HE comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."

Judah would become the royal family—from this family came the king. And though the kings of Israel came from the family of Judah, they eventually became so corrupt that *"This is what the sovereign Lord says, '...remove the crown... It will not be restored until he comes to whom it rightfully belongs'."* (Ezekiel 21:26-27)

And to whom does that crown rightfully belong? Matthew 1 makes much out of the fact that Jesus, through Mary, was descended from the tribe (family) of Judah. Matthew 2:6, quoting from Micah 5:2, says Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy: *"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah...out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."*

This Lion of Judah, this Jesus in this scene in heaven in the

future, is the Jesus of history who was born of the virgin Mary, who is the Messiah predicted 500 and 1800 years earlier. This is no "Johnny-come-lately"—this is the Messiah.

The one with authority to open the scroll—to usher in the end of the age is also called the "Root of David." If you have ever cut down a tree or a bush and left the stump in the ground you have probably seen a new slender shoot growing up out of the leftover stump-root. That is the imagery here—David, and his father Jesse, may have died but out of their family has come another leader—Jesus. Isaiah 11:1-10 predicted it 200 years after Jesse and David:

***There is One who can set history right—
who can bring justice. Who is it? Jesus!***

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit...In that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him and his place of rest will be glorious..."

God promised David that his descendant would always rule his throne—Jesus is that descendant. Matthew begins his gospel with the words, *"A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the Son of David."* (1:1)

Luke records the angel's words to Mary, *"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you will give him the name Jesus...The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign...forever; his kingdom will never end."* (1:31ff)

The promised Messiah is the only One worthy and capable to take the scroll and open it; He is the only one who can usher in the end of this age and the beginning of the new one.

John goes on to say, *"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as it if*

had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”(5:6)

This is a pivotal point in John’s description of what he sees. John is told by the elder to look at the Lion but when he looks he sees a Lamb! Why the switch? That a lion would have power is obvious but how that power is exercised is what is now emphasized. Jesus triumphed as a Lamb. Shear “lion” power alone would not accomplish the task. What was needed was a kind of power that could only be accomplished by a sacrificial lamb. If there was ever going to be any future for us beyond destruction, something had to be done about sin.

The Kingdom of God could never be ushered in, in its fullness, until the problem of sin was dealt with.

Why is it that for 6000 years of recorded history people have not been able to bring in the paradise on earth they so eagerly seek? Because the root of our problem is not superficial but systemic—the basis of trouble from the beginning has and continues to be the sin and corruption of human nature. Years ago, the Times of London asked in an article, “What’s wrong with the world?” One famous man replied in this succinct and very accurate note: “I am. Yours truly, G.K. Chesterton.” All the effort of every person in the world could not overcome the sin that infects every one of us.

The Kingdom of God could never be ushered in, in its fullness, until the problem of sin was dealt with. And so the Lamb! John the Baptist says, *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* (John 1:29)

And, just as Isaiah predicted 500 years earlier, *“He was*

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oppressed and afflicted yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter..." (Isaiah 53:7)

It was a lamb that was sacrificed and whose blood was put on the doorposts of the Israelite homes to prevent the killing of their firstborn when the angel of death swept through Egypt just before the Israelites were released from Egyptian captivity. And it was a lamb that was sacrificed in the Temple to atone for the sins of the people. And so it is a "Lamb" that is used to depict the authority necessary to bring about the end. And Jesus is that Lamb who dealt with the problem of sin.

There was only one way the kingdom of God was ever going to be established and that was the way of a sacrificial death. If one was found who was able to bear the wrath of God, able to pay the penalty for sin, able to suffer and die not for his own sin but the sins of others, who could satisfy the unchangeable righteousness of God, only that One would be worthy to take the scroll—to bring about the end.

"He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... And they sang a new song. You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth." (5:7-9)

At the center of all history is this event: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no hope for a sinful people apart from this event. The cross is crucial. And that is why the Lamb is praised.

"For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but

with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” (I Peter 1:18-19)

And when the Lion/Lamb, who makes the coming Kingdom possible is revealed, those present worship. They recognize what every Christian through the ages has recognized: we have a future—life as we know it is not endless. History will have a conclusion. Justice will be done. Not sin and death, but God will reign supreme. Death is not the end. The Lamb of God has secured our future. He is worthy. Worthy not only to bring in the fullness of the Kingdom of God but worthy of our endless praise.

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise."

When John wrote this chapter to those Christians in Ephesus and Sardis what did he expect them to do? He expected them to see that Jesus is truly triumphant—that Jesus, the Lamb, has secured the future for those who are His. And they too would worship Him, confident of His grace and power.

End Notes

¹ Herman Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh; An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, p. 171

² Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?*

³ *Ibid*

Chapter Nine

The Seven Seals Revelation 6

Several years ago many of us were appalled when we read of a father throwing his two-month-old son against the wall repeatedly because the baby wouldn't stop crying. We were likewise moved when we saw and read about the 14-year-old boy that brought 5 weapons to school in Kentucky and shot 8 other students in prayer, killing three of them.

When Jesus came to earth the first time He indicated that He came to preach about and bring in the Kingdom of God. It is God's rightful rule over the world:

- It is justice and peace and love prevailing in this world.
- It is the end of hatred, envy, and anger.
- It is caring, and giving, and enjoying each other.
- It is the Kingdom of God!
- It's a world **very** different from this one.

And when Jesus came He said, "*Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is near.*" He said, "*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.*" In other words the kingdom of God will spread through or permeate the whole world.

Jesus' first followers certainly had visions of grandeur in mind when they assumed that Jesus had come as the Messiah to overthrow the Roman rulers and establish God's kingdom on earth right then. Jesus talked about His death but His disciples didn't want to hear that; they wanted to

hear about winning. It was not uncommon for them to ask Jesus, "Okay, when will the end of the age come?" "When will the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven be reality and not just promise?" By the time John wrote the Book of Revelation to the seven churches in Turkey, Jesus had been physically gone for nearly 50 years. Certainly there were some among them who wondered when the end that Jesus promised would come to pass. When would the Kingdom of God be a full reality and not just anticipation? When would goodness and righteousness rule instead of these ungodly, unjust and immoral Caesars? Because time would pass, the Apostle Peter predicted what some would say:

"In the last days scoffers will come... They will say, Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." (2 Peter 3:3)

Now nearly 2000 years later the scoffers are still scoffing and we too are still wondering: "When is the end going to come?" It doesn't look to us as if the Kingdom of God is coming. It doesn't appear to us as if the Kingdom of heaven is winning. On the contrary, when we hear about 2 month-old babies being killed and teenagers being shot as they pray, it seems that evil is still as strong and prevalent as ever. Anne Dillard in her book, *Holy the Firm*, put the question and even the frustration quite succinctly: "What in the Sam Hill is going on here anyway?" God, through the Apostle John, wrote the book of Revelation to answer that question.

We know about Jesus' first coming (that's what Christmas is all about) and the latter chapters of Revelation tell us about His second coming but how do the already 2000 years of history fit in between? Chapter 6 of Revelation addresses that issue.

"I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice

like thunder, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

"When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, 'Come!' Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword.

"When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!'

"When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?' Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars

in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"

Most people have heard of the Book of Revelation. Some have even tried reading it. One thing common to many of us who read it is the question: When do these things happen? I wish for you to look at a time-line in Appendix B. On it I placed the events of Revelation, noting in particular where chapter 6 fits.

I want you to think with me about yet one more issue before we look at chapter 6 more closely. As we have already seen, chapter 6 refers to "seven seals." The seals are on the scroll/book. These seals were evidently like those wax spots we might put on a fancy envelope to seal it. Seals in those days, like our day, often were imprinted with a signet ring to indicate who sealed the letter or in this case, the scroll. When we read chapter 6, we quickly note that when some of the seals are opened there follows a description of violence and suffering on the earth: conquest, bloodshed, economic difficulty, and death.

Those of you familiar at all with this book know that there are **seven seals** in all and that later in the book are **seven trumpets** of judgment (8:2) and still later are **seven bowls** of judgment (15:1). The structure of the rest of the book is built around these 21 seals, trumpets and bowls. What is this about seals, trumpets and bowls? A simple way to understand this is to think of seals as being opened to

reveal something, trumpets announcing something and bowls as containing something that is poured out on the earth.

When we look at the seals now and the trumpets later, we will notice that the 7th seal and the 7th trumpet are not actually any event at all but are an introduction to the next set of judgments. So that there are not 7 “seal” events but there are 6 with the 7th actually being all 7 “trumpet” events. And the 7th “trumpet” event is actually all 7 “bowl” events.

***One thing common to many of us who read Revelation is the question:
When do these things happen?***

With that background and overview I want us now to come back to chapter 6 specifically. As I have already said, chapter 6 demonstrates the connection between the past and the future. I want us to start with the 6th seal in the last part of the chapter because of the uniqueness of it in comparison to the first five seals.

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?'" (6:12-17)

First of all I want you to notice that we finished the chapter

and there was no 7th seal. We don't find it until chapter 8 and then we will see that the 7th seal is actually, as I indicated earlier, a reference to the next set of events—the 7 trumpets. But looking at this 6th seal we find that it is decidedly different from the first five. The language describes a cataclysmic time that is far more severe than any of the first five seals, as we will see in a minute. Along with many others, I think that when John gets to the 6th seal, in contrast to the first five seals; he sees into the future—he sees the great tribulation that is yet to come. This 6th seal is a forecast, a preview of what is yet to come. It is a time when even the physical world will be thrown into convulsions—nothing will be stable; the earth will shake, the mountains will erupt, islands will submerge, the skies will be dramatically different and people's hearts will

People's hearts will fail as they realize that it is true: God has come in final judgment. This 6th seal then is a brief description of the great tribulation.

fail as they realize that it is true: God has come in final judgment. This 6th seal then is a brief description of the great tribulation.

But while the 6th seal is a look into that future tribulation, the first five seals are a description of this present age. Let me repeat, the first 5 seals don't describe the great tribulation—they describe the time **before** the great tribulation. When the Christians of John's day first read this letter they would have had right to think these first five seals were describing their day. When Christians of John Calvin's day read this letter they would have been right in thinking it was describing their day. When we read it today we have even more reason to think it is describing our day. But we don't know the day or the hour. These are the signs

that the end is coming.

And what are these signs? What does Jesus here show John that helps make sense of the seeming dominance and invincibility of evil?

"I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, 'Come!' I looked and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest."
(6:1,2)

This is the first of four horses and riders that appear: the "four horsemen of the apocalypse," as they are sometimes called. In chapter 5, we already saw that the "Lamb" who opens the seals is the resurrected, ascended and reigning Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy to initiate the ending of the world. In chapter 4 we saw that the four living creatures represent all creation. As there is probably no significance as to why one of those creatures does the calling out, our focus is on what John sees. Even though there are similarities between this horse and rider and Jesus on a white horse in chapter 19, there are more reasons to understand that this rider is not Jesus but instead is a representation of evil and destruction on the earth. The weapons are different, the crowns are different and most importantly, the context is different. This horse and rider, goes out to destroy. I, along with others, see this horse as symbolic of warfare. He has a bow for war and he goes out to conquer.

While war has always been present through all of human history, consider our more current history. Billy Graham wrote, "The post-cold war stockpiles of nuclear weapons still give mankind the power to destroy the earth seventeen times over in flames reaching 130 million degrees...The number of third world nations with dreams of glory constantly seems to be growing. There are several military

dictators who would think nothing of lobbing a nuclear missile into Tel Aviv or Jerusalem if they had the capacity...Historians tells us that the world has seen more than four thousand wars during the last five thousand years most of them lasting for years at a time...We know that over 60 million people died in the two world wars of the first half of this century."¹

***The mission of this rider is to remove
peace from the earth:
people turning on each other.***

In August 1991, "the Journal of the American Medical Association published a compelling study of death in war which reported among other things the estimated average annual deaths from war over the past four centuries. The researchers found that the average annual death rate from war in the seventeenth century was 9,500. The yearly average was 15,000 in the eighteenth century, 13,000 in the nineteenth century and an enormous 458,000 per year in the twentieth century...so far."²

Even if we can't tell if the number of wars is increasing, we can be certain that the destructive power of them is rapidly increasing. Jesus says this is a sign that the end is certain!

Internal War

Then we come to the second horse and rider:

"When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, 'Come!' Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him was given a large sword."(6:3,4)

If the white horse and rider depicted invasion from an outside power then the red horse and rider depict warfare

within—internecine warfare—brother against brother. The mission of this rider is to remove peace from the earth: people turning on each other.

Zech. 14:13 says, "And on that day a great panic from the Lord shall fall on them, so that each will lay hold on the hand of his fellow, and the hand of the one will be raised against the hand of the other."

In this time rebellion and civil disorder reign. Again it is noteworthy to see how much civil war is raging across our world. Consider Vietnam, Cambodia, Uganda, Rwanda, Zaire, Algeria, Ireland, and the list goes on. Yes, there has always been brother rising against brother but Jesus says here in Revelation that internal war is a sign the end is certain.

Economic Hardship

Look at the third horse and rider:

"When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' I looked and there before me was a black horse. Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures saying, 'A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine.'" (6:5,6)

This horse is black and with its rider it represents **economic hardship**. The rider held a scale for weighing and then selling food. But notice the food was so expensive people could barely live. A man would work the entire day and earn no more than his own bread whether a rich man's food (wheat) or a poor man's food (barley). It's called living at a subsistence level or worse. Things would be 10-12 times more expensive than they should be. Years ago singer/songwriter Larry Norman put it this way: "A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold." When militaries march and

civil war breaks out, famine often results.

Someone wrote, "Here they come: the stick children with their flat unseeing stares. Their knee sockets are so large, and their calves are so thin that you wonder how they can manage to walk. They are too weak to sweep away the flies that have settled on their mouths and nostrils. They can only hold their bowls out toward the television cameras."³ This scene is not from the 70's but from East Africa today. A World Press report a couple of years ago

***For years agronomists and agriculturists
have been saying that we have the
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why hasn't it happened?
Because the four horsemen of the
apocalypse are loose on the earth.***

was titled, "The Four Horsemen are here to stay." Imagine going from an income of \$35,000 to \$3500 instantly. For years agronomists and agriculturists have been saying that we have the technology and land to eliminate hunger—why hasn't it happened? Because the four horsemen of the apocalypse are loose on the earth.

Death

See the next horse:

"When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the fourth living creature say, 'Come!' I looked and there before me was a pale horse. Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague and by the wild beasts of the earth." (6:7,8)

The fourth horse is a natural result of the actions of the first three horses. Death comes from the war, the strife,

and the famine that increasingly plagues the earth. It is worth noting that death is given power over one fourth of the earth to kill. When we come to the trumpets we will notice that death is given power over one third of the world, obviously a greater percentage. And when we come to the third set of judgments we will see that death is given no limitation at all. What the one fourth means is that many will die but not as many as in the great judgments yet to come.

One author writes, "Here is death's record of achievement: 50 million deaths every year. (in 10 years that's ½ billion) Every year a million people die from man-made disasters; 80,000 die from earthquakes, and 10,000 from floods. Each day a shocking 25,000 die from pollution alone. In the U.S. 50,000 people die annually in traffic accidents; 11,000 die from falls; Worldwide there are 5 million malaria deaths per year and 3 million from tuberculosis; 2.8 million children die annually from vaccine-preventable diseases, while infectious diseases kill 4 million un-immunized children. There are 5 million diarrhea deaths by children under age 5; 4 million die of pneumonia. We are told there are potentially 60 million HIV/AIDS carriers with 3 million per year dying. Add to these the estimated 16.8 million who die from parasitic diseases, 13.3 million from circulatory disease, 4.3 millions cancer deaths, 2.6 million tobacco-related deaths and 401,000 suicides."⁴

Yes, death is loose on the earth.

Martyrs

And then the Lamb opened the 5th seal:

"When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, 'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and

true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.”(6:9-11)

Who are these “souls”? These are God’s people who have been killed for their faith in Christ. In the opening of her recent book on the persecution of Christians Nina Shea writes, “Millions of American Christians pray in their churches each week, oblivious to the fact that Christians in many parts of the world suffer brutal torture, arrest, imprisonment, and even death—their homes and communities laid waste—for no other reason than that they are Christians. The shocking, untold story of our time is that more Christians have died this century simply for being Christians than the first nineteen centuries after the birth of Christ.”⁵

Why under the altar? Under the altar was where the basin was placed which collected the blood of the sacrifices. This then is a vivid way of describing that they were martyred for their faith. They were just like Paul’s description of himself: *“I am already on the point of being sacrificed (dying).”* (2 Tim 4:6)

Every believer is to take up his cross and follow Jesus—to be willing to suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ. To become a Christian is to make that commitment. Whether we are actually killed is another matter but we are ready to be killed—we have made that commitment in following Christ.

These souls under the altar are Christ-followers who had died because of their commitment to Christ. They are martyrs. This great company of believers calls out to the Lord, “How long until the end?” And the Lord says there are yet more who will die for their faith—the end won’t come until that happens. It may not be happening in our country

yet but martyrdom is increasing around the world. How long before God says, "Enough!" In a few short verses John described this present age and then, as we saw earlier in the 6th seal, very briefly described the great tribulation yet to come.

Look at Mark 13 to see another description of the period of the seals:

"Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to be fulfilled?" (13:4)

What Jesus describes next is the same as He describes in Revelation as the time of the first five "seals." See the similarity of language:

"When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains. You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved..." (Mark 13:7ff)

Jesus goes on to say what, in Revelation, is described in the 6th seal: A time of intense Tribulation—the great tribulation:

"(Then) will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now—and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect (God's people), he has shortened them..." (Mark

13:19ff)

Then, just as in the 6th seal and in the trumpets and bowls, there is a great cataclysmic upheaval of the physical universe just before Christ comes again:

"But in those days following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."(Mark 13:24ff)

When will this happen?

"No one knows about that day or hour... Be on guard. Be alert. You do not know when that time will come...What I say to you I say to everyone: Watch!"(Mark 13:32ff)

But if these signs have been evident for nearly 2000 years, how do they help us detect that the end is approaching? Note the difference between what we naturally look for (dates and times) and what Jesus emphasizes (preparation and certainty). When Jesus describes symbolically what this present age will be like He is not talking about the **nearness** of the end chronologically—that is not His emphasis. He is emphasizing the **certainty** of the end! We want to know timing and Jesus wants to know we are prepared. We want dates and Jesus wants steadfastness.

I wish I had time to demonstrate this to you but please look at it yourself: almost every time the Bible discusses the end of the age it is not for the purpose of predicting the time but for the purpose of encouraging God's people to be prepared and to anticipate the future. The description of the end times is not very positive in that war, famine, and death will be even more prominent than now. But for the believer, all that turmoil only serves to confirm the future—Jesus is coming! The evidence that could drive unbelievers to despair leads believers to say, "even so come Lord Jesus" not out of a defeatist attitude but precisely the

opposite: victory—Jesus is coming! The same evidence elicits two opposite responses in unbelievers and believers. I don't mean we are happy for the difficulties on the earth but we do see in them the harbinger of victory. Jesus said it this way in Luke 21:28, "*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*"

What does Chapter 6 communicate? Yes, evil appears to reign and to be sure, evil does devastate people and God's world. But is that the way it will always be? No. Chapter 6 summarizes history to date—evil appears to win but a new day is coming. Will you believe Him?

End Notes

¹ Billy Graham, *The Coming Storm*, p. 180-81

² Source unknown

³ Source unknown

⁴ Graham, *Ibid*, p. 226-7

⁵ Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den*, p. 1

Chapter Ten

Secure and Satisfied Revelation 7

"After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.

"Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea:

Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.'

*Then I heard the number of those who were sealed:
144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.*

*From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,
from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,
from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,
from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.*

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and

were holding palm branches in their hands.

And they cried out in a loud voice:

'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²saying: 'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'

Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?'

I answered, 'Sir, you know.' And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

Therefore, 'they are before the throne of God serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.' "(Rev. 7)

The Bible teaches us there is a beginning and an end to history. It speaks of God creating the world and it speaks of God ending the world as we know it.

(See appendix B for timeline)

After describing the "Now" period of time with the symbolic four horses, the Apostle John, as we saw earlier, gave us a preview of that time to come:

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of

goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?'"
(Revelation 6:12-17)

The Bible teaches us there is a beginning and an end to history. It speaks of God creating the world and it speaks of God ending the world as we know it.

That last question forms the reason for chapter 7: in such a time of destruction, "Who can stand?" "Who can survive it?"

The symbolic language of 6:12-17 describes a time that is yet to come when God will shake this world in judgment. In the text printed above it is called "the great day of God's wrath." In chapter 7, it is called the great tribulation. Down through the centuries prophets of God predicted a time was coming when God would pour His wrath out on this world. 600 years before Jesus came to earth, Daniel prophesied of this coming tribulation—a time of great stress and desolation on the earth. Here's the way Jesus spoke of it when He was here:

"When you see 'the abomination that causes desolation' standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down or enter the house to take anything out. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in

those days. Pray that this will not take place in winter, because those will be days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world, until now – and never to be equaled again. If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive...’But in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.’ ”(Mark 13:14-25)

John will tell us who can stand! God gives him two visions that are meant to give God's people great encouragement and confidence.

Revelation 8 and following describes something of what that time will be like.

"The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast...The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God...but they refused to repent...The fifth angel poured out his bowl (and the world) was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores but they refused to repent of what they had done..."(16:2ff)

Nearly two-thirds of the book of Revelation is a description of that dreadful time of God's wrath just before the coming again of Jesus. In fact, so intense is this period of destruction, upheaval, and death that Jesus said, as we saw a minute ago that if that period of time wasn't kept short no one would survive.

But notice that before that time of intense destruction, calamity, and death on the earth is fully described, John, at

Jesus' instruction, inserts chapter 7—an interlude. This is something Jesus wants His people to know before He describes more fully those terrible days to come. If you were headed into this great tribulation what would you want to know? If the world is to socially and physically come unraveled in the ways the Bible describes the tribulation, then how can anyone make it? Or to again put it in the words of the end of chapter 6: *"The great day of God's wrath has come, and who can stand?"*

John will tell us who can stand! John knew the Christians to whom he was writing were faced daily with living in cities where Christians were unwelcome. John knew that some generation, maybe his, maybe ours, would live in that great tribulation to come. How could they remain faithful when everything would be falling apart? For that matter how do people today, even before the great tribulation, remain faithful when their world falls apart? What about Christians who this very day are imprisoned, tortured and often killed for their faith in Christ in countries like North Korea, China, Algeria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other places?

While I first noted some of the more severe forms of one's world falling apart, what about those whose worlds are falling apart through illness, disintegrating families, or financial ruin? How do they make it? How do they remain faithful to God? Before Jesus shows John a fuller description of the terrible conditions that will prevail on earth during the great tribulation, He gives him two visions that are meant to give God's people great encouragement and confidence:

7:1-8 is the first vision—*"After this I saw..."*

7:9-17 is the second vision—*"After this I looked and there before me was..."*

These two visions give us mental pictures of two unshakable truths God gives His people who face

tribulation—either the kind that people face now or the great tribulation to come. The first vision is of God’s protection and the second is of God’s paradise.

Before we look at the first vision, I need for us to be reminded of the kind of literature we are reading. It is called apocalyptic literature. The word “apocalypse” means to reveal, to uncover. But that kind of literature, whether in the Bible or in other secular writings, uses symbolism to communicate the ideas intended. The word pictures created would often be exaggerated, even bizarre, collections of creatures and events that together give an impression.

What is important to remember about this kind of literature is that we don’t take the details in a woodenly literal way but we attempt to understand what the picture is intending to communicate.

God’s Protection

Read to the first vision again:

"After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 'Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.' Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel." (7:1-4)

Four angels are said to have power over a wind that will harm the earth but they are told to wait until a “seal,” a mark, is placed on the foreheads of God’s people. What do the angels and wind symbolize? Other places in Revelation and in other apocalyptic literature, **angels** are portrayed as

being in charge of certain forces of nature—water, fire, wind, etc. Wind in particular is used sometimes in Scripture as symbolic of the judgment of God.

At this point in the book of Revelation, it seems quite evident that the symbolism is meant to indicate that the tribulation that is to come on the earth won't come until God has somehow marked those who belong to Him. The vision describes a "seal" or a mark being placed on the foreheads of those who belong to God.

These two visions give us mental pictures of two unshakable truths that God gives His people who face tribulation. The first vision is of God's protection and the second is of God's paradise.

We'll come to this "seal" or mark in a minute but first let's go back to those who are sealed before the great tribulation begins. The text says they were, *"from all the tribes of Israel."* If this was prose literature such as an Old Testament historical book like Exodus we could reasonably assume that the author is referring to the literal descendants of Jacob—the twelve sons of his who became the heads of the 12 families or tribes of Israel, the Jews. But this is apocalyptic literature, symbolic literature, and so we reasonably ask, who is He referring to? He told us they are the servants of God. I believe strongly that these words "tribes of Israel" refer to all God's people who are alive at the time of the great tribulation, and not just the Jews.

First of all it is common in the New Testament for the church to be referred to in distinctly Old Testament Jewish terms. In Galatians 6:16 Paul calls the church, *"the Israel of God."* Peter refers to all believers (Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians) as the "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation," phrases borrowed right out of the Old

Testament and applied to the church. Paul said in Romans that true Jews are those who are Christ followers. Those and other passages indicate that the church of Jesus Christ, made up of believers of all ethnic backgrounds, is the true Israel. So here in Revelation 7 it would not be out of character at all, to use the phrase “tribes of Israel” when referring to the whole church.

John is using common New Testament language to describe all the people of God when he says the “tribes of Israel”—the church.

Secondly, when we come to Revelation 9, we will see that the wrath of God will fall on all people except those who have the “seal” of God on their foreheads. Are we to believe that only Jewish Christians will be spared the trouble? Would not the context indicate that all God’s servants are spared? If the “sealed” ones in chapter 9 are all God’s people then they must be so in chapter 7 as well.

Thirdly, when we come to chapter 14 we find the 144,000 again. This time they are standing with the Lamb—Christ. Two things I want you to note about them—they have **the name of God written** on them and they **follow the Lamb wherever He goes**. If you go back to Revelation 2 and 3 when John was writing to all Christians (Jewish and Gentile) in the churches in Turkey he said, *“To him who overcomes I will write on him the name of my God.”* It is not only Jewish Christians who are given the name of God but also all Christians. And when we look at chapter 7 and the description of all who stand before the throne of God, it specifies that this group includes all tribes, nations, and languages—every Christian and it says, *“the Lamb...will be their shepherd.”* This is the same shepherd and same people as the 144,000. For these reasons it is best to

assume that John is using common New Testament language to describe **all the people of God** when he says the “tribes of Israel”—the church.

Why is there a specific reference to 144,000? I think the best explanation is that the number is meant to indicate completeness and inclusiveness. The number of tribes (12) is squared and then multiplied by 1000. The number indicates a large number and a complete number. The tribes are then mentioned by name (Judah, Reuben, Gad, etc.) with 12,000 for each. But when you notice that not all the tribes are mentioned (Dan is missing), and one tribe is represented twice (Joseph and Manasseh) we have another clue that literalness is not expected here. Again I believe John is using numbers, symbolically, in a very common biblical way to convey the idea that **all** God’s people, every one of them (all Jewish Christians and all Gentile Christians), have been sealed or marked by God.¹

Now, knowing who is being sealed (all God’s servants) and when they are sealed (before the Tribulation comes), we are ready to get to the most important matter—what does this sealing mean? We’ve already seen this word “seal” used in chapter 6. And we know that to “seal” something in John’s day as in ours usually meant to put a sign of some kind on the item to indicate ownership or security. A book or letter that was sealed was not to be opened by just anyone. The seal usually was a mark in wax or ink with a signet ring indicating the authority of the one doing the sealing. And most importantly, the seal indicates to whom the sealed person or thing belongs. In Revelation 13 we will see that a mark (666) is placed on the forehead or hand of everyone who belongs to the evil one.

This is not the first time in the New Testament we have heard about this seal on God’s people. 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 says, *“Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on*

us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come."

And, Ephesians 1:13 says, *"And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit."*

When we become a Christian we are given the Holy Spirit of God to live in our spirits—His very presence is God's seal, God's mark, and God's guarantee that we belong to God. The "seal" or the mark is not a literal mark or stamp but is God's Spirit in us. Jesus promised His disciples, when they were distressed over His talk of His death and the coming difficulty, that... *"The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you...Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*

The Holy Spirit's presence is the seal, the guarantee, and the assurance that we belong to Christ—even when Jesus is not physically here.

The whole point of the vision is to declare to God's people again that even though they are facing Tribulation, even though it is true that the world will fall apart, God protects them. They belong to Him—they have His mark on them. The sealing of them clearly doesn't mean they will be protected from physical harm, for many if not most of God's people are killed during the great tribulation. *"As many as should not worship the image of the beast should be killed."* (13:15)

- Christians will still fight the awful battle of death.
- Christians will still experience the ravages of war, civil and international.
- Christians will still suffer from famine in many places

in the world.

- And most of all, Christians will suffer for their faith.

But they are protected from the eternal consequences that will befall the others. These "sealed" ones will come out the other side, victors.

When we read in 9:4 of the trumpet judgments during the Tribulation, we see that when the judgments of God begin to fall on people, those with the mark of God are spared. God's judgment will not fall on them. They may suffer persecution, they may suffer indirectly from all that is

The Holy Spirit's presence is the seal, the guarantee, and the assurance that we belong to Christ—even when Jesus is not physically here.

happening in the Tribulation but they can even pass through the valley of the shadow of death fearing no evil because they belong to God. And how can they have such confidence that they can even go through Tribulation and not lose their faith? Because it is God who has promised to see them and us through. Jesus said,

"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."
(John 10:27-30)

Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6, *"I am confident of this very thing that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

In John 17, Jesus said that He prays for us and what Jesus prays for, He receives!

Charles Wesley wrote:

*"See where before the throne he stands,
And pours the all-prevailing prayer
Points to His side, and lifts his hands,
And shows that I am graven there."*

His name is on our foreheads and our names are on his nail pierced hands. No matter what the future holds, no matter how dark it gets, if we have God to save us through Jesus, His mark is on us. We belong to God. We don't always feel that way, but it is true; God has spoken and we belong to Him. Jonathan Shairst captured the contrast between feelings and fact well in these words:

***We want Christians who are convinced of
God's faithfulness so that no matter what
comes their way they know they are in
God's hands and He won't fail them.***

*"Twixt gleams of joy and clouds of doubt
Our feelings come and go;
Our best estate is tossed about
In ceaseless ebb and flow.
No mood of feeling, form of thought,
Is constant for a day;
But Thou O Lord, Thou changest not;
The same Thou art always.*

*I grasp Thy strength, make it mine own,
My heart with peace is blest;
I lose my hold, and then comes down
Darkness, and cold unrest.
Let me no more my comfort draw
From my frail hold of Thee,
In this alone rejoice with awe -*

Thy mighty grasp of me."²

Some believe that Christians won't go through the great Tribulation. I disagree. But whether they do or don't is not the biggest issue. What we don't want are Christians whose faith can't take tribulation. We want Christians who are convinced of God's faithfulness so that no matter what comes their way they know they are in God's hands and He won't fail them.

God's Paradise

I go on quickly and briefly to the second vision.

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'

"Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?'

"I answered, 'Sir, you know.'

"And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again

will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

We will deal with this more fully when we come to chapters 21 and 22, but notice here that John shows his readers a picture of the paradise of God that is to come. This time the people of God are described **not** in Old Testament terms of tribes of Israel but in New Testament terms of people from every nation, tribe, people and language. They are standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb. They are in the presence of God, Himself and they are worshipping Him.

Who are these people?

“...These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”(7:14)

The very same people who were pictured in the first part of the chapter as anticipating the tribulation are here now pictured after the tribulation. Before, they were on earth about to head into that terrible time of trouble and John reminds them they are “sealed” by God. Here they are in God’s presence and the trouble is over.

They are wearing white robes symbolic of purity and holiness, fit for God’s presence. How did they get white? They were washed in the blood of Christ. That is very symbolic language to indicate the forgiveness of sins that comes by grace through faith in Jesus’ death in our place. He who knew no sin, took our sins on Himself and satisfied divine justice by taking our punishment. And where are they in this vision? *“They are before the throne of God...”* The evil of chapter 6 seemed so dominating. This world in which we live gives us no cause for hope. The evil of chapters 8-18 **that will come** on this earth in

unprecedented ways during the tribulation will be nearly overwhelming. But in the latter part of chapter 7 Jesus gives John a look into eternity—a peek into the future. This world and the Tribulation are not the end of the story.

Just before the darkest hours of Jesus' life on earth, just before His own death and just before His disciples would be pursued and many of them killed, Jesus took them to the mountain where they saw what we call the "transfiguration"—they saw Jesus in all His glory along with Moses and Elijah. Jesus gave them a glimpse of the future to encourage their minds and hearts for what was to come. So here, Jesus gives John's first readers, and us a glimpse into the future. When we compare Revelation 21 and 22 with this passage we discover that John here is describing the new earth. When God ushers in eternity, He will completely renovate this earth creating a new earth on which God's people will forever live.

People from every nation, tribe, people and language are standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb. They are in the presence of God, Himself and they are worshipping Him.

What will that eternal heaven on the new earth be like? Our imaginations are too weak to grasp this wholly. The Bible says, *"Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and neither has it entered into the heart of people what God has prepared for them that love him."*

This present earth is beautiful, too beautiful to take in sometimes, but yet, according to the Apostle Peter the new earth will make this present earth pale in comparison. There will be such beauty that our minds at present cannot comprehend it.

What will heaven on the new earth be like? In this new

place only that which is just and right will take place. John in Revelation 21 writes, *"Nothing impure will ever enter it. Nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful."*

The sins of person against person to which we are so prone now will be gone. No slander, gossip, defaming, lying, cheating, abusing, or hurting—it will all be gone. All injustice so many have suffered will be gone. The wrong will be made right.

What will that heaven on the new earth be like? Most of all it will be the place where Jesus is!

What will that heaven on the new earth be like? In Revelation 7 and 21, we are told God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more hunger or thirst or death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. Joni Erickson Tada, at a speaking engagement in Philadelphia, told her story of the diving accident that left her a quadriplegic. Near the end of her testimony she said something about heaven. "She said that when she got to heaven, the first thing she wanted to do was to ask Jesus for a dance. Then from her wheelchair she sang about this hope" this great future that is hers on the new earth.³

What will that heaven on the new earth be like? Most of all it will be the place where Jesus is! *"The Lamb will be their shepherd."* Many of you know the story of John Newton the author of Amazing Grace, the slave trader who was saved by Jesus.

In a letter, he wrote of what he looked forward to most in heaven: *"I hope one day to be all ear, all heart, all tongue; when I shall see the Redeemer as he is, I shall be like him. This will be heaven indeed, to behold his glory without a veil over my eyes, to rejoice in his love without a cloud,*

and to sing his praises without a jarring or wandering note, forever."⁴ Music and singing will be one of the great occupations of heaven. Imagine the music and lyrics that most inspire you; imagine the melodies that most speak of your feelings, your love and your worship of the Lord. Having imagined as best you can, now consider that you can't come close to the experience of praise and music that will be ours in that heaven on the new earth. That's the eternity waiting for those who are sealed by Almighty God.

How about you? Do you know the security of being chosen by God—of having His seal on you? Do you know that the paradise of God is your destiny? That is the whole point of the gospel: to inform people that it is possible to belong to God now and forever. This life with its trouble is not all there is. Death is not the end. There is eternal separation from God to shun and paradise with Him to gain. First listen to Jesus' words:

"For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only son. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."(John 3:16,17)

If you trust Him, you need not fear the future; you need not fear the tribulation you face today and you need not fear the great tribulation. If you trust Him, you need not fear dying or death—God's mark is on you and you belong to Him. Your future is secure; you will be with Him in paradise.

End Notes

¹ Source unknown.

² John Campbell, Shairp in Sinclair Ferguson, *Know Your Christian Life; A Theological Introduction*, p. 176

³ *Ibid*, p. 188

Chapter Eleven

Justice with Mercy Revelation 8-9

There is an almost universal fascination with knowing the future. Where is this world headed? If there is an end to this world as we know it, what then? The December, 1997 cover story of *U.S. News and World Report* reported on the subject of prophecy and people's belief in the end times. A U.S. News poll taken in November of that same year indicated that 66% of Americans believe Jesus will return to earth. A professor at the University of Oregon says Americans are attracted to the "promise that human existence and history have purpose and that an imminent golden age will soon put an end to evil and injustice."¹ Books like, *The Bible Code*, based on the prophecies of Nostradamus, are widely read. Movies like *Contact* and *The Seventh Sign* draw viewers to ponder the end.

In the midst of a great deal of confusion and speculation, God has spoken in the Bible to tell us what to expect—to tell us what we need to know about how history will come to a close. While many portions of Scripture speak to the issue of the end times, the book of Revelation is the most extensive treatment of the subject. The Eighth and Ninth chapters offer vivid descriptions of earth-shaking events that will happen just before Jesus comes—events that could begin happening at any moment. Before reading this somewhat lengthy text, I want to remind you of the context—the setting for what we will read.

Those of you familiar at all with the book of Revelation know that there are three sets of seven descriptions of the events marking the end of the age: seven seals, seven trumpets and then seven bowls. Seals, trumpets and bowls

may sound odd to you. A simple way to understand this is to think of seals as being unsealed to reveal something, trumpets as being blown to announce something and bowls as containers that pour something out on the earth. The "seals" in chapter 6 (with the exception of the 6th seal) describe this present time, leading up to the tribulation. The trumpets and bowls describe the tribulation period itself. So what we are going to read next is the first full description of what it will be like in that period of intense turmoil and destruction called the great tribulation just before Jesus comes again. We saw a brief description of it in Chapter 6 with the opening of the 6th seal but that was a preview; now we have the fuller description of what it will be like in that time, a time that could begin at any moment:

A simple way to understand this is to think of seals as being unsealed to reveal something, trumpets as being blown to announce something and bowls as containers that pour something out on the earth.

"When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake.

"Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them. The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up. The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water—the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night. As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: 'Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!'

Chapter Nine

"The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the

sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.

"The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon. The first woe is past; two other woes are yet to come. The sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the horns of the golden altar that is before God. It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. The number of the mounted troops was two hundred million. I heard their number.

"The horses and riders I saw in my vision looked like this: Their breastplates were fiery red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. A third of mankind was killed by the three plagues of fire, smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths. The power of the horses was in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails were like snakes, having heads with which they inflict injury. The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or

walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts."

Can you imagine that? As you read did your imagination attempt to picture what John was seeing? Horses with lions' heads breathing fire, smoke and sulfur? Tails like snakes on the horses with heads on the tails? Locust insects that looked like horses but had what resembled human faces and with long hair and lions' teeth? It rather boggles the mind doesn't it? When will this take place? Just before Jesus comes again.

The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands.

Why does John describe those days with such vividness? What is his point in telling what those days will be like? I think John has two different audiences in mind when he writes these chapters. Like bookends, he puts one audience at each end of the descriptions of the trumpet judgments. Chapter 8 opens with clear reference to those who are believers—Christ-followers who have been praying to God, even crying out to God, over the years.

"The smoke of the incense together with prayers of the saints, went up before God..." (8:4) John draws attention to believers before he describes this terrible time.

Chapter 9 closes with clear reference to those who are unbelievers—those who were unwilling to repent of their sin and turn to Jesus.

"The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands..." (9:20) John draws attention to unbelievers as he closes this description of devastation and death. The Holy Spirit, who superintended the writing of these words through John,

evidently wanted both audiences to see ahead of time what will happen. He wanted a different response from each.

You see if you can determine what response each should have. Let me give you a clue:

- Regarding believers—for what have they been praying throughout the time of injustice and evil that has dominated so much of history?
- Regarding unbelievers—what truths do they desperately need to understand so they will repent and turn to God?

Let's turn our attention now to John's description of those terrible days of the great tribulation.

"When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour." (8:1)

Every indication is that this is a violent storm of some kind the likes of which have never before been experienced on the earth.

Have you heard the expressions "waiting for the other shoe to fall" or "the calm before the storm"? When I was a fairly young boy I remember visiting a school friend for the first time in his home. We were playing in their basement and his mother called him. Much to my surprise, he ignored her. And then she came down the stairs and in a very loud and stern voice said, "Larry, come here!" Just as loudly and sternly he said, "No!" Then silence descended on the room—maybe it was only a fraction of a second but it felt like half an hour. Given my relationship to my mother and father, I thought the world was going to come to an end right then. The silence only heightened the tension.

That's what this silence does in Chapter 8. The sixth seal

had given us a preview of what was coming and now the time has come—the devastating events of the tribulation are about to begin. In his vision, John sees seven angels stand before God and to each of them is given a trumpet. In verse 6 John sees them raise the trumpets to their lips. You can almost feel the tension mount as you anticipate what will happen next.

The First Trumpet

And then it comes: the first angel blows trumpet number one and with that blaring sound comes the first of four disasters of nature:

"The first angel sounded his trumpet and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up and all the green grass was burned up." (8:7)

Every indication is that this is a violent storm of some kind the likes of which have never before been experienced on the earth. In Exodus 9 it is recorded that when Moses tried to convince the Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt God poured out a plague on Egypt the likes of which had never before been experienced in that country—thunder, lightening and hail devastated all the vegetation in the country except in the province of Goshen where God's people lived. I've seen what hail can do to crops and vegetation. I drove through Yellowstone Park following the fires there. Is the "fire" a reference to lightening? And does the lightening start fires all over this earth? Is the "blood" a reference to the color of the rain such as in 1901 in southern Europe when there was a rain storm that was blood-red from fine red sand that blew into the rain as it fell.² It says that one third of the earth is "burned up." When we studied the "seals" in chapter 6 we noted that John refers to one fourth of everything being affected. Here

we see one third, which is more than one fourth but not as extensive as when we get to the “bowls” in chapter 16 when the destruction is complete.

There is no particular reason to take the one third as meaning precisely 33% but it is probably better to take it as a reference to an extensive portion of the trees and vegetation being burned. This is not just an outbreak of a forest fire here and there. This is destruction of such a large portion of the earth that no one can miss its uniqueness. Exactly how it is destroyed I don’t think we can say with certainty but somehow hail, lightening, and fire or their equivalent are involved and what we can know for certain is that the destruction to the flora and fauna of this earth is extensive.

The Second Trumpet

No sooner does the first Trumpet sound then the second one blasts its destruction:

"The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a huge mountain, all ablaze, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea turned into blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed."(8:8-9)

Just as the first plague brought destruction to the land so the second plague brings destruction to the sea. Can we even imagine what this would be like? Somehow the water is fouled making it unfit for many of the fish. Something happens that sinks ships. Does God use some meteor? Does a volcano erupt, the likes of which we have never yet seen? Do many volcanoes erupt? Are oil tankers and other ships all over the world suddenly inundated by water from a tsunami—a tidal wave caused by a meteor? Recently, scientists have projected the kind of damage that would be caused worldwide by a large meteor hitting our oceans—whole cities submerged, entire islands gone, the

suddenness and extent of ship destruction would make the Titanic look insignificant. We don't know but whatever it is it causes unprecedented destruction. John sees what he sees and the result is great destruction that occurs in the oceans and in commercial shipping.

The Third Trumpet

"The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water - the name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter."
(8:10-11)

This is not just an outbreak of a forest fire here and there. This is destruction of such a large portion of the earth that no one can miss its uniqueness.

"Wormwood" means bitter—whatever fell on the earth made much of the fresh water poisonous. Again the similarity to one of the Plagues in Egypt is striking. The first plague in Moses' day was when God turned the waters blood red and they were made undrinkable and many died. So in the tribulation, one third of the waters will be unusable. A star blazing like a torch may mean literally a meteor that falls. However it happens, many die as a result of this natural disaster. Imagine the state of affairs in this world after these events. There have been a number of natural disaster movies made recently and in each case the chaos that reigns is quite graphically imagined. Imagine what it will be like in the great tribulation. A third of the earth is devastated, a third of the oceans are affected, a third of the fresh water is altered and now the skies themselves are affected.

The Fourth Trumpet

"The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of them turned dark. A third of the day was without light, and also a third of the night." (8:12)

Is this a partial eclipse (1/3 of the light gone) or a full eclipse for 1/3 of a day? Or both? It's difficult to tell. But certainly we are reminded of the 9th plague that fell on Egypt when it was total darkness for three days. Imagine complete darkness, no sun, no moon, no stars, no natural light of any kind for 8 hours Jesus said it would be part of what would happen: *"The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light."* (Mark 13) Imagine! Even an eclipse causes quite a stir in the world today. What if it was totally pitch black, no light—the panic would be widespread to say the least.

The angel opens a pit, an Abyss, or in other words, gives permission from God for the creatures of that place to work their evil on the people of the earth.

And then more bad news comes:

"As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: Woe, Woe, Woe to the inhabitants of the earth because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels." (8:13)

The Fifth Trumpet

These next three trumpets herald a disaster worse than the first four.

"Woe, Woe, Woe!" If you thought what preceded was bad, wait until you see what's coming next.

*"The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and the sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those **people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads**. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months..."* (9:1-12 – Emphasis Added)

This time a star falls from the sky but the star is evidently a person—an angel. The angel opens a pit, an Abyss, or in other words, gives permission from God for the creatures of that place to work their evil on the people of the earth. These evil beings are depicted as locusts because throughout the Old Testament this insect, the locust, is a symbol of destruction. Locusts have been seen in concentrations 100 feet deep and up to four miles in length as they sweep in from the skies and do their damage, eating everything.

But these locusts are unique: they are horse-shaped, longhaired, flying locusts with scorpion tails and golden crowns over human faces with lion's teeth. How grotesque!! All of these characteristics combined give us the impression of an evil, powerful, unstoppable plague of misery that spreads out over the people of the world in a plague of misery. The pain people will experience will be so severe they will want to die but they won't be able to, John says. It says the torment will last five months or in other words, some relatively short period of time but long enough.

The Sixth Trumpet

"It said to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, 'Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates.' And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind." (9:14-15)

The fifth trumpet had released unprecedented suffering but this sixth trumpet announces death. John sees a great horde of horses and riders in his vision and they were even more grotesque and terror producing than the locusts: Their breastplates were fire red, dark blue, and yellow as sulfur. The heads of the horses resembled the heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke and sulfur. John reminds us that this is a vision he is having and so we don't take the descriptions as reference to literal horses with lions' heads but we understand they are demonic. These are not God's angels who will move across the world to kill but are demonic forces released by God to show what they have all along wanted to do—destroy everything they could.

They are allowed to kill a third of mankind. This is not the normal millions that die every day in our world but 100's of millions—even up to a couple of billion. Imagine such death occurring all over the world. You've seen pictures of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City following the bomb blast there. We all watched the destruction on 9/11. You've probably seen pictures of Nagasaki or Hiroshima following the A-Bomb explosions toward the end of WWII. Maybe you saw pictures of downtown Sioux Falls South Dakota after the flood in the summer of 1997. Any and all of these give you some idea of the kind of devastation being envisioned by the Apostle John.

Am I exaggerating? Am I sensationalizing it? Whether these are literal locusts and horses or meteors and fire or not it is

impossible to exaggerate the destruction Jesus says will come to this earth in those coming days. I want to come back now to the two audiences I said I believe John had in mind as he wrote this description of those days: the believer and the unbeliever. What response does John expect each to have to what John shows them?

Look first at the unbeliever:

"the rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent... they did not repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts."
(9:20)

These are not God's angels who will move across the world to kill but are demonic forces released by God to show what they have all along wanted to do—destroy everything they could.

When those days of tribulation come—when the world is thrown into the kind of physical chaos described and when millions and millions of people are in unbearable pain, then millions and millions more are killed—when everything Jesus predicted comes true; when the end is obviously coming; when every evidence of God's power and this world's instability has been made apparent, you'd think people would flock to Christ! You'd guess they would get the message and finally run to Jesus for the safety of His grace. But what does the text tell us? They refuse to repent. When we get to the judgments of the bowls in chapter 16 we will see it again—instead of turning to God they will curse God!

Like Pharaoh of Egypt the obvious intervention of God only revealed the growing hardness of people's heart. There are people who think they can know the truth and wait until some later time to respond to it. They know they should

submit to Jesus but they would rather wait a while. They'll quit smoking just before they get cancer. They'll put their seat belt on before the accident. They'll stop playing around with sins just before they get hooked. They'll repent and come to Jesus when they are nearer the end of life. "Fools" are what God calls them, for continuing to reject Jesus only increases hardness. I'm convinced John wants unbelievers to realize that God's warning of the future is that they might repent now before it is too late.

I can trust God. I don't have to try to convince myself that evil doesn't matter, that I just have to get over injustice—that unfair, evil things just happen. I know God will make wrongs right.

What about John's desired response from believers? Look at the beginning of chapter 8. What are pictured there are the prayers of God's people rising to God and then God answering their prayers. Pastor Scotty Smith of Franklin, Tennessee speaks of the day in 1996 when he got a call from a member of his church to come to an associate pastor's house immediately. The family ministries pastor of their church, Don Beasley, had been murdered in his home. As Scotty looked at that body on the garage floor he said he couldn't help but ask, "Lord where are you in the midst of such injustice? This makes no sense. How could you let such a thing happen? Why didn't you intervene?"³ How many times have you wondered where is justice? How many times have you found it almost unbearable to think about what has happened to you or worse yet to someone you love? Can God be both good and all-powerful? What God is doing in these chapters in Revelation is demonstrate to His people that **He has not forgotten**. God is declaring that justice will eventually prevail. Back in the chapter 6 when the 5th seal was opened, we saw the souls of those

who had been killed for their faithfulness to Jesus crying out, *"How long Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"*

In Chapter 8 God declares the answer: It won't be long now. What's the effect? I can trust God. I don't have to try to convince myself that evil doesn't matter, that I just have to get over injustice—that unfair, evil things just happen. They don't just happen—they are the result of sin and sinful people and sin and unrepentant sinners will meet justice one day. Now this is not an attitude of vengeance but an attitude of justice. I know what I do matters—I know God will make wrongs right. I can trust Him. Eugene Peterson wrote, "When we know that delay is not procrastination, that our waiting is not because of someone's indifference, that we have not been forgotten, then the waiting is tolerable."⁴

One other very important note for God's people: Did you notice who is protected while all this destruction and death are taking place? Those who caused terror, torment and death were not allowed to touch anyone except whom? *"Those who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads."* (9:4) Those who belonged to God were protected. This is just what God had declared in Rev. 7:3, *"Do not harm the land and the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."*

The message of Revelation 8 and 9 is two-fold – Justice and Mercy. Justice will ultimately prevail—we can count on God. And mercy is extended even today—will you turn to Jesus now?

End Notes

¹ *U.S. News and World Report*, December 1997, p. 63

² Henry Barclay Swete in Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 185

³ Michael Card and Scotty Smith, *Unveiled Hope*, p. 124

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *A Distant Thunder*, p. 94

Chapter Twelve

A Hope and a Calling Revelation 10-11

In 1998 Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced she was creating a high-level post in the State Department to ensure that concerns about religious liberty around the world were addressed in all aspects of foreign policy. From then on countries that perpetuated religious persecution could face economic sanctions and those that improve their religious tolerance would be rewarded with closer U.S. ties including economic preferences. For Mr. To Dinh Trung of Vietnam that news might have come as hope for some much needed relief. He had been beaten, bound hand and foot, left to lie in the hot Vietnam sun without water until he became delirious.¹ Mr. Trung has been in prison in that country since April of 1995 because he led Bible study groups. Because Vietnam is seeking to normalize relations with the U.S. and because maybe now, after years of lobbying, our government is beginning to recognize the amount of religious persecution taking place around the world, Mr. Trung, his wife and 3 preschool children might get some help.

Imagine living in a place where being a true Christian was illegal and punishable by death. The evidence is overwhelming; there are such places today, as I have reported to you in recent months. But imagine living at a time when in the whole world it was illegal to be a Christian—when there were no agencies lobbying for freedoms, when there were no U.S. or other governments putting pressure on religious persecutors. Imagine living in some of the cities John tells us about at the beginning of the book of Revelation, cities where just being Christian was a crime against the government. How hopeless must

that feel? I wonder what Mr. Dinh Trung feels as he lies in his wretched cell, 2½ years after being incarcerated.

When I listen and watch what is happening in our culture, it is not difficult for me to imagine a day when it would be considered illegal to be a Christ-following Christian. There are increasing signs that the day is coming when the only thing that will not be tolerated are religious convictions; when believing and teaching that Jesus is the only way to God will be considered so dangerous that it will be outlawed. Even now, in this age when every belief is equally legitimate, the exclusive claims of Christianity are subject to ridicule and characterized as dangerous.

The Apostle John was writing to people who knew what it was like to live in the midst of that kind of deadly discrimination. And the Apostle John was writing to generations to come who would likewise live under those conditions. And he was writing to those who, one day, would live in a world that had gone mad in its hatred of Christianity, a period of time called the great tribulation. John believed they would live in it. What does God say to encourage His people who are living in such times? The whole book of Revelation is written for that purpose.

But what do chapters 10 and 11 contribute to this goal? A quick outline of the tribulation might be helpful:

Chapters 8 - 11

7 Trumpets of Judgment

1. Firestorm on earth
2. Chaos in the oceans
3. Fresh waters poisoned
4. Darkness on the earth

Woe 1

5. Demons inflict torture on unbelievers

Woe 2

6. Demons inflict death on unbelievers

Woe 3

7. 7th Trumpet introduced

While the chaos and panic described by the first 6 trumpets is happening in the world during the first part of the tribulation, what are believers doing? What is happening to those who are Christ-followers—Christians? Chapters 10 and 11 answer that, at least in part. The intent is obviously meant to encourage God's people, but you will find the encouragement to be "bitter-sweet." There is good news and bad news in what we will see. But the good news far outweighs the bad.

The Apostle John was writing to people who knew what it was like to live in the midst of deadly discrimination.

I want to start with the bad news. I describe the life of a Christian, especially during the tribulation, as a "hard calling"—a calling to die.

John is looking at the time of the tribulation and he says this:

"I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, 'Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months. And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1260 days (42 months), clothed in sackcloth.' These are the two olive trees and the two lamp stands that stand before

the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and half days men from every people, tribe, language, and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth."

Their calling to testify of Jesus will be met with great resistance and eventually many will be killed and the world will gloat over the apparent destruction of God's people.

In obviously symbolic language, John is describing what the people of God will be doing during this time of tribulation. When John is told to measure the temple, the only way we can understand that is to remember the Old Testament usage of measuring the temple. And we discover in Zechariah, for example, that the measuring indicated God's intention to protect His people. A couple of times already in Revelation we have heard John emphasize this point; when God symbolically put a mark on those who belonged to Him in Chapter 7, we knew it was God's way of saying, "I will take care of you." When in chapter 9 the locusts in the 5th trumpet judgment were **not** given power over any who had God's mark on them, we knew it was God's protection. Now

here again we see God's symbolic way of saying, "You belong to Me and I will protect you."

But what we read next in this chapter doesn't sound like protection to some of us until we understand protection differently. The Temple, the altar, the worshippers, and the holy city of verses 1 and 2 represent God's people. And the Gentiles represent those opposed to God and His church. Here John tells us that the godless forces of this world are going to be given unprecedented power to control this world and persecute God's people, but for a limited amount of time (represented by 42 months or 3½ years). There is no reason for us to define this as precisely 3½ years but we ought to see the number as referring to a very limited period of time.

During the time that this world is dominated by such evil forces, Christians will be witnessing to the person and power of Jesus. There is much debate about who the "two witnesses" are but I believe after studying it, that the "two witnesses" represent the witnessing church. For a period of time during the tribulation the church will have uncommon power to declare the truth of God to this world. Just as during the days of the apostles so maybe John has in mind that during at least a part of the tribulation, the church will have power to heal, do miracles, and even the power to shut down their enemies as Peter did with Annanias and Saphira.

But their calling to testify of Jesus will be met with great resistance and eventually many will be killed and the world will gloat over the apparent destruction of God's people. It says in verse 7 that a *"beast... will attack, overpower and kill them."* When we get to chapter 12 we will see that "beast" again. There it says of him that, *"he was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them."* What we have in chapter 11 is a description of the "hard calling" to be Christ-followers—to be witnesses for

Jesus. I say “hard” because it will be met with resistance and even death.

That shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus had already said to the churches in chapters 2 and 3:

“I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for 10 days (again, a limited time). Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

When Jesus was describing the end of the age He said this:

“...they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to...prisons...and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in you being witnesses to them...You will be betrayed even by relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.” (Luke 21)

If those words are true in this present age, how much more true will they be during the tribulation? Testifying to the person and power of Jesus—telling people about God’s grace—will be a “hard calling” in those days, resulting in the death of some, and maybe even many.

But, John quickly points out, while the calling is hard, the conclusion of the matter is so very good. Look at Revelation 11:11-12,

“But after three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them (the witnesses), and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, ‘Come up here.’ And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on.”

Do you remember that the earlier text said that the witnessing of God’s people and the persecution of God’s people would go on for 3½ years—a limited period of time?

Notice here that after a very short period of time—3½ days—the world will see something that strikes terror in their hearts. God's people who were killed for their faith will be resurrected and they will be drawn into the presence of God. The whole world will see that what those believers had been saying was true. The calling, the vocation, to follow Jesus can be a very hard calling and during the tribulation it will be hard for a greater number of God's people, but they are guaranteed an outcome of vindication, resurrection and life with God.

Chapter 11 is a description of the "hard calling" to be Christ-followers—to be witnesses for Jesus. I say "hard" because it will be met with resistance and even death.

Some of you might be somewhat confused. You thought that when it says God's people are "protected" it meant they couldn't be harmed in any way. You thought that when God's people were "sealed" in chapter 7, it meant they couldn't be hurt at all. If that were true, how could Jesus possibly have said, *"they will put some of you to death... But not a hair of your head will perish."*

What Jesus meant and what is taught throughout the Scripture is that even death in this life is not the last word. God has the last word and He says those who belong to Him will be resurrected and gain a life that cannot be destroyed.

The Apostles Peter and Paul both responded to our tendency to fear suffering and death in this life. Peter wrote, *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his*

glory is revealed."

Paul wrote, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"* when Jesus comes again. The Apostle John in this passage is very clear that God's people will suffer, and many will die during this period of intense turmoil on the earth but that is not the end. Jesus said it this way: *"I tell you dear friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more."* (Luke 12:4)

Whose authority does he have? He has God's authority, having been in the very presence of God.

In Chapter 10, John had seen a mighty angel and had been told to go and take a little scroll, a little open book from his hand,

"So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, 'Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.' I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour." (Rev. 10:9-10)

Earlier I mentioned that the encouragement of chapters 10 and 11 would be bittersweet. This passage is why I used those words. John was told that the message the little book contained was bitter/sweet. The bitter part was the news of the persecution that God's people would face, but the sweet part was the news that the persecution would be short-lived compared to the eternity of the reward they would receive.

John's first vision in these chapters is what makes that believable: Look at chapter 10:1-7:

"Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from

heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.' Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, 'There will be no more delay.' But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."

The description of the angel is significant. Whose authority does he have? He was "coming down out of heaven," therefore He has God's authority, having been in the very presence of God. How extensive is his authority? He plants one foot on the sea and the other on the land—he straddles the whole world and he has authority over it all. And the description of him lends even added emphasis to his authority: robed in a cloud, crowned with a rainbow, face like the sun and legs like fiery pillars. What a sight of magnificent power!

He gives a shout like the roar of a lion. This shout is associated with the great declaration of God that it is all over—the time has come to bring all history to a close. When the Lord descends at His second coming He will give a victory shout. In Joel 3:16 it says, *"the Lord also shall roar out of Zion and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth will shake..."*

So here the angel's announcement is powerful, authoritative and final. And as if his authority wasn't enough just in his appearance and his deportment, this mighty angel lifts his hand and takes an oath that what he is saying is true. And he swears by no less a name than the name of the God who created the heavens, the earth and the sea—just in case you missed it he wants you to know the God in whose name he is making his declaration is none other than the sovereign God of everything. And with all that lead in, all that display of light, sound, power and authority, what does he have to say?

"There will be no more delay!"

Let those who are persecuted for their faith in Christ, let those who are suffering because they testify to Jesus' name and grace, let those who are dying for their commitment to Jesus, **know** that when the seventh trumpet sounds, it's all over! Let them know that there is no further 2000-year wait. Let them know there are not many years yet until the end. Let them know they don't need to be patient any longer. The final battle will now be fought. It will now move swiftly—the mystery of God will be accomplished.

We have a calling, a hard calling: a calling to testify to the saving person and power of Jesus in a world that will increasingly resist that message. But we have a hope—a confidence—that God is in control of the end and He has promised us vindication, resurrection and life that never ends. That's how To Dinh Trung faces imprisonment. That's how God's people have always faced persecution. And that's how God's people will have victory even in the Tribulation.

End Notes

¹ Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den*, p.70-71

Chapter Thirteen

Kingdom Come Revelation 11:14-19

If I asked you if you ever get discouraged with life it would probably be a little like asking if dogs bark. The obvious answer is "yes." There are few people who won't at least privately concede that life can get discouraging. Most of us would rather not admit that we ever get depressed but sometimes it is very difficult to put on the "happy" face and act like everything in life is just "peachy." When we look at people who have lost loved ones, who have been chronically ill, or who have lost their jobs, for example, we think to ourselves, "It is no wonder they are discouraged or even depressed," or we marvel if they aren't.

It is tempting to stave off feelings of discouragement and depression by simply getting busier. Some people party harder, drink more, spend money, change jobs, start a new hobby, do whatever they can to change their surroundings, hoping they can drown out the flatness, the dullness, or the grayness of life. Life can be frightening no matter what age you are. Children and young people worry about growing up. Young adults worry about marriage and jobs. Older adults worry about relationships and financial security and even sickness and death. It's relatively common for people to slowly realize that life is threatening and even discouraging. A low-grade fear or depression sets in and life becomes a chore that is more and more difficult to have the energy for. Can anything truly overcome that? Is it possible not only to "put on" a happy face but also to feel a genuine happiness? Is it possible not only to "make it through" another day but to want to? Is it possible not just to "cope" but to thrive?

In the book of Revelation, the Apostle John has been describing some very terrible days that are coming to this earth. Jesus called it the "great tribulation." In other places in the Bible it is called the, "Day of the Lord." It is a period of time just before Jesus comes again.

At one point, John described some of those days in this symbolic way:

"There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black...the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth. The sky receded like a scroll rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then (people) hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?' "

John jumps right over the judgment of the 7th trumpet and gives a preview of something so grand, so real, so powerful, so exciting, so captivating, and so encompassing that when they see it, it will put their present and future experiences in perspective.

John described some of the physical devastation that would befall the earth: a great firestorm, devastation in the oceans, drinking water being poisoned, and darkness on the entire earth. And worse yet he described demonic powers being released to torment and kill millions and millions of unbelievers. And, as we studied earlier, even **believers** will be opposed, discriminated against, persecuted and possibly killed for their faithfulness to Jesus.

Those are frightening descriptions. Anyone living in those days and even thinking about living in those days would have reason to fear them—would have reason to wonder how it will be possible to stand it under those conditions. How will it be possible to bear up under such pressure? Wouldn't fear, discouragement, and even depression be the likely experience of those believers? God knows the very normal human tendency to be emotionally overwhelmed by those experiences—to be overwhelmed by your experiences in life.

In Revelation, John has been describing some horrific things that will happen on this earth and what he has been describing has been getting steadily worse. And if what had already been described wasn't bad enough, after the judgments, announced by the first six trumpets, we come to Rev. 11:15 and read: *"The seventh angel sounded his trumpet..."*

What we expect with that trumpet sound is a description of more trouble, more devastation, or even worse conditions than before. But what we get, unexpectedly, is something very different. It's as if John knows how discouraged his readers could be with what they have been hearing. He knows how hard life has been for some of them. He knows the opposition to their Christianity some of them have already faced.

And so in the midst of all of that, John gives his readers a glimpse into the future. For just a minute, he jumps right over the judgment of the 7th trumpet, he passes over the difficult period still to come and he gives a preview of something so grand, so real, so powerful, so exciting, so captivating, and so encompassing that when they see it, it will put their present and future experiences in perspective. It will revolutionize their attitudes toward life, even difficult life. The fears of life will subside, the discouragement will lift, and the flatness or dullness of life will dissipate. With

this vision of the future their hearts take on confidence and their lives are invested with purpose. The same can be true for us! Lose sight of this vision and I can almost guarantee that life will eventually overwhelm you, great tribulation or not.

What is this vision that can so dramatically alter our perspective and so radically change our attitudes about life here and now? It is **Jesus finally reigning as King** over this physical world and everyone in it. Some people have the mistaken idea that when Jesus comes again it just means that all God's people go to heaven and we sit on clouds, playing harps and singing forever. Or even if they know it isn't that, they don't know what it is. But the Bible declares that when Jesus comes again He will set up His kingdom on earth and He will reign as king over all. Here's the way John describes it:

"...there were loud voices in heaven which said, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.' And the twenty-four elders who were seated on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying 'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.'" (11:14b-17)

Have you ever heard the saying: "It's all over bar the shouting"? meaning for all practical purposes the event has finished and all that remains is the celebration? In the 1998 Superbowl game, with just seconds left on the clock in the fourth quarter and Green Bay seven points behind, Bret Favre launched a pass on 4th down. All of the Denver Bronco fans held their collective breath until that pass was knocked to the ground. At that point there were still 20 seconds left on the clock but it was over bar the shouting. In fact, if I remember correctly, the shouting began. That's what's happening here; there are still seconds left on the

clock, there is still work to be done on earth but so certain is the outcome that John sees into the future and hears the shouting begin. And everyone in heaven shouts: *"the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord!"* Like I said earlier in reflecting the theme of the entire book of revelation: **Jesus Wins!**

In the midst of lives that could lead to discouragement and fear, weariness and depression, John says, "Look ahead, see into the future, and envision what is most certainly coming." *"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord."* Do you hear the verb tenses in that statement? John is saying that he sees it as having already happened. The kingdom of the world **has become** the kingdom of our Lord.

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

The kingdom of the world is the world as we presently experience it. Notice it isn't kingdoms (plural) of this world but kingdom (singular). God knows that behind all the evil of this world, whether through corrupt political rulers or through other social forces, behind all the evil of this world stands one evil source—Satan, himself. God said it this way in I John 5:19, *"We know that the whole world is under the control of the evil one."* Through all the ages, God's people have had to withstand the onslaught of the evil one directly and indirectly through those he controls. In this age, until Jesus comes again, God is sovereign but He has not yet eradicated His opposition. Satan and those who follow Satan are opposed to God and God's people. In the wickedness of their hearts they still imagine they can usurp God's place and actually be governors of their own lives and futures.

Since the Garden of Eden, Satan, attempting to wrest control of this world from God, has carried on a battle.

- He attempted it in the Garden of Eden.
- He attempted it in Egypt by trying to keep the Israelites captive.
- He attempted it with the forces against Joshua trying to keep the Israelites out of Canaan.
- He attempted it by using the surrounding nations to destroy Israel.
- He attempted it with his opposition to the rebuilding of the wall and Temple in Nehemiah's and Ezra's days.
- He attempted it through Herod by attempting to kill the messiah when He was first born.
- He attempted it by tempting Jesus to forego the cross and just enjoy His rights.
- He attempted it by killing Jesus.
- He resisted the apostles time after time, not wanting the gospel to spread.
- He resisted the Great Awakening with the Revolutionary War.
- Time and time again he has used war to interrupt revivals in this country and elsewhere.
- He continues to attempt it by thwarting God's people and the spread of the gospel.
- He continues to attempt it by blinding people to the truth of the gospel.
- He continues to try to thwart the purposes of God by causing wars, famines, and oppressive policies—anything to get people to resist God.

- He is opposed to you knowing and following Jesus.

But John writes, Look – I see that day when that “kingdom” is defeated, when it is handed over to Jesus.

The prophets foretold that day: In Daniel 2, Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a large statue—an enormous dazzling statue, awesome in appearance with a head of gold, chest of silver, belly and thighs of bronze and legs of iron and feet of iron mixed with clay. Then a rock cut out (of a mountain) but not by human hands (from God) smashed the statue. When Daniel interpreted the dream he said, *“The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed...It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end but it will itself endure forever. This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands...”*

Since the Garden of Eden, Satan, attempting to wrest control of this world from God, has carried on a battle.

In Daniel 7 it says, *“Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him.”* (Dan. 7:26-27)

Zechariah 14 says in a description of the final battle between the Lord and those who oppose him, *“The Lord will be the king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name.”* (14:9)

Paul said it this way in I Corinthians 15:24-25:

“Then the end will come when he (Jesus) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.”

John says, "I see it!" I see that day when all that was predicted comes to pass and when Satan no longer holds sway in this world—when Jesus is Lord. So overawed by the reality of this are the 24 Elders (representing all the people of God) that they fall to their faces in worship. "It has happened," they cry out. "You have taken your great power and have begun to reign." It's done. Notice please that while we are accustomed to saying, "the Lord God who **is** and who **was** and who **is to come**," John omits the last: he says the "Lord who is and who was," because in John's vision, the "to come" has come—It now is! Jesus is Lord—Jesus wins!

Do you want Him to come? I see optimism, confidence, strength, encouragement, and energy to persevere—to press on.

And seeing into that future John says he hears those heavenly voices declaring that the time has come for judging the dead and rewarding God's faithful people. In Revelation 20 John describes this judgment in more detail:

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne and books were opened... The dead were judged according to what they had done, as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then (they all) were thrown into the lake of fire... If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

Back in chapter 11, John is saying that he sees it—it happens.

But not only are unbelievers judged, but also Christ-followers are rewarded. And in chapters 21 and 22, which we will look at in the future, we see what that reward is like. John describes it as living in the presence of the Lord Jesus—Him physically present with us. John says, “Do you see it?” Do you believe it? Can you imagine that day? What will it be like when this world, this world, is ruled by Jesus? When Lakewood, Littleton, and Jefferson County governments are ruled by Jesus? When the school district is controlled by His word and will? When businesses are run according to His desire? When homes are run by His love?

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray He said pray this way:

*“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. **Thy kingdom come!**”* Do you pray that – “Thy kingdom come?” It is true that when we pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” we are asking that God’s will be obeyed now in our lives just as His will is obeyed in heaven. But more precisely the prayer is that the kingdom of God in its fullness would come—that Jesus would come again and establish His everlasting kingdom. Do you pray, “Thy kingdom come?” Do you want Him to come?

Yes, there are some who want the end to come but for the wrong reason. I wonder if some of us want Jesus to come because we want to escape. Some grow tired, weary, discouraged and they give up and just wish Jesus would come and take them away from all this. When I see John’s words here, I don’t see that kind of escapism. Instead I see optimism, confidence, strength, encouragement, and energy to persevere—to press on. Certainly we will be tempted to be discouraged and defeated. Satan will throw everything at us trying to get us to quit before the end. But we must resist it. We are called to struggle but not give up, to persevere, but not bail out, to remain faithful in service, but not quit before Jesus comes. In Luke 12 Jesus said the

wise, faithful manager was the one who was doing his Master's will right up until the time Jesus comes again—there is no retirement in the kingdom of God.

God wrote: *"Do not lose heart in doing good, for in due time you will reap if you do not grow weary."* John's vision of the future encourages us to say, "I can remain faithful. I can keep on serving. I can bear up under even the most difficult circumstances because my efforts matter and my reward is certain. And we can pray, "thy kingdom come" not to escape but because we long so much for that day when everything we are working for will be complete. Who would want to forever plan a house and never build it? Who would want to forever plan a trip and never take it? Who would want to forever invest his life and never see the results?

I want Jesus to come again because I want to see the day when Jesus is King of everything—when every knee bows to Him—when my own heart is singly focused—when people will know the perfect control of Jesus in their lives. I know there also people, often young people who don't pray "thy kingdom come" because their desire for this life is stronger than their desire for what is to come. They think, "I want to get married, I want to have children, I want to do some things before the end comes." I'm convinced such thinking is because we are so limited in our understanding of what it will be like when Jesus comes again. All those things I've mentioned that we'd like to experience in this life are good but they will pale in comparison to having Jesus here.

Do I understand at all what it will mean for Jesus to be king in every country in this world? Can I appreciate how infinitely better it will be? Imagine the lepers, the beggars, the homeless, and the diseased of India or Mexico when Jesus is King. Imagine Rwanda, Bosnia, or Algeria with Jesus as King. Think about the Five Points area of Denver,

Capitol Hill, or the ghettos and slums of the great cities of the world—what will happen to them when Jesus is king? Imagine the government of the U.S. when Jesus' will is being done. Can you fathom the change in our daily news when Jesus is in control of this world? How will television and motion pictures be altered?

***"Do not lose heart in doing good, for
in due time you will reap if you
do not grow weary."***

Think about the homes where last night in drunkenness and frustration men beat their wives and children and where children lashed out at parents. Now imagine those homes when Jesus' love is controlling every word and action. Consider the homes where people were deathly ill or where loved ones had recently died; imagine those homes after the resurrection, when Jesus is here. Look at the hospitals, the police stations, and the prisons—what do you see? They're empty—there's no need for them. Think about your business, your company—what will it be like to go to work when boss and worker alike perfectly and happily obey the word of God? Now I ask you, "How could anyone in his or her right mind not want that?" Thy kingdom come—come Lord Jesus.

Jesus has not yet returned because He is patient with those who resist Him. He wants them to know something of that future kingdom in their lives now so they may participate fully in it when He does come. That's why we have evangelism teams. It's why we teach the gospel in our Sunday School classes. It's why we pray for our neighbors. It's why we sent the Haleys, Newcombs, Loseys, Tevebaughs, Engels and others around the world. 85% of us have made no investment in our "staff" missionaries and that frightens me. What does it say about our vision of the future? We know Jesus is coming and we want others to

experience that coming kingdom. Now that gives my life purpose; everything I invest is for the purpose of preparing for the coming Kingdom of Jesus.

If we are living life fearful, discouraged, and half depressed, it may be because we have lost sight of the future. Here's the way it is said in Hebrews:

*"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the **joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**"* (Emphasis added)

If I keep my eyes fixed firmly on Jesus as the one who is most certainly coming to this earth and who will reign here, if I realize that my investments of time, energy and money, here and now, have an impact on that day, discouragement and lethargy will not control my life: confidence and energy will.

Life matters because Jesus is coming. Will you pray that God will impress these truths on your mind? Will you ask Him to make them so real in your imagination that the picture is always before you? *"The Kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord."* Will you ask Him to shape your attitude and actions today, by the reality of Jesus' certain coming?

Chapter Fourteen

Behind the Scenes Revelation 12

You have heard it said, “Timing is everything” but I say to you, “Perspective is everything.” Several times I’ve had the experience of being in a store and have seen a mother lose sight of her child. I’ve seen women literally running from aisle to aisle in a clothing store looking frantically for their child. Because of their concern and because I identify with their fear, I have found myself also searching for the child. A couple of times I have seen the lost child before the parent did and my relief is instant and thorough. Stop the scene right there for a minute. I see the child and am relieved, the mother does not yet see the child and is in panic. What’s the difference? Perspective—I can see them both and though they are both still in tears, I know they are both okay and will be reunited.

I have conducted many funeral services. Sometimes the relatives of the deceased are panic-stricken—their hopelessness is palpable. But when I hold a memorial service for believers it is very different. Their families grieve deeply over their loss but they do not grieve as those who have no hope. Why? Perspective! They see something in the future that they know will mitigate their present circumstances. Perspective is everything.

I remember when Public Service Corporation was going through what a lot of companies, large and small, go through—a re-organization. I had several friends who were in the middle of that and had weeks on the job when they didn’t know whether they would still have a job the next week or the next month. When you have kids in college, house payments to make and other financial

responsibilities, that can be a very anxious time. Oh what you would give to be able to see into the future and know how it would all turn out. The hardest part seemed to be the unknown. In fact there were times when these friends couldn't even tell what forces were at work manipulating the outcome. They would have had some relief from the anxiety if they could have known the rules the game was being played by even if they couldn't see the outcome. Being totally in the dark about the process and the outcome was agonizing.

A day was coming when those who have opposed God and His people will be judged and those who have remained faithful will be rewarded with the presence of God forever.

Imagine if what we were discussing here was not someone's financial security but his or her very life. Waking each morning **not knowing** if it would be your last; not knowing if this day your spouse or your child would be carted off by the government never to be seen again. And nearly as bad would be your ignorance about even who the enemy was—who you could trust and who you couldn't; not knowing for certain what choices would elicit what responses. Oh, what you would give to be able to see into the future and know how it would all turn out—Perspective. One of the hardest things about facing difficult times in life is not knowing what is going on, why this is happening, and how it will turn out.

The Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation as a letter to the people of the churches of Asia Minor, in the area of the world that we now call Turkey. As I have mentioned before these were people whose jobs, homes and even lives were at stake. In the 11th chapter, John gave his

readers and us a look into the future. He wrote that there is coming a day when the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and He will reign forever and ever. A day was coming when those who have opposed God and His people will be judged and those who have remained faithful will be rewarded with the presence of God forever.

I can imagine those Christ-followers in Turkey being greatly encouraged by those words. I can imagine them, like us, singing songs that express that expectation. I can imagine them being uplifted, strengthened and expectant—kind of “pumped up” and ready to face the world. God told them that the evil that exists in this world and that seems to be so powerful will be overthrown. That’s great. And they walk out of church on Sunday thinking about the coming “kingdom of our Lord” and walk right into Monday hit full in the face by the present “kingdom of the world.” In other words, it’s one thing to think about what will be. But when “what is” keeps knocking you down you can easily wonder what’s going on. How does what **is** and what **will be** fit together? How do we explain the apparent incoherent, chaotic, and even evil world in which we live? It too often looks like most of life is just flat out “out of control” and the best we can hope for is that some day Jesus will come and put an end to it all. How do you fit the “dog eat dog” world in which we live into the greater scheme of things? How do we make any sense out of the life that so often comes at us?

Perspective! John has repeatedly told what the outcome of history will be but what he will do now is describe the process; he will give them God’s perspective on what is happening on the earth and what will happen during the tribulation. When life as we would like it to be is falling apart and when in the future the people of God face persecution during the tribulation, John wants us to know what is going on. He wants us to understand the forces at

work making life so miserable at times. My thesis, taken I believe from this passage, is that **knowing the outcome** and **knowing what is going on during the difficulties of life** make it much easier to “hang in there” – to remain faithful, to persevere. Once we are convinced life is out of control, we will turn to anything and anyone to bring order back into our lives even if it means we must make a pact with the devil. Fear will cause people to do many things. God wants us to have His perspective so we will not be afraid—so we will know what is going on in the difficult times of life—and so we will, by His grace, persevere. God has pulled back the curtain on the stage of life to allow us to see behind the scenes, to see another dimension of history, so we can see the forces that shape what we experience each day.

The major point that God is going to make to His followers through John in this text, is that their lives are not being driven by the fickle winds of fate. It is not the capricious whims of chance that make life difficult for God’s people. It is not some unknowing, unseeing force that confronts Christ-followers. Behind the evil of this world is a person and John describes him as a dragon.

The vision John sees in Chapter 12 is this: A magnificent woman appears and she is pregnant. Even as she appears so also appears a powerful dragon. So powerful is he that a third of the stars are swept out of the sky by a swish of his tail. The next scene in the drama is that of the dragon standing in front of the woman waiting for her child to be born so he can devour it. But as soon as the very special child is born it is protected by God and taken to heaven. At that same time the woman goes to the desert where God protects her for 1260 days.

At that point the scene switches from earth to heaven and we see the high-ranked angel, Michael, and others of God’s angels doing battle with the dragon and his angels. The

dragon loses and is hurled from heaven. And then the inhabitants of heaven celebrate. They sing of their delight in the fact that the dragon has been overcome. But the drama is not over. When the dragon realizes he has been defeated in his desire to kill the child, he turns his attack on the woman. But again God protects her. So infuriated is the dragon at being foiled again that he now turns his attack on the other children of the woman.

My thesis is that knowing the outcome and knowing what is going on during the difficulties of life make it much easier to "hang in there" – to remain faithful, to persevere.

In chapter 13, we see two other creatures joining forces with the dragon to wage their war against the children of the woman. The first creature is a beast out of the sea with great power and hideous appearance. An amazing thing happens. It seems that the beast had a fatal wound to his head but is healed; it looks like he comes back from the dead. So awed and fearful are the people of the world that all but those who belong to God, begin to worship the beast and the dragon. And with outrageous blasphemies against God and unstoppable power he wages war against those people who belong to God.

Beginning at 13:13, John sees another creature, a beast out of the earth, join the first beast and the dragon. And he, too, spoke with great authority but he looked like a lamb. And this lamb did great miracles—miracles that looked very much like the miracles done by God's prophets in the past. And because of his appearance and power, he deceived people all over the earth. He even set up an image of the first beast and made it appear to have life and speak. He commanded that the image be worshipped and

anyone who didn't would be killed. Along with that he made it difficult if not impossible for anyone to hold a job, get income or even purchase things unless they had the mark of the beast on them.

When we think about the vision just described we see six principle characters:

Three of the characters are clearly evil: the dragon and the two beasts.

Three of the characters are good: the woman, the child and the other children. I want you to see who John says these characters represent and I want you to see that this story covers a great deal of time.

The Good

The child that is born is Jesus. In Rev.12:5, he is referred to in Old Testament Messiah language as the one who would rule the nations with an iron scepter. The child being snatched up to God speaks of the ascension of Jesus following his life, death and resurrection here on earth. Therefore, if the child represents Jesus, then the mother must represent the Israelite people of God as a whole of which Mary was a part. God had promised that out of His people, Israel, would come the Messiah. The rest of the woman's offspring clearly represent the church. Rev. 12:13 speaks specifically of those who obey God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

So far we have the woman who represents the Israelite people of God throughout the Old Testament up to and including Mary from whom comes the child, the Messiah, Jesus. We also have the other offspring of the woman—the Church, the New Testament continuation of the people of God, including us.

The Evil

But allied against the Lord and His people of all ages are three others:

The dragon that John calls, "*the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan.*" (12:9) From our perspective, what John has described thus far is past and present history—he is not yet talking about the future. Satan the ancient adversary of Israel was very present when the Messiah was born and tried his best to destroy Jesus' life and ministry. When he was foiled in his plans to defeat Jesus he turned his attention on the people of God—specifically the church. I Peter 5:8 says, "*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*"

Now I know I haven't interpreted yet who the two beasts are but I want to pause here for a minute and allow you to soak up what John was saying to his first readers and subsequently to us, in what he has described thus far: from the Garden of Eden, right down to the time of Jesus, and right up to this very day, who does God say is behind the attacks on His people? Satan. The Christians in Turkey could know their circumstances weren't the result of blind chance over which no one had any control. The persecution they were facing was not just the result of evil capricious governments. The evil behind the evil they were experiencing was none other than Satan himself.

Now John is not suggesting that everything bad that ever happens to you is directly from Satan. In fact when we are introduced to the beasts, in the next section, you will see how Satan works through others. But even the tragedies that some call "acts of God"—an earthquake in Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana and Mississippi and other disasters—can be traced back to an earth that is under the influence of the evil one. The Apostle Paul said that even the natural order is waiting for its redemption from the

power of evil. And even the evil that people foist on one another can trace its source back to Satan.

You might say that knowing Satan is behind the evil you and I experience is not comforting but even more frightening. That might be true except for two very important things. God says not only do you know the ultimate source of your opposition, Satan, but you also know:

- His days are numbered, and
- His power over you is limited.

Remember in John's vision he saw the dragon defeated by Michael the angel and he saw the dragon thrown out of heaven? When that happened, John said he heard a celebration in heaven. There were at least two things they were celebrating:

1. That Satan's days were limited. In fact, Satan's attacks in the tribulation are so severe because he knows his days are limited. And in Chapter 20 we will see that this dragon, Satan himself, will be thrown into the lake of fire and be tormented forever and ever. Even if his attack is violent, we know his days are numbered. Just knowing that Satan's attacks on God's people can't go on very long, is comfort in itself. There is an end in sight.

2. We also know that his power over Christians is limited. He has the power to kill them but he doesn't have the power to destroy them. In Rev. 12:10 it says that God's people actually overcame Satan, *"by the blood of the Lamb and the testimony of their witness; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."* Satan's desire from the beginning has been to take God's people away from God: to cause them to fail, to cause them to follow Satan instead of God.

Christians defeat Satan by their very faithfulness

(empowered by the grace of God). Satan is overcome not when he is kept from killing them in this life, but when he is unable to take their souls with him to hell. Christians know that Satan's power is limited because while he can kill their bodies he can never kill their souls that belong to God. Some of us will be tempted to say that is not much comfort. And I would say I understand that sentiment: if we were God we would probably make it all turn out so we had nothing but wealth and comfort all of this life and forever. But for reasons I don't know, and would probably not understand if I did know, God has allowed Satan a limited amount of authority to create havoc on this earth for a time. But what I do know is that **even that authority is limited** and his doom is sure. And what God has in mind for those who love Him will make the difficulties of this life worth it—so my God promises.

***God says not only do you know the
ultimate source of your opposition,
Satan, but you also know:
His days are numbered, and
His power over you is limited.***

And so John says a Christ-follower's faithfulness extends even to his or her willingness to die because they know love of life on this earth is not to be compared with the life God gives. And God promises that even our physical bodies, which Satan has the power to kill, will be resurrected to live forever.

Christian, your life is not out of control. You are not caught in the vortex of chance. You can know that you have an enemy and his name is Satan. He is the one who is behind the evil that happens. God is in control of him—we are not left to fate. Knowing who is the source of the evil that comes into your life you can also know two things about

him: He is doomed—he cannot forever assault you, and his power is limited even now—he cannot defeat you. Even if he takes your physical life or the lives of those you love, he cannot take you—you belong to God and God has marked your soul. So persevere Christian—your very perseverance is your defeat of Satan.

I know you know the song well but I want you to look again at Martin Luther's great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*. This song captures the truths of this passage so well:

"A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing; Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing: For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe; His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate, On earth is not his equal.

"Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing; Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing: Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He; Lord Sabaoth, His Name, from age to age the same, And He must win the battle.

"And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us: The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure, One little word shall fell him.

"That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth; The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him Who with us sideth: Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever."

Chapter Fifteen

Taking on the Enemy Courage and Discernment: Weapons of Spiritual Warfare Revelation 13

What would it take to draw you away from trusting God? What lies are you susceptible to that could convince you to stop following Jesus? What ideas, values or goals could be more influential in your thinking than God's kingdom? If someone wanted to turn you away from being a Christ-following Christian, to just being an "in name only" Christian, what would best accomplish that goal?

Would the threat of physical death turn you away from following Jesus? In other words, would you be a Christian if it were illegal? Would you be willing to die rather than renounce your faith in Jesus? Would fear of poverty or financial insecurity lead you away from trusting and following God? In other words, would you be willing to give up your job, your income, if the alternative meant disobeying God? Would fear of being alone lead you to sacrifice your principles and date and marry someone who doesn't love Jesus? Contrary to God's word, have you come to believe that a person's life does consist of the abundance of his possessions and, like the rich young man in Jesus' parable, if you can't have both God and money, your life indicates you will choose money?

What fears or lies keep you from being a Christ-follower or could cause you to stop following Him? This is not just hypothetical—many people even in churches are unwilling to be Bible-obeying Christ-following Christians because they perceive the price is too high. Something or someone has deceived them—something has caused them to fear the

wrong things.

In Revelation 12 we were introduced to a vision of the Apostle John's in which a dragon is seen as making war against the people of God. John says that dragon is symbolic of none other than Satan, himself. Throughout the Bible there are clear references to a great struggle that has been going on for generations—Satan's struggle to take as many people to hell with him as he possibly can. The Bible leaves no doubt that Satan is a person, a created being, who in anger against God has spent his known existence fighting against the purposes of God. There is an enemy of

Throughout our study of Revelation we have seen that John doesn't describe everything in strict chronological order—we have to pay close attention as to when he is talking about the future or when he is describing the present or when he is talking about the past.

your soul and it is Satan. There is an evil power behind all other evil that is Satan's influence. Revelation 12 made it clear we have an enemy. Chapter 13 will speak of two powerful ways Satan works to destroy people and how God's people can resist him. John describes these two ways in fantastic symbolism. He has a vision in which he sees two beasts joining forces with the dragon/Satan to accomplish Satan's ends.

The First Beast

The first beast has political, governmental, military power.

"And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a

blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion.”(13:1-2)

Hundreds of years earlier Daniel prophesied precisely concerning the coming world powers: In a dream wherein he saw four beasts, he described the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman world powers that would come in succession. One of those beasts in Daniel’s vision, was leopard-like, one lion-like, one bear-like and so on. When John in his vision, sees the beast of Rev. 13, it combines the worst of all the beasts of Daniel. If the power and evil intent of those previous world governments had been great, this last government’s power for evil would be worse.

John described this latter-day beast as having horns, heads and crowns. In the Bible, “horn’s, heads and crowns” have always symbolized power and authority. And from whom does this beast derive his power? *“The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.”* (Rev. 12:2b) This last great government gets its authority from Satan himself—this government is under Satan’s direct control. We know that the book of Revelation is prophetic—looking forward to a time in the future. When will this “beast,” this last great evil government be in existence?

Throughout our study of Revelation we have seen that John doesn’t describe everything in strict chronological order—we have to pay close attention as to when he is talking about the future or when he is describing the present or when he is talking about the past. In chapter 11, John described the Tribulation time and then jumped ahead to describe in part the second coming of Jesus. In chapter 12, John went back in time and described the animosity Satan has always had for the people of God and for Jesus. He was talking about the period of time leading up to the birth of Christ and this age in which we live where Satan’s goal is

still to destroy God's people.

When we come to chapter 13, we get the impression John is describing the period of time called the tribulation. He has jumped ahead now to describe what it will be like during that period of intense turmoil on the earth. But because of other texts in the Bible we know that what will be intensely true during the tribulation is already true in part. The attack on God's people may be more intense then but his attack is real now. So we are discussing the tactics Satan is using now and in the future.

What is this government and who is the beast that leads it? In times past some have thought the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope were this government and beast. For a while the Roman Catholic Church thought that Martin Luther and the reformation church were the beast of Rev. 13. Others in more recent times have picked the Trilateral Commission or the United Nations, but they are probably all wrong. The governing power spoken of here in Rev. 13 is an awesome power, apparently known to everyone. *"The whole world was astonished and followed the beast."* (Rev. 13:3b) I believe, given the scheme of things in Revelation, it is a world power that is yet to rear its ugly head. But is this beast symbolizing an actual person or is it a movement?

Some refer to this beast as the "antichrist." While that term is not used in Revelation, John uses it in his other letters to the churches. And this beast certainly fits the descriptions Daniel and Paul gave of a coming person, the same that Jesus predicts would come at the end of the age.

The word "anti" in "antichrist" means both "opposed to" and "instead of." When we look at this beast we see that he certainly does both: His task, as we will see in a moment, is to oppose Christ and Christ's people and he certainly presents himself as God—"instead of" the real God. Notice that first he takes names for himself that

belong to God alone, *"on each head a blasphemous name."* (13:1) Not only does he take God's names but he mimics the death/resurrection of Jesus—*"One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed."* (Rev. 13:3) And thirdly, he takes the worship that belongs to God alone—*"They also worshiped the beast and asked 'Who is like the beast?' 'Who can make war against him?'"* (Rev. 13:4b) Those phrases, taken from the Old Testament, are elsewhere directed to God. "Who is like our God" and "Who can overcome God? No one!" It seems consistent then, with other Scriptures, to refer to this beast as the antichrist. I don't think we can be dogmatic that this beast represents a single person but I do think a single person best fits the imagery presented here.

Some refer to this beast as the "antichrist." While that term is not used in Revelation, John uses it in his other letters to the churches.

And so the "beast" is a coming powerful leader of an evil government who will convince the people of the world that he alone can lead them to the kind of power, security and affluence they so much desire. But most importantly, he will be so powerful that no one will dare resist him. I want you to see what his purposes are:

"He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." (Rev. 13:7-8)

He wants to rule over the world in God's place and he wants to destroy those who belong to God. In our lives of

relative peace and affluence it is rather difficult for us to imagine a time as is described in this text. But John's readers had no difficulty at all. They could readily see the Roman government and the current Caesar as the embodiment of the beast. People at many times in history and in our own day, in other countries likewise can easily imagine such a coming day because they live, right now, in a situation very much like it.

If the antichrist will use the raw power of fear in those last days, the spirit of the antichrist uses it even today.

And what is the tactic that this first beast, this antichrist, uses to control the world and to attempt to destroy God's people? Fear! It's the use of raw power to intimidate God's people and all others.

- It's like the religious leaders and Roman authorities in Peter and Paul's day telling them to stop preaching the gospel or lose their freedom and their lives.
- It's like Chinese Christian leaders today rotting in their prison cells because they must obey God rather than the government.
- It's like people in Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia, being fearful of following Christ because it could mean their livelihood and/or their lives.

But this intimidation by Satan is not reserved to open threats of physical violence. How often today does Satan use the fear of financial insecurity as reason for people to reject Jesus or to stop following him? How many of us are more enamored of this present kingdom than of the Kingdom of God; we're so afraid that we make our largest investments in the here and now?

How often today does Satan use fear of sickness and especially fear of death to keep people from trusting Jesus? We get so consumed with hanging on to this life that in the midst of sickness or facing death, when Satan insinuates that God doesn't love us or God's isn't in control, we buy it.

How often does Satan use our fear of being alone to intimidate us into all kinds of compromises with God's will. We're afraid that God's will and way for relationships won't "work," so in fear we use whatever means are available just to have someone, even if it means someone after someone after someone. If the antichrist will use the raw power of fear in those last days, the spirit of the antichrist uses it even today.

I want you to note that the actions of the beast, the antichrist, were not reserved for the time of the great tribulation alone. While it is true that assault on God's people and the intimidation of all people will be greater during that time John said, *"This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."* (I John 4:3)

Satan's tactics are the same today. And how are God's people to respond to Satan's intimidation?

"He who has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints." (Rev. 13:9-10)

Endurance and Faith

John says there are two ways you overcome Satan's use of fear: endurance and faith.

Endurance is doing what is right even when it is costly and faith is believing God even when all you have to go on is His word.

- Satan comes when we are sick and says God isn't doing what He's supposed to do and we say "You're wrong, Satan. I will not fear sickness or death."
- Satan says your life will be ruined if you don't make so much money or take a certain job and you say, "No it won't. I will not fear poverty."
- Satan says if you don't abandon your principles about dating and marriage, you'll never have a happy life and you say, "I will not fear being alone."

I will not compromise what is right according to God's word just because Satan attempts to frighten me with dire consequences. He may wreck his havoc on me as he did on Job but I will not yield. Instead I will trust God. I will continue to believe Him and that obedience to His will and to His Word will be worth it. As I mentioned earlier, Satan is most overcome in our lives not by an inability to kill us, because he might kill us; **Satan is overcome when he cannot take our souls to hell with him.** Satan is overcome when we refuse to succumb to his intimidation and we remain faithful no matter what the circumstances.

The Second Beast

Now the second beast presents Satan's second method for destroying people: If the first beast was fear, the second one is deception. As in the case of the first beast so in this case (although it is possible that this beast represents a religious movement) the language seems to indicate that this is an actual person who leads a religious movement. Later he is called the "false prophet." It is possible that if the first beast is the "dictator" of that coming world power then this second beast is the "Minister of propaganda."

This second beast comes with two horns like a lamb but with the authoritative voice of the dragon. Jesus said, *"Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's*

clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Mt. 7:15) This person is seductive and deceptive. The first beast ruled through governmental might. This second beast rules through religion.

But the second beast exists to serve the purposes of the first beast that in turn exists to serve the purposes of the dragon or Satan himself. Notice this beast, this person, performs great miracles. And, *“Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth.”* Paul had warned of that day: *“The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie...”* (2 Thess. 2:9-11)

I will not compromise what is right according to God’s word just because Satan attempts to frighten me with dire consequences.

The second beast orders them to set up an image of the first beast to worship and they do it. So convinced are they that this new religion is the right one that they willingly respond. And so deceptive is the second beast that he gets the image to appear to be alive and even to speak. It doesn’t matter if there is an actual statue or not—this is a vision. What matters, with or without a statue, is that there is a philosophy/religion that people accept as the truth in contrast to what God has said. So seductive, so deceptive is the second beast that people all over the world willingly respond. And when this philosophy/religion is fused with the government, it makes sense to people to adopt the

financial practices of this new world power.

Will there be an actual mark on the hands or foreheads of people? While that is of course possible, the language of this passage leads us to believe the idea of the mark is simply a way of saying that the people pledge their allegiance to this way of government, religion and business. In Chapter 7, when it said that God's people, even during this age, are "sealed" or marked with God's mark, few of us started checking our bodies to see if we could find some physical marking.

How do Christ-followers respond to the deceit of this beast? It calls for wisdom and insight, John says.

It is rather fun to speculate like a bunch of sci-fi buffs but when referring to this passage, it is just a little too fantastic when writers and speakers talk about physical marks on the forehead, or computer chips implanted in people's hands, or uniform product codes on everyone to represent what John is talking about. It is much more in keeping with good interpretation of literature to see that John is merely representing in visual form what has taken place in people's thinking—everyone accepts the lies of the second beast and conforms to the new rules of the world. Everyone except those who refuse to be deceived by the lies—those who are followers of Jesus Christ.

Discernment and Truth

How do Christ-followers respond to the deceit of this beast? *"This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666."* (Rev. 13:18) Just as fear had to be rejected with endurance and faith so deceit must be rejected with discernment and truth. It calls for wisdom and insight, John says.

Before describing what that means today let me attempt to deal with this most intriguing idea of the "666." It is hard to imagine all the interpretations these numbers have conjured up. Many believe, following some ancient methods of deciphering encrypted codes, that when the letters of names are given numerical value it is possible to find the name that adds up to 666 and when you do you will know who the antichrist is. The problem with that is that all kinds of names have added up to 666, depending on the method you used. In times past, as I said before, certain Popes have been called antichrists because someone got their names to add up. Others said it was Martin Luther. Soon after John's day some said it was Caesar Nero. But in more recent times some have said it was Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Henry Kissinger, Saddam Hussein and the list goes on.

Within 100 years of John writing this book, Christian leaders did not know who he meant if he meant someone in particular. I concur with those who don't see the number as indicating a certain individual but as describing the whole governmental/religious system as being nothing but man's concoction. Throughout Scripture, God's number of perfection is 7. 777 is perfection multiplied. 666 is man's number—imperfection multiplied. The point is that God's people must be able to discern man's "truth," which are actually lies, from God's truth.

Let me now show you some of the discernment necessary. I want you to remember with me the time in Jesus' life when He was in the wilderness fasting and Satan came to Him to tempt Him. The account is found in Matthew 4. Three times Satan comes to Him, three times trying to use deceit to seduce Jesus to do Satan's will instead of God's will.

The first time he invites Jesus to use spiritual power to meet His own immediate needs rather than using spiritual power to do God's will. He suggests that Jesus turn the

rocks into bread since Jesus is so hungry. Jesus resists him recognizing that what Satan wants Him to do is be more concerned with the material and the immediate than with the spiritual and the eternal. Jesus replied, *"Man shall not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Satan wanted to seduce Jesus to see earth as bigger than heaven, to see time as more important than eternity and to think that Jesus' immediate needs were more worthy of consideration than God's longer-range plans. How many of us are seduced this way? Made to believe that the immediate issues of job, money, importance, safety, security, happiness, and relief from any pain (emotional or physical) are the most important issues we have to deal with and God's agenda will have to wait. We buy the lie and like Esau, we sell our spiritual inheritance for a bowl of porridge.

How about when Satan next came to Jesus and said to demonstrate His power and divinity by throwing Himself from the temple wall and commanding angels to come and catch Him. How spectacular that would have been. Imagine how impressive. Imagine a shortcut to getting people to realize who He was. But Jesus was unwilling to take a shortcut to being the God/man He came to earth to be. There was no shortcut for Jesus to experience full humanity. And there is no shortcut for us to experience full spiritual maturity. Satan comes along and intimates that spiritual disciplines aren't worth it—that faithfulness won't get you anywhere, and that endurance will end in disappointment. Again, we buy the lie and again go for the immediate. Complete honesty, faithfulness to our spouses, integrity in our dealings with others, forgiveness and patience seem like such slow ways to get what we want—surely there's a shortcut. No there isn't; there are only shortcuts to a dead end.

I know this raises political issues but I couldn't help but think of this when I saw excerpts of former Governor Romer's press conference regarding his long-time relationship with a woman other than his wife. With his wife standing sadly by his side, he tried to convince us there was a different ethic that was just as healthy and honest as fidelity. I know he calls himself a Christian but he accepted a lie. He couldn't wait for God's timing using God's methods—he took action of his own.

And a third time Satan came to Jesus and this time he promised Jesus the world if Jesus would give allegiance to Satan. Satan offered Jesus a less expensive throne—one that didn't include the price of the cross. But Jesus said, *"Away from me Satan. For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only'."* Satan can offer much, but it cannot last.

Three times Satan comes to Him, three times trying to use deceit to seduce Jesus to do Satan's will instead of God's will.

Do you notice how Jesus resisted the deceit of the devil? Every time, He responds with the word of God. As the deceit gets more subtle, the knowledge of God's word must be sharper. Believer, you can't withstand the lies of Satan if you don't know what God says. So John says to his readers, "Be discerning and be wise." Satan comes now and he will come in the tribulation with raw fear and with insidious deception. God's people will stand against him with endurance, faith, wisdom and insight.

How are you doing? Are you steeped in the truths of God's word. Have you grasped an eternal perspective that allows you to see through the immediate into the future? Have you come to the place where you will say, "I trust God no matter what?"

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."

(Ephesians 6:10-18)

Editor's Note:

For further study of the 42 months, please see Appendix B

Chapter Sixteen

Grapes of Wrath Revelation 14

Are you ever ashamed of God? Have you ever been reading in the Old Testament and you came across an account of some action of God and you wish God hadn't done that? You read the account of Joshua and the Israelites invading Canaan and killing every living thing, people and animals, and doing it at God's command and you cringe, thinking, "How could God condone or worse yet command that?" And if someone at school or at work brought the subject up, you'd have a hard time explaining it—you'd find yourself somewhat embarrassed by God. A God of love and forgiveness we find easy to talk about. But a God of bloodshed and eternal torment, He's embarrassing. Is God wrong or have we missed something?

Revelation 14 could be embarrassing to a Christian who believes what it says. The Apostle John has a vision, describing in symbolic terms, what will happen when Jesus comes again. If it were a movie it would have to be rated "R" for violence.

"I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one 'like a son of man' with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, 'Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.' So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

"Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge

of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, 'Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe.' The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia". (Revelation 14:14-20)

God has waited as long as He is going to wait. The time to reap has come.

I'm certain most of you quickly picked up on what John is describing. But just in case you missed it look a little more closely. In verse 14 whom is John describing? Jesus, as He comes the next time. John introduced this entire book by referring to this event—the second coming of Jesus.

"Look he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be. Amen."
(Rev. 1:7)

Daniel had predicted this event: *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven."* (Daniel 7:13-14)

Jesus referred to Himself as the "son of man"—clearly a claim to being prophecy's fulfillment. He was the "messiah" foretold by Daniel. In Mark 14:62, Jesus said, *"I am the Christ...And you will see the Son of Man...coming on the clouds of heaven."*

Here's the way Jesus described this event in the gospel of Matthew:

"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will

see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.” (Matthew 24:30)

There can be no doubt that what John envisions in chapter 14 is the second coming of Jesus. But notice what Jesus is carrying in John’s vision: a sharp sickle—a scythe. I’m certain most of you have seen pictures of a scythe. It is that long, wooden-handled, curved-blade farm implement that a person uses to cut down grain. Until the time of the mechanical reaper and the grain combines we know today, farmers all over the world for thousands of years used scythes to harvest their grain. So Jesus is seen as holding a scythe—a sharp sickle. And an angel comes from the temple, symbolic of the presence of God, and in essence says, “It’s time!” God has waited as long as He is going to wait. The time to reap has come.

The angel makes it very clear that he is not talking about grain, “*The harvest of the EARTH is ripe.*” John is talking about the people of the earth and as we will see in a minute, it is the people of the earth who have rejected God and His rule in their lives—they are ready for harvest. And then John sees Jesus take the scythe and swing it across the earth and the earth is harvested—the people are cut down. It’s a graphic portrayal of judgment.

Then changing the analogy slightly from harvesting grain to harvesting grapes, John’s vision becomes even more graphic. Don’t let the reference to it being an angel who now has the scythe, the sharp sickle, confuse you. Angels are often depicted in the Bible as the ones who work on behalf of the Lord. Here it is the action of the Lord administered through an angel. But what is the vision? The “scythe-swinging” angel is to cut down the clusters of grapes because they are ripe, ready to be harvested. So the clusters of grapes are cut from the vine but this time, as I said, the vision is more graphic—the grapes are thrown into a winepress.

Today we have motorized machinery into which grapes are fed that crush them and extract the juice. For the thousands of years before such machinery, it was common to place the grapes into a large rock or concrete basin with small holes in the bottom. Then a person would literally stand in the hollowed out rock or basin and stomp the grapes, squeezing the juice out of them. The juice would sink to the bottom and out the small holes collecting in another basin or bowl. But in John's vision it is into God's winepress that the grapes are thrown. And as you notice it is not grape juice or wine that flows from the winepress but blood. John is not depicting a winemaking operation, but rather he depicts people who are violently and wholly punished by Jesus—they are slaughtered. And when John says that the blood rose as high as the horses bridles for a distance of 1600 stadia or 180 miles, which is the length of Israel, he is saying that the judgment covered the whole earth.

This is a truly gruesome picture. Does this mean that people will be thrown into some large vat into which God will climb and stomp them to death? Of course not, but the point of John's vision is that when Jesus comes, His judgment on those who do not belong to Him will be physical, swift, violent, deadly and complete. In Revelation 19 John describes it again in these words:

"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire and on his head are many crowns...Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations... He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty." (19:11ff)

Do you comprehend what that says? When Jesus comes again He will literally slaughter everyone who has rejected His love and His authority in their lives. According to what

Revelation 19 presents, those who do not belong to Christ will be resurrected with bodies that will last forever and they will be thrown into the lake of fire. Here's what John saw in his vision that we looked at earlier:

"He will be tormented with burning sulfur...And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever." (14:10b-11)

John depicts people who are violently and wholly punished by Jesus—they are slaughtered.

The picture is of the Lord Jesus slaughtering those who have resisted Him and then casting everyone and everyone like them who has died through the ages, into a gigantic caldron of eternal torment. Is it literally fire in the lake of fire? It could be. God could give resurrected unbelievers bodies that could suffer the torment of fire without ever dying—forever and ever. Or just as likely, the fire symbolizes punishment, a misery, far greater than anything our minds can imagine. And so God has given us this image of burning in a lake of fire as a way for our little minds to capture just something of how terrible hell will be.

Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, written 650 years ago in one of the world's great epic poems, tried to capture something of the horror of hell. He wrote that as he entered hell he saw a sign that read, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here!" And as Dante imagined himself visiting hell he wrote:

"Upon the edge of a high precipice
formed by a circle of huge broken rocks,
we came upon a throng in great torment.
And here the nauseating stench that rose
from out the deep abyss, forced us to rest...
"We now must go down slowly, that our senses

may get accustomed to this sickening blast.

"For I saw multitudes of (people)
who all were weeping piteously, and seemed
tormented all in varying degrees.
While some were lying supine on the ground,
others were sitting huddled in a heap,
or running round about incessantly.
More numerous were those who ran about;
the fewer, those who in their torment lay,
although they cried the louder in their pain.

"Over that sandy waste fell slowly down
broad flakes of fire, falling measuredly
like snow upon the Alps in quiet air.
Just so th' eternal heat was falling down,
from which the sand, like tinder under steel,
Burst into flame, the torment to redouble.
Without a moment's rest the slapping hands
danced frantically on, now here, now there,
to brush away the torture of the flames."¹

This 13th century description is no more vivid, no more horrifying than John's vision of God's grapes of wrath trampled in the winepress of his fury. Tell me honestly, is this depiction of God judging people with fire, blood and fury just a little embarrassing? In this day of tolerance, live-and-let-live and non-judgmentalism, isn't the idea of a God who slaughters, judges and casts people into a lake of fire just a bit much? And aren't believing such things more than a little embarrassing? It's only embarrassing if we don't know God. It's only embarrassing if we've never suffered real injustice. It's only embarrassing if we lived in a world with no evil.

The Jesus of judgment pictured in these verses is not embarrassing; instead, He is absolutely imperative. All of life and all of humanity would be set adrift on a sea of

chaos if we didn't know a God of justice. Imagine an eternity with wrong stronger than right. Imagine life forever with evil greater than good. No! The life that God created demands justice. Sin and sinners must be destroyed or there is no point to life. I have mentioned many times in this series of sermons that the Apostle John is writing to people who are well acquainted with injustice. These are people facing the threat of martyrdom every day. They live in a time and place where the government, the religions, and the culture around them are openly hostile to them. For no other reason than being a Christians they are losing their jobs, their homes, and in some cases their lives. The injustices they are experiencing are testing their faith. Is God there?

All of life and all of humanity would be set adrift on a sea of chaos if we didn't know a God of justice.

In Revelation 13 we saw a description of that time in the tribulation when the antichrist and the false prophet, when the government and the dominant religion of the world would have absolute power over the world. And in their intense hatred for God and His people, they would discriminate against them, deprive them of a way to make a living, and even kill them. How could any Christian withstand that kind of pressure? What would keep them from abandoning Christ? Why wouldn't they just join the "winning" side? Because they believe in the God of justice! Chapter 13 tells how hard it will be to be a Christian in the tribulation, but Chapter 14 declares that God and the faithfulness of His people will be vindicated—justice will come!

Let me tell a story. Apin Akot is a Christian man who lives in Sakobat, Sudan. Three years ago when he was in the

field with his two-year-old son, Muslim raiders, under the authority of the Sudanese government, raided his home and took captive his wife and two daughters, age 5 and 9. To the government they were fair game because they were Christians. They were raped, beaten, and herded like cattle many miles to the north where they were sold into slavery. The five year old couldn't keep up on the journey north and was tied to a horse, cutting off the circulation to one leg and crippling her for life. Their father sold everything he had, traveled north and through risky negotiations bought back his wife and five-year-old. But the nine-year-old was soon to be sold into prostitution and was too valuable for the father to afford. He had to leave without her.²

"It happens to thousands; it's too bad but that's life." No, that's not life, that's evil and such evil and those who perpetrate it demand justice.

That is a true story, and it didn't happen hundreds of years ago but just recently. How do those Christian parents handle that? Why does that not drive them to insanity or at least apostasy? Forget Christianity—this is their daughter's life they are talking about. But even if they converted to Islam, much of the damage has been done; the injustice is unfathomable, the pain unimaginable. Doesn't such evil demand justice? Would you dare say to that father, "Well, that's life."

Years ago, I stood in the home of our dear friends and long-time partners of this church, Clarence and Genevieve DeVries. Clarence was near death. I looked into the face of Genevieve as she sat quietly weeping in her wheelchair. The man to whom she has been married nearly 64 years was quickly dying. The pain she was experiencing was hard for me to grasp. Death is evil. It is not natural—it is the

product of a sin-saturated, fallen world. Where's the justice? Doesn't such evil demand justice? Would you dare look into Genevieve's face and say, "Well, that's life."

My own adopted son was brought home from the prison hospital just after he was born. Barbara and I looked into the face of that helpless 6 pound baby and could hardly handle the thought of him going into the environment that was likely to be his future—one of neglect, drugs and who knows what else. If that baby boy were abused, where would justice be? Don't you dare say, "It happens to thousands; it's too bad but that's life." No, that's not life, that's evil and such evil and those who perpetrate it demand justice.

I believe John is saying to his readers and to us, "When you live through such injustice, when you see it happening in the world all around you, when you are treated unjustly, when your loved ones are suffering, and when your heart grieves over the pain that evil inflicts on this world, remember justice will come! Jesus is coming and He is carrying a sword, scythe, a sharp sickle, to measure out justice." But something in you says even if He does that, nothing could make up for the evil and suffering that so many have experienced. I easily confess I don't know how it works but I believe our Bible declares that when Jesus comes and executes justice on this earth, we will stand in awe before Him and willingly say, "It was right—what You did and when You did it, Jesus, was perfectly right and justice has been served."

So persevere, Christian—hang in there. No matter how dark it gets, know there is light. No matter how long it takes, know He is coming. No matter how great the injustice, justice will prevail and the whole world, especially those who have been treated unjustly will say, *"Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways."*

But hear me on one more issue. Where will you be when Jesus carries out this justice? This issue is not an afterthought to the text. To me it rings throughout this entire passage. Who could help but think, "What about me? Will I be cut down like so much grain, will I be trampled in God's winepress of wrath when Jesus comes again? Will I be thrown into the lake of fire?" Listen to these most familiar words that speak directly to the issue:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

To believe in Him means I repent of my sin and turn to follow Jesus Christ, asking Him and believing/trusting Him to save me from the consequences of my sin. Jesus Himself met the justice of God against my sin on the cross. Jesus came and died to take the punishment for our sins. And when Jesus comes again meting out justice I will stand in the shelter of His cross.

Where will you stand? Jesus is coming again to bring justice on the earth. To you, is that a threat or a promise? If it is threatening to you, God will remove that threat today and forever if you'll ask Him. My prayer for you, my readers is, "Lord Jesus, give your people a solid conviction that You are coming and You will vindicate their faithfulness. Make us know beyond a doubt that no matter how unjust, evil and nearly unbearable are the circumstances, You are coming and You will bring justice. Cause us to believe You so that no matter how hard it gets we will remain faithful, trusting You.

"And Spirit of God will You please right now invade the minds and hearts of those who have not yet invited You to forgive them, save them from Your coming judgment, and be Lord of their lives. Cause them to respond to You today—to accept Your gift of life."

If you are one who has not invited Jesus Christ into your life, you have never intentionally and deliberately asked Him to forgive you and to give you eternal life, will you pray these words right now:

"Jesus, I confess that I am a sinner deserving your wrath. I believe you died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I turn away from my sin, I don't want to live the way I have been living. And I turn away from trusting in myself to make me acceptable to you. I trust only in your forgiveness based on your death for me. I invite you into my life as my saving-Lord. I trust you now to give me eternal life. Thank you Jesus for giving me that life."

Jesus said, *"As many as receive him to them he gives the right to be called the children of God."* If you have prayed that prayer from your heart, with meaning and intention, then you have become a child of God. Rejoice! God is coming again!

End Notes

¹ Dante, *Divine Comedy*, "Inferno Canto 14"

² Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den*

Chapter Seventeen

The Great Tribulation Revelation 15-16

The word “tribulation” means distress, affliction, and oppression, coming from the root word meaning to crush or squeeze, to press down. The word “tribulation” obviously has negative connotations. Starting with the prophet Daniel (600 years before Christ) and continuing through Jesus and the Apostles, there were many references to a coming time of “tribulation” in the world that would be unlike any time preceding it. This world has experienced plagues with millions dying in the middle ages, earthquakes, typhoons and floods even in recent years with whole cities wiped out and thousands killed. We have seen pictures of the awful effects of the bombing of Dresden, Germany and Hiroshima, Japan. But according to the biblical writers, all such examples from history pale in comparison to the devastation in the world that will come in what Jesus called “The Great Tribulation.”

People seem to always have had a fascination with what the end of the world will be like. Even motion pictures such as *Independence Day* and *Contact* flirt with the concept of a “doomsday” end of the world. Jesus taught His disciples that the world and life as we know it were coming to an end. In three of the gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) the disciples, in their “to be expected” curiosity asked how they would know when the end of the age was coming—what would it be like.

Jesus answered this way: *"For then there will be great tribulation (distress), unequalled from the beginning of the world until now - and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for*

the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.... Immediately after the tribulation (distress) of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time the... Son of Man will appear in the sky..." (Mt. 24)

In what I think is obviously symbolical language, John envisions a time of terrible events that are so horrible people wish they could die.

Jesus clearly teaches that just before He comes the next time there will be a period of time on the earth that will be so bad that unless it is a short time, everyone on earth will die. But He doesn't give us much detail. That came in the book of Revelation.

And so the Apostle John's book of Revelation begins with these words:

"The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John who testifies to everything he saw." (Rev 1:1)

In a series of visions, Jesus reveals to John what will take place at the end of this age—how the world will come to an end and what it will be like. And, frankly, it is a frightening description! As more socially conditioned Christians, street corner preachers in downtown Denver who yell out "repent or perish!" embarrass us. Although their methods may be less than effective, their message is strikingly biblical. The Bible says this world is coming to an end—a violent end. We come next to a passage that describes that "end" in the fullest detail found anywhere in the Bible. Before we look at that specific text, I want you to see again that we have had

previews of this terrible end of the world, several times already, in the Book of Revelation. In chapter 6 with the opening of the 6th "seal" we received a preview when John wrote:

"I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth... and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'"
(Revelation 6:12-17)

In what I think is obviously symbolical language, John envisions a time of terrible events that are so horrible that people wish they could die.

In chapter 8, John again sees a preview of the end:

"Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake." (8:5)

When we came to the latter part of chapter 8 and then chapter 9, we saw a fuller description of what that period of tribulation would be like. Described as judgments announced by trumpets we saw ecological disasters predicted and then flying locusts that looked like horses stinging everyone except the people of God.

Then in Chapter 11:19, there is a summary description of this period of tribulation:

"And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of

thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm."

Time and again throughout the first half of the book there are previews or summaries of what that time will be like. In chapter 14 John again gives a summary description.

"If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath." (14:9-10)

And then in the latter part of chapter 14, this period of tribulation is described:

"So he (Jesus) who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth and the earth was harvested." (14:16)

And again in 14:19, *"The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress...and blood flowed..."*

What all of these passages have described symbolically or literally and in greater or lesser detail is now, in chapters 15 and 16, described in the fullest detail in the Bible.

But before we look at this text there is one more thing I wish for you to bear in mind: The period of time which we generally call the "tribulation" is a period of time that begins with the establishment of a world government/religion by the antichrist and false prophet described in chapter 13 and ends with the second coming of Jesus described most fully in chapter 19. Whether it is exactly 7 years in length or not is reasonably debated but we do know that at least it is a relatively short period of time.

The two beasts (the antichrist and the false prophet) assume worldwide leadership and institute a governmental/religious system that controls the whole world. Because of their rebellion against God, instigated by

Satan (the dragon of chapters 12 and 13), this world government persecutes the people of God. That persecution is described in chapters 11 and 13. It is likely that early in this period unbelievers are relatively free of any tribulation—they are thriving, and they are being deceived into believing that this world government/religion and the leadership of the antichrist is exactly what the world needs. But at some point in this false paradise on earth while the unbelieving of this world are persecuting God's people the judgment of God begins to fall on them. It appears that the "trumpet" judgments of chapter 9 come first as less severe and then these "bowl" judgments of chapter 16 come last. But it is just as possible that the "trumpet" and "bowl" descriptions are describing different aspects of the same judgments of God.

The period of time that we generally call the "tribulation" is a period of time that begins with the establishment of a world government/religion by the antichrist and false prophet described in chapter 13 and ends with the second coming of Jesus.

While John sees the persecution of believers during this time as severe, it is not for that reason it is called a "tribulation" – it is called a "tribulation" because of the judgment of God on unbelievers. And it is that "tribulation-judgment" that probably comes toward the end of this relatively short period of time before Jesus comes again that we now see described in detail in chapter 16.

Read these excerpts from chapters 15 and 16:

15:1 - "I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues - last, because with them God's wrath is completed."

15:7 - "Then one of the four living creatures gave to the

seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God..."

16:1ff - "Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, 'Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.'

"The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.

"The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.

"The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood..."

"The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent or glorify him.

"The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done.

"The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East.

"Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

'Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.' Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

"The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'It is done!'" Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake.

During that time, the closer it gets to the day that Christ will come, the more severe and deadly is the judgment of God.

"The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible."

What a description! Can you imagine being alive at such a time? During this period of time Jesus called the "great tribulation" as the persecution of God's people grows ever more severe, so God's judgment on unbelievers grows ever more intense. As the world government turns up the heat on God's people, God really turns up the heat on the world. During that time, the closer it gets to the day that Christ will come, the more severe and deadly is the judgment of God.

Lest you think these days are remote or removed from our experience, please remember that these things could begin

to happen at any moment. There is no prophecy that must be fulfilled before these things can begin to happen. Having witnessed the entire Soviet empire changed virtually overnight, it ought to come as no surprise to us to think that the kind of antichrist government/religion described in Revelation could grow up very quickly in our world. These events described in Revelation 16 could take place soon. I'm not saying they necessarily will happen soon but we must be aware that these things could be happening to us or at least our contemporaries very soon.

God's people are not the subjects of this wrath of God that is poured out.

Seven plagues are poured out on the earth. John sees it as seven angels each holding a shallow dish—a bowl—the contents being God's wrath in a particular form. I want you to be very clear however on whom these plagues are inflicted. Who bears the wrath of God? These tribulation plagues are not on God's people! Before John describes the terror of those days of God's wrath, he sees the people of God. In Rev. 15:2 he writes, *"I saw...those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb."*

John pictures them as already successfully through the persecution of the antichrist. He sees them as standing victoriously on the other side of the second coming of Jesus. Just as Moses and the Israelites rejoiced in song at their deliverance by God from Egypt, so God's people rejoice in song over their deliverance from the antichrist.

These are God's people who did not yield to the threats of the evil one. These are God's people who did not believe the lies of the antichrist. These are the people who didn't

slide back into the old ways of the world when there would have been every temporal advantage to doing so. These people are not the subjects of God's wrath—they are subjects of God's ultimate protection. But notice also 16:2 – the first plague, *"broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image."*

The plagues don't fall on God's people but on those who rejected God's way, those who wanted what the world governmental/religious system had to offer. They pledged their allegiance to the antichrist and now they were receiving their reward. Again, I emphasize, God's people are not the subjects of this wrath of God that is poured out.

The Wrath of God

Look briefly at this judgment of God. The first plague is described as ugly and painful sores breaking out on everyone except God's people. Are these like Job's painful sores that covered him from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet? Are these like the boils that God inflicted on the Egyptians so that they were in agony as a result of their refusing to obey God? Whatever they are, they are disfiguring, putrefying, loathsome sores that won't go away with no cure. People are horrible to look at and the pain never ends.

The second plague is poured out and the sea turns to blood and every living thing in it dies. Imagine such a disaster and imagine the stench! John said the blood was like that of a dead man, coagulated and rotting. Is this literally "blood"? I don't know for certain but whatever it is, it causes death. There have been years when something called a "red tide," a natural contamination, strikes certain oceans and causes unimaginable destruction of marine life. In Florida a number of years ago, the carcasses of fish were pushed into piles sixty miles long.¹ But in Revelation 16 the death to marine life is universal; not just a part of

an ocean but all the oceans turn to blood and it destroys everything in them.

In the third plague, just as in Moses' day, the fresh water sources turn to blood. But this time it is apparently all fresh water, worldwide. I have no doubt it could be literally blood—Jesus who made everything from nothing and who turned plain water into wine, could do precisely as it says.

In the fourth plague something happens to the sun. Its delicate balance of gases is somehow altered and the earth heats up to the point of scorching people from the heat. We think it can't happen but even our scientists tell us how vulnerable we are to even minor changes to our earth's relationship to the sun.

The fifth plague is the opposite of the fourth. Now it is darkness. When we saw the effects of the trumpet judgments in chapter 9 we saw how the earth was subjected to total darkness for a period of a third of a day and the kind of panic that would set in. Here the entire world is thrust into complete darkness, not just for a third of a day, but for some unspecified period of time—long enough that worldwide panic sets in. The combination of sores, undrinkable water, heat and darkness cause people to gnaw their tongues in pain.

The sixth plague is not so much a direct attack on the people as it is a preparation for the battle that will occur when Jesus comes again. At this point in the chronology of events, we are at the threshold of Jesus' return. The river Euphrates is dried up so that the kings of the east and their armies can join the rest of the world to fight against the Lord Jesus when He returns. That battle is described in chapter 19.

The seventh plague, just like the seventh seal and the seventh trumpet is a description of a cataclysmic geological upheaval just before Jesus comes or maybe as He comes.

Back in chapter 8 when the seventh seal was opened it says, *"The angel took...fire from the altar and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake."*

In chapter 11 when John described the sounding of the seventh trumpet he wrote, *"there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a great hailstorm."*

The combination of sores, undrinkable water, heat and darkness cause people to gnaw their tongues in pain.

And here with the seventh bowl poured out, those previews become reality: lightning, thunder, an earthquake that splits mountains, inundates islands, and a hailstorm the likes of which has never before been known.

You could well ask, "Is this to be taken literally?" That John uses words symbolically to describe the indescribable seems clear but what is also clear is that he uses those words to describe a literal and physical calamity on the earth that will strike terror to the souls of people. I think we have exegetical and theological reason to say that the judgment, the destruction, the fear and the death are literal—they are real. That is what will happen just before and as Jesus comes again!

A Warning

Why is John shown this horrible vision of the future and why does John tell it to the people of Asia Minor and to us? I think it is a warning: A warning to both unbelievers and to believers. Two times in John's description of those horrible last days on earth, he mentions specific things. Twice he mentions that in spite of the agony of the judgments of God, people, *"cursed the name of God and they refused to*

repent and glorify him" (16:9) and they *"cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores but they refused to repent of what they had done."* (16:11) He or she is a fool who thinks they can wait and come to God whenever they want to. A day is coming when even the most awful punishments from God will result not in repentance but in a hardening of the heart toward God. Do not wait for those days to come and say, "Then I will turn to God." It won't happen. Now is the day of salvation!

Heed the warnings of God. In our day and age many evangelicals are embarrassed by the concept of "repent or perish" but God isn't. God says, "Come to me because I love you." That is true, but there is another issue as well. God also says "Come to me because *'He who does not have the Son does not have life but stands condemned.'*" "

***God graciously and freely offers
forgiveness of our sins, and eternal
sanctuary from the wrath of God, if we will
turn in trust and obedience to Jesus.***

We don't only say to our young children, "Don't run into the street because I love you." That is true but we also say, "Don't run in the street because you can be killed." God has placed some very real pictures in front of our faces and He says, in essence, "Don't go there!" *"There is a way,"* He said, *"that seems right to a person but the end of it is death."*

God's warnings are because of His grace. John Newton wrote it this way in his well known hymn *Amazing Grace*: "Grace has taught my heart to fear." And he went on to add, "and grace, my fears relieved." *"Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

God graciously and freely offers forgiveness of our sins, and eternal sanctuary from the wrath of God, if we will turn

in trust and obedience to Jesus. Have you? Will you?

But I also said John describes the terrible end of this age for another group of people—for those who are already believers. Right in the middle of John's description of the plagues he inserts this:

"Behold I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." (Rev. 16:15)

Using the analogy of a soldier who is supposed to be on guard, he suggests there might be some who will be tempted to sleep. There might be some of you who will get lulled into believing the lies of the enemy. You too are susceptible to desiring what the world has to offer more than you want what God has to offer. You too might be tempted to reduce your Christianity to something you believe in your head but it doesn't really affect your living. But Jesus says through John, "Don't do it!" Know that the consequences of unfaithfulness are deadly—eternally deadly. There is grace to see you through—will you ask for and receive His grace? Don't fall back! Remember, in the midst of it all, no matter how hard it gets, Jesus wins! And those who are in Christ are saved from the wrath of God.

End Notes

¹ John Phillips, *Exploring Revelation*, p. 201

Chapter Eighteen

The Last Babylon Revelation 17-18

Consider it fair warning—some of the language I use in this chapter will be somewhat indelicate. I have found it difficult to express what John is expressing without using his language and his language is earthy. I also believe very firmly that John's choice of words and the mental pictures he creates are intentionally shocking. He wants his reader's attention.

The book of Revelation is a book of big ideas and of large pictures. It stands back from life and looks at it in perspective. It paints the elements of life in bold relief so they can be clearly seen. It makes us ask and answer big questions—questions about life and death and about who we are, what we are doing and where we are going. It doesn't let us just get up and brush our teeth, go to work, take a lunch break and watch the evening news. It pushes the “why” and “what” questions in our faces. It paints life in big bold colors and bizarre pictures—it uses startling and exaggerated language to point out what should be obvious to us but can too easily get lost in the details of life.

Author Flannery O'Connor was asked why she created such bizarre characters in her stories and she replied that for the nearly blind you have to draw very large, simple caricatures.¹ John must have thought us “nearly blind.” Political cartoonists today do that very thing. They exaggerate the physical features of a person or a place to make it obvious what they are talking about and what they think about it. In our day if a political cartoonist draws a picture of a ferocious bear hovering over a tiny republic we know immediately he or she is telling us something about

the Russians and the little country of Chechna. John uses words to paint a political cartoon. His cartoon is not a bit funny—it is deadly serious. Ultimately, it is a striking commentary on life in the tribulation, and our lives today, and it communicates a great warning.

"Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues."

Before we look at this political cartoon I want to ask you some questions that I hope will keep you mindful throughout the sermon of why John describes what he does.

- What in life is most attractive to you?
- What do you seek from life?
- What is so important to you in life that you are giving your time, your energy and your money to accomplish?

Put a little differently: Whom are you serving in life? You will serve someone. Who do you believe? You will believe someone. 3500 years ago, Joshua put it this way:

"Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your forefathers... or the gods of (the land in which you are living). But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15)

I believe the central question John is posing in chapters 17-18 of Revelation is this: Whom will you serve with your life? I believe that is the question that we are to answer because of what I believe to be the key verse in the entire passage:

"Then I heard another voice from heaven say: Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so

that you will not receive any of her plagues.”(18:4)

Whoever “she” is in that verse, John is saying you don’t want to serve her because of what she does and where she’s going. And who is she? That’s what the political cartoon is about.

In chapter 17, John paints a word picture of a great prostitute sitting on a blood-red beast with seven heads and ten horns covered with blasphemous names. Put that political cartoon in the Denver Post and it would get everyone’s attention. But what does it mean—what is this picture supposed to communicate? John leaves nothing to chance. In chapter 17, he spells out exactly who these exaggerated caricatures represent and in chapter 18, he repeats a long poem the angel tells him—a poem that describes what happens.

For those of you who like the big picture of where we’re going in the text, I would explain it this way:

1. Who is this prostitute?
2. What is her desire?
3. What means does she use to accomplish her desire?
4. What ultimately happens to her?
5. And how do we respond?

The Prostitute

First of all then, who is this prostitute? In 17:1 we read, *“One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters.’ ”*

We’ll get to “who” she is in a minute but first of all, why does John picture her as a prostitute? The word prostitute is often used in the Bible in connection with unfaithfulness to God. The Lord God often referred to His own people this

way; He loved them, betrothed them, cared for them, took them into His home and yet they forsook Him, chased after other gods and gave themselves and even what God had given them to others.

*"See how the faithful city (Jerusalem) has become a **harlot!** She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her - but now murderers...Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts."* (Isaiah 1:21)

Often in the Old Testament there are references to cities and to kingdoms as "prostitutes." And time and time again you see that the word is not so much a reference to human sexuality but rather as spiritual unfaithfulness to God. Nahum said, *"A oracle concerning Nineveh...The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims...all because of the wanton lust of the **harlot**, alluring, the **mistress** of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her **prostitution**..."* (Nahum 1:1, 3:1)

And Isaiah said, *"At the end of seventy years, the Lord will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a **prostitute** and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth."* (23:15)

This prostitute takes what belongs to God and gives it to another. And again I emphasize the issue is not about sex—it is about who and what you are giving yourself to in life.

But again who is this prostitute? John tells us:

- 17:1 – *"She sits on many waters"* which later (v15) are identified as *"The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages."* This prostitute has control over the world.

- 17:2 – *"The kings of the earth...and the inhabitants of the earth..."* consort with her. This prostitute has dealings with the nations of the world.
- 17:3 – She was *"sitting on a scarlet beast."* Whoever she is, she is again pictured as in alliance with the nations of the world—the beast that is described for us in chapter 13 and here in chapter 17.
- 17:4 – She is wealthy and powerful
- 17:6 – She has killed the saints.

This "prostitute" in Revelation is not referring to a person but to a way of life—a whole way of thinking about life and living it out.

Often in the Old Testament there are references to cities and to kingdoms as "prostitutes." And time and time again you see that the word is a reference to spiritual unfaithfulness to God.

What does the prostitute represent? She represents what other New Testament writers call "the world." Paul said, *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world..."* (Rom. 12:2) and John wrote, *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."* (I John 2:15)

This prostitute is symbolic of the world's way of thinking and acting without God. And according to John the prostitute is symbolic of a city.

"The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." (17:18)

Just as Baghdad stands for Iraq, Saddam Hussein included, so this prostitute symbolizes the center of the entire world-controlling system during the tribulation. But notice she is also called "Babylon"—she is called, *"mystery Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of*

What is this prostitute's desire? Her desire is to destroy the people of God.

the earth." She is identified as the Babylon that is described in chapter 18 more fully—a city, an empire, and an economic and social system that ruled with wealth, power and cruelty toward God's people. (see chapter 18)

Why "Babylon"? Babylon was in actuality the city/empire that overthrew Jerusalem/Judah in 606BC and carried the people into captivity. With the conquest of Jerusalem, temple worship ceased, the people of God were in exile, and the great nation of Israel that had been the promised land and led by King David at the height of its prestige and power was now in ruins. Babylon, the city/empire, and even the word "Babylon" became symbolic for the evil of the world against the people of God. "Babylon" became a euphemism for the enemy. Call any city or government "Babylon" and everyone knew what you meant—it was evil and it was your opposition. By the time the New Testament was written, Babylon had been long gone but that name was applied to any enemy of the people of God.

So she is called a "prostitute" because she leads people astray. She is called "Babylon" because she is the evil enemy of God's people. Let me attempt to put this evil empire in chronological perspective for you. Chapter 13 introduced us to the evil empire that will rule the world in the few years just before Jesus comes again. The two

beasts of chapter 13, the antichrist and the false prophet, will lead that worldwide governmental/religious system.

Chapter 14 jumped ahead to describe some of what would happen when Jesus does come again.

Chapters 15-16 then went back, to describe the last plagues that God would pour out on the earth just before and as Jesus comes again.

What we have in chapters 17 and 18 is more of what that world-government discussed in Chapter 13 would be like and particularly its destruction.

Chapter 19:11 and following will describe the second coming.

One more look at who she is tells us this:

"There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns." (17:3)

When we compare that with chapter 13 where the "beast" is clearly symbolic of a worldwide governmental/religious system that rules the whole world, we then see that the prostitute is the capitol city, or the center of that evil government.

Her Desire

And what is this prostitute's desire? Verse 6 tells us: *"I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus."* Her desire is to destroy the people of God. Verse 14 goes on to say, *"(She and the others) will make war against the Lamb."* This prostitute and the beast, symbolic of that evil empire at the end of the age, and all those they bring into alliance with them described symbolically as, *"the ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with*

the beast” have one purpose: *“They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast - They will make war against the Lamb.”* (17:12-14)

God has created us to be in relationship with Him—to worship Him. “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Satan’s design from the beginning has been to thwart that plan of God, that purpose of God, for all people. Another way of describing her purpose is by simply describing the woman as a prostitute—she wants to get people and especially God’s people to use themselves for purposes other than for what they were created. If she can get them to follow her instead of God, then she has accomplished her aim.

Her Game Plan

We come now to the means she uses to accomplish her plans to destroy people. John clearly gives this a lot of ink in his description. She basically offers people a cheap substitute for the real thing. She lures them with temporal riches instead of eternal wealth. She entices them with passing power instead of everlasting significance. She offers us the here and now, immediate gratification, instead of lasting peace and joy.

In chapter 18, when the people of the world are lamenting her downfall, notice what they miss about her:

- 18:3 – *“the merchants of the earth **grew rich from her excessive luxuries.**”*
- 18:9 – *“the kings of the earth... **shared her luxury**”*
- 18:12-13 – *“**Cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble; cargoes of***

cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horse and carriages; and bodies and souls of men."

(estimated 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire)

- 18:15 – *"The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her."*
- 18:16 – *"...dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls...such great wealth."*
- 18:18b – *"was there ever a city like **this great city?**"*
- 18:23 – ***"Your merchants were the world's great men."***

"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Satan's design from the beginning has been to thwart that plan of God, that purpose of God, for all people.

What did she lure them with? Affluence and influence! She got them to chase after everything the world has to offer instead of pursuing God. She got them to sell their souls for a little more education, a little more money, a little larger home, a little more power, or a little higher position in the company. I don't know how to apply this today. How does the "whore" seduce you? What does she offer that would lead you away from God? What does she promise that is ultimately a lie even if immediately it appears so good? How does she insinuate herself into your confidence?

Is it money? Does she so tantalize you with things that you wind up giving your life for those things? Has she

convinced you to put a picture of a Ferrari or something else on your refrigerator and then strive to achieve it? Has she made you so fearful of the future that a retirement fund that can handle every emergency is the driving force of your life and "trusting" God is a hollow concept? Has she turned your head to other things so you can't give or only give out of a grudging duty.

Is it prestige, being somebody, being known, recognition? Education becomes not a means for learning but for getting somewhere. Jobs are not for doing something well and providing a service but for getting promoted, getting

The great prostitute takes the good things of life and uses them to turn us away from God, getting us to focus on ourselves—now!"

recognition, getting ahead, especially ahead of others. Class reunions aren't for enjoying old friendships but for comparisons—to make certain we aren't fatter, older looking, poorer, or less educated than the average. If the prostitute could offer enough of the world that people think they don't need God then she has them hooked. Babylon was a great place to live; sleeping with the whore wasn't all bad until you realize what it kept you from and where it led.

Author Eugene Peterson, using the same earthy language that John uses, describes the deception this way:

"The terrible thing about the whore is not that she takes strangers to bed with her, but that once getting them there she uses her body to lie about life: There is no joining of lives, only of (bodies). The exploration and development of our unique human identity, of which sex is the physical means, is replaced by elaborate and deceiving fantasies. A

fundamental impoverishment of person is accomplished behind a seductive spell of perfumes, silks and flatteries. Whoredom uses sex to lie about life: The truth of life is that love is a gift, that relationships are commitments, that sexuality is the sacrament of (human) spirituality. The whore's lie is that love is purchased, that relationships are 'deals', that sexuality is appetite. Whoredom is the use of the good to do evil; the use of a good body to demean the person, the use of the means of realizing our identity to depersonalize identities. The great wrong in whoredom is not sexual immorality (although it is that) but spiritual sacrilege."² The great prostitute takes the good things of life and uses them to turn us away from God, getting us to focus on ourselves—now!"

What are you pursuing in life? Have you gone into the whorehouse of the world's values to find it or into God's house? Do you seek life's fulfillments in the arms of the great prostitute or in the arms of God?

Her Demise

The prostitute, the world, seduces with the allure of power and wealth but what will happen to her? John already described for us in chapter 14 that the world would be harvested like so many grapes and thrown into the winepress of God's wrath; that those who pledge their allegiance to the world's ways will be forever punished. Chapter 18 is a funeral dirge for the whole system and those who followed it. It is a song lamenting the greatness of the fall of the great prostitute.

- 18:2 – "*She has become **a home for demons** and a haunt for every kind of evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.*"
- 18:7 – "*Give her as much **torture and grief** as the glory and luxury she gave herself.*"

- 18:8 – ***"Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her; death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her."***

The politicians and businessmen who had gotten fat off their alliance with this world system lamented the downfall of the Prostitute/Babylon:

18:9 – ***"When the kings of the earth who have committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see **the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her.**"***

18:10 – ***"Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! **In one hour your doom has come.**"***

18:21 – ***"Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said, '**With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again.**'"***

John is saying in the strongest language imaginable that the prostitute is going down. She may have all the appearances of strength, and influence and wealth. She may appear to offer everything a person could ever want. But she is going down. She offers a counterfeit life but her destruction is real.

What Can We Do?

And so John's warning is urgent! ***"Come out of her so you will not share in her sins...or receive any of her plagues."*** (18:4)

There are two reasons given to separate:

1. So you won't fall into her ways.
2. So you won't reap her consequences.

In Revelation 17-18, John is describing what the world-wide

governmental/religious system led by the antichrist will be like and how certain is its destruction. But that description, according to John, fits not only that day to come but fits this present day as well. John wrote earlier, "*(There) is the spirit of antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.*" (I John 4:3b) Though it will be even more seductive and powerful then, we are today faced with the deceits of the prostitute—her lie is that she offers life when what she offers is really death. Are you pursuing God with your life or are you following the prostitute?

"Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your forefathers...or the gods of (the land in which you are living). But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24:15)

End Notes

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 146

² Ibid, p. 146-147

Chapter Nineteen

The Hallelujah Chorus Revelation 19:1-9

When I was in my elementary years, I attended a one-room schoolhouse in rural northern Wisconsin. There was a total of 15 students in the entire school from grades 1-8. Studying Revelation 19, I was reminded of an incident that happened when I was in 5th grade.

It was winter time, as it is much of the time in Wisconsin, and almost everyday at recess we would build two snow forts about 25 feet away from each other and then at noon we would have snowball fights, each team firing from its own fort. One day Chester Miller was on the opposing side. Chester was big! Certainly much bigger than me. And some of us thought Chester was “one brick shy of a full load.” So when Chester got angry it was rather frightening because he didn’t know when to quit.

At noon that particular day we were busily making snowballs and storing them in the fort. Then, at the appointed time, we began the war. Fairly soon in the battle I picked up a special snowball—hardened with a little water and better for breaking down the enemy’s fort—and I launched it with all my might. Chester stood up in his fort just as the snowball arrived and it caught him in the head.

For just a second I felt sorry for Chester. But the holler he let out and the way he came out of his fort toward me told me he was in pain, but not injured. And my sympathy turned instantly to fear. Chester’s words as he came toward me were something about ending my life. It’s funny now but it wasn’t, then! My only hope was to outrun Chester, so I took off around the schoolhouse corner with Chester lumbering after me in screaming pursuit. Around and

around the schoolhouse we went, Chester yelling about killing me and me crying and running for my life.

It seemed like forever but finally the school bell was rung ending recess but Chester didn't stop coming after me and if Chester didn't stop there was no way I was going to stop. All the other children went inside but not Chester and not me. You might ask why I didn't make a dash for the schoolhouse door? Because I knew that being inside only meant I would be cornered. The teacher came out and ordered Chester to stop but she was no match for Chester and when Chester didn't stop chasing me, I didn't stop.

From the safe side of the sea, the Israelites saw, with astonishment, that their enemy had been miraculously defeated. Now can you imagine the relief they experienced?

Then Chester's sister, Janet, appeared. She was in 8th grade and she was bigger and tougher than Chester. The teacher had apparently asked for her help. When I realized Janet wasn't after me but was going to take Chester out, and when I saw her step in front of Chester and take him down to help him get control of himself, I collapsed into the snow with tears of relief. The dragon had been slain. Babylon the great had fallen. What relief, what joy.

Have you ever had a genuinely life-threatening experience? Can you remember the relief, the joy when it was past and you realized you weren't dead and weren't likely to die soon? There's an emotional response that can be very strong. Most of you know the biblical account of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea but have you ever imagined the emotions they experienced?

Historians estimate there were more than a million of them. They had left Egypt, walking and carrying everything they

owned. It was a huge exodus of people—to give you some idea of their experience, think of the pictures you’ve seen of civilians streaming out of war-torn cities or countries. By the time they got to the Red Sea, an impassable barrier, they realized the Egyptians had changed their mind about letting them go and their army was in hot pursuit. At that point they were convinced they were doomed. They were slaves, they were carrying gold from Egypt and they had been responsible for some of the worst plagues to ever visit Egypt.

Then God opened up the waters of the Red Sea. The water banked up on either side creating a dry roadbed right through the sea. With haste the Israelite masses walked through that sea to the other side. But as they made it to the other side they could instantly see the danger was not over—the Egyptians on their horses and chariots were madly dashing through the sea on the same dry roadbed. Again, clutching their children to them, they waited for what appeared to be the inevitable end.

But God once again intervened and as certainly as He had stacked up the water to create a dry roadbed, so now He released that walled-up water and it caved in on the Egyptians. And from the safe side of the sea, the Israelites saw, with astonishment, that their enemy had been miraculously defeated. Now can you imagine the relief they experienced? Can you picture them watching in fear as the Egyptians approach? Can you see them peer in astonishment as they watch the waters cave in on those horses and their riders? Can you see them stand in stock silence as they take in what has happened? Can you then imagine them turning to each other and whispering at first and then slowing raising their voices to shouts – “Did you see that?!” Can you see them hugging each other?

What relief, what joy—what a celebration! The Bible says, *“Then Miriam took a tambourine in her hand and all the*

women followed her with tambourines and dancing they sang:

*'Sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted.
The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.'* "

Can you see them raising their faces toward heaven and shouting and waving anything in their hands and dancing and praising God and little kids running around in circles with excitement like they do when they don't know what's going on but it's fun? I can imagine the party went on all day. And as the singing continued more and more words were added to the song:

"The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him." (Exodus 15:1-2)

Now I want you to "fast-forward" at least 3500 years. We skip quickly over:

- Joshua leading the Israelites into Canaan. (1500 B.C.)
- Samson and Samuel as judges in the land (1200 B.C.)
- David crowned as king (1000 B.C.)
- The fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian armies. (600 B.C.)
- There's Ezekiel and Daniel in captivity.
- The Persian Empire and then Alexander the Great. (400 B.C.)
- The Romans conquer the known world. (200 B.C.)
- Jesus comes to earth the first time.
- Peter and Paul and others spread the gospel. (A.D. 50)

- Mohammed preaches and Islam begins to grow (A.D. 600)
- Europe begins to divide into nation-states. (A.D. 1000)
- The Crusades take place (A.D. 1200)
- Columbus begins to explore the world. (A.D. 1400)
- Martin Luther and John Calvin lead the great reformation. (A.D. 1500)
- An English colony is founded at Jamestown, Virginia. (A.D. 1600)
- The American Revolution (A.D. 1700)
- The Russian Revolution (A.D. 1900)
- World War II (A.D. 1940)
- The Second Russian Revolution (A.D. 1989)
- Today
- The evil one-world government (A.D. ?) Rev. 13

The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

According to Revelation 13 and 17, the coming governmental/religious system that will control the world, that John alternately calls the beasts, the prostitute, and Babylon, will be so evil and so pervasive that it will make the Egyptians that chased Israel seem like the "Welcome Wagon." The one-world government that is coming will have unlimited power. It will offer untold wealth and comfort to those who pledge their allegiance to it. But its greatest joy will be to persecute and kill God's people and it will all happen, undoubtedly, in the name of law and order and what is good for the human race.

But when Jesus comes again, according to chapters 14 and 18, that great evil empire will fall. It will unravel from within and Jesus will bring judgment from without. And the people of the world will mourn because they put their trust in her and she has been destroyed and they go down with her.

With that we come to the first ten verses of chapter 19 of Revelation. Chapter 18 viewed the destruction of that last great evil empire from the vantage point of the people who were going down with her. Just like viewing the crossing of the Red Sea from the view point of an Egyptian soldier that watches the walls of water cave in on him and his army,

John is looking ahead and he feels the excitement that will be felt when Jesus has come again—when He is here on this earth again.

chapter 19 is viewing the destruction of that last great evil empire from the perspective of God's people. Remember what we imagined earlier when we considered what the relief and joy the Israelites felt when they saw the Egyptian Army defeated by the sovereign intervention of Almighty God? This is how the people of God will feel in that day when Jesus comes again—evil has been destroyed and Jesus has come.

This passage has understandably been called the Hallelujah Chorus. Four times the word is shouted out—"hallelujah." It is only here in all the New Testament that this word is used. It is a word common to the Old Testament and it is a transliteration of two Hebrew words that mean "praise" and "Jehovah"—and thus our English translation "Praise the Lord" or just simply, "Hallelujah." Why the excitement? It appears there are two major events that generate this enthusiasm for God. The first is the destruction of the

enemy of God's people in verses 1-4 and the second is the marriage of God's people in verses 5-9.

When does this take place? Revelation 19:1-10 describes a time after Jesus comes again. His actual second coming will be described in Rev 19:11-21. But here in the first part of the chapter John jumps ahead and describes what it will be like when Jesus has come back. So John is looking ahead and he feels the excitement that will be felt when Jesus has come again—when He is here on this earth again.

First of all, he describes the excitement believers will feel when they realize that the enemy of their souls has been destroyed. Rev 19:1b-3 says, *"Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants. And again they shouted: Hallelujah! The smoke of her goes up for ever and ever...And they cried, 'Amen, Hallelujah!'"*

At the end of the tribulation when Jesus comes back again and ushers in the eternal kingdom of God, all the people of God will stand looking back and they will see there is no longer a threat. The enemy has been destroyed. When Jesus forgives us for our sin upon our repentance and faith in His death for us, we experience freedom from the penalty of sin. Immediately upon the experience of the "new birth"—when we become Christians—Jesus promises that from that day forward we can know that we will never be punished by God for our sin: the punishment, the penalty has been taken by Jesus. He died in our place.

As we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ we can also know an increasing freedom from the power of sin. It doesn't mean we won't sin again but it does mean we will realize that by God's grace it is possible for us not to sin; He enables us to obey to a degree we never thought possible. Life will still be a struggle but we can experience

wins and not just losses when it comes to sin. We experience something of freedom from the power of sin. But when Jesus comes again a whole new world will open to us—a world that is free from the presence of sin. No sinful nature or evil spirits offering their temptations to us. No government directly or indirectly attacking our values and our beliefs. No religion or state out to convert us or kill us.

- Imagine a world where the Balkan nations lived in peace—real peace.
- Imagine a world where the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda and Burundi loved each other.
- Imagine a world where poverty and sickness were non-existent.
- Consider a world where there was no child abuse, no unfaithfulness, and no deep emotional pain of rejection, or of loneliness, or of fear.
- Imagine a world where the specter of death, illness, and debilitating old age were absent—not even thought about again.
- Envision a world with no greed, and no prejudice.
- Imagine everything that works against us in this life being destroyed.
- Imagine being set free to actively serve God with no opposition even from our own natures.

No wonder these people were excited—the enemies of life that brought temptation, pain, suffering, fear, and frustration were gone. Do you want to know the truth? I am so conditioned to living in this corrupt world and with my corrupt nature that I struggle to imagine what it could be like. But in Revelation 19:1-4 the people of God see it happen, they experience it and they can't contain

themselves because of the joy they feel.

But secondly these people feel this excitement because of the marriage of God's people.

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory. For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given to her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints)." (Revelation 19:7-8)

When Jesus comes again a whole new world will open to us—a world that is free from the presence of sin.

All through the Bible God uses the analogy of marriage to describe His relationship to His people.

- In Hosea 2:19, God says, "I will betroth you to me for ever."
- In Isaiah, the Lord calls himself the husband of Israel.
- In Mark 2:19, Jesus likens Himself to a bridegroom to His people.
- In II Corinthians 11:2, Paul writes, "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him."

And in this passage the people of God are compared to a bride who has waited for a long time for the wedding and now the groom, Jesus Himself, comes and what they had waited so long to experience has now come to pass—they are together! Have you ever known an ache in your heart when you have been separated from the one or ones you love? Have you ever known the sheer joy at being reunited—together again? Is there anyone you know so

well and love so much that to be with them is peace, contentment, and satisfaction? In Revelation 19, the people of God had so long desired to be with Jesus that when He actually comes they can't contain themselves. Oh, to see Him face to face. To experience His love not by faith but by sight. The text says the bride has made herself ready. She

When we begin to grasp the height and depth and length and width of the love of Christ we too will long for that day when we will be with Him.

has lived in anticipation. She has obeyed and she has shaped her life with the expectation of seeing Him soon.

To be honest, there have been too many times when I have had no eagerness about the coming of Jesus, too many times when seeing Him brought no emotion to my heart. I suspect the major reason why some of us couldn't care less about seeing Jesus is because we don't know Him. If we knew how much He loves us we could hardly wait to see Him.

In Ephesians 5 when the apostle Paul compared the relationship of a husband and wife to that of Christ and the church, He said this is the way Jesus feels about us:

"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy cleansing her...and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless." (Ephesians 5 25-27)

Paul uses five verbs to indicate Christ's love for you and me—His church.

- **Loved** her
- **Gave** Himself for her
- **Make** her holy

- **Cleanse** her and
- **Present** her to Himself.

His whole reason for coming to earth the first time was to rescue us from ourselves and Satan and transform us into what He created us to be. His love was so strong that He gave Himself for us, died in our place to cleanse us from our sin, and He lives today to sanctify us, to make us holy, to reshape us so that we will be able to receive Him when He comes again. I don't think it is too strong to say that Jesus can hardly wait to come back to see you and be with you—He loves you.

There are many things about marriage that make it great but outstanding among all the others is one: Unconditional love. You can earn respect, or rewards, or even honor but you can't earn love. With a true marriage comes an unconditional commitment to love. I love to go home at night. I can hardly wait to get home after a trip. I want to be with my wife because there is no place else in the world where I know the sheer contentment, peace and satisfaction of being loved that I know in her presence. When you are loved that way, where else would you want to be?

When we begin to grasp the height and depth and length and width of the love of Christ we too will long for that day when we will be with Him. No wonder the people in Revelation 19 were excited: The enemy was destroyed and the Bridegroom had come. Everything they had believed, everything they had trusted Jesus to do, He had done. A life of obedience, and of faithfulness, even in the face of a hostile world, was worth it all. Now that is why they were excited but I want you to see how John describes it. For the way John presents this information adds to the anticipation of that day.

First of all I want you to notice that unlike earlier passages

where John describes what he sees in his visions of the future, this time he “hears.”

- 19:1 - “After this I heard...”
- 19:5 - “Then a voice came...”
- 19:6 - “Then I heard...”

John did not here have a visual experience, he had an audio one. Have you ever had one of those “boom-box” cars pull up along side you at the stop light and your car shakes from the sound coming from it? You look over and see that the driver is having an audio experience—the sound has captured them.

John is captured by the sound and it is loud!

- 19:1 - “a great multitude in heaven SHOUTING:”
- 19:3 - “And again they SHOUTED:”
- 19:4 - “And they CRIED:”
- 19:6 - “Like a great a great multitude...SHOUTING:”

John hears it and it’s loud but how loud and what does it sound like?

- 19:1 - “Like the roar of a great multitude...”
- 19:6 - “what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder...”

You’ve heard Bronco fans at the stadium when the opposing quarterback is trying to get a critical play off before the time expires. You’ve been under a large waterfall. You’ve been in a canyon in the summer when a thunderstorm rattles the trees. John says that’s what it was like. The sound was deafening. The excitement was contagious and the celebration was like nothing ever experienced before.

Earlier John said it was like this: *"Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering...ten thousand times ten thousand...Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth singing...."* (Revelation 5:11ff)

Imagine standing there that day with all that sound and celebration and in the middle of it all is Jesus. And every one of us has our eyes on Him. We can hardly believe it is real, but it is. He has come, the enemy is destroyed, and we are with Him!

"Hallelujah, For our Lord God Almighty reigns."

When Handel wrote the *Hallelujah Chorus*, this was the passage that inspired it. Can you put yourself there? Can you "hear" that day? Will you believe He is coming? Will you stake your life on it? Will you live your life today with that sound ringing in your ears?

"Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen."

Chapter Twenty

Jesus Wins! Revelation 19:11-21

The Bible is not just a collection of unrelated events or just a history of a people called the Jews. 66 books written by over 30 men and women over a period of 1500 years combine to tell one story. While the Bible is made up of many events, many poems, and many sermons, there is one overriding plot that runs throughout. It is the story of God's gracious act of destroying evil without destroying those who trust Him. In most stories we read or watch on television or in theaters, after introducing us to the main characters the storyteller describes the dilemma that the rest of the story will unfold and hopefully solve. Good Jack and Jill are likable, upstanding citizens. Evil Susan comes and kidnaps their precious baby, Samantha. The rest of the story is how good conquers evil and baby Samantha is returned to Jack and Jill and evil Susan is imprisoned.

Within the first three chapters of the first book of the Bible we are introduced to God and to Satan and to humanity. And within those same first few words we are told how people (namely Adam and Eve and everyone who would come after them) rebelliously and selfishly chose to believe the lies of Satan and follow Him rather than the God who created them and loves them. From that point forward the Bible is the unfolding of a holy and just God's plan and dealing with people to bring them back into relationship with Himself. He has to destroy evil without destroying the evil people He desires to save.

The Bible could have been a very short book. Three chapters:

- Chapter 1 - God graciously creates everything including people with a relationship to Him.
- Chapter 2 - The people rebel against God's authority.
- Chapter 3 - God justly destroys the people.

God creates people, people rebel, and then God destroys the people. But God, in mercy, doesn't do that. Instead, working a plan He made even before creation, He called one family on earth (Abraham's family) and He determined that through that family, God Himself would come to earth—a messiah, to save His people from their sins.

The great hope of humanity is that Jesus is coming again and will put an end to the evil that causes such misery and suffering in our world.

And at just the right time, according to God's plan, God the Son came and He was born of a virgin, becoming God-man. That was His first coming. And after declaring and demonstrating that He was God, He died for the sins of His people. He satisfied divine justice against evil, against the sin of His people, and He paid the price for sin so His people could be justly forgiven. And what He declared was that though the wages of sin is eternal death, He, the Messiah, would give people life—spiritual and physical life for eternity—if they would ask Him and trust Him.

And so we live in a world dominated by the struggle between good and evil. An evil leader in Satan, an evil world subjected to disease and catastrophe, and evil people desiring their own selfish ways more than God's love. And on the other hand a gracious God offering forgiveness and life. But the story doesn't end there. We are not destined to live in an everlasting struggle between good and evil. Jesus

declared that a day would come when He would put a final end to evil—He would wipe it out. He would recreate a world where His people would live in loving fellowship with Him and each other forever. That would be His second coming. The story began with creation and it will end with Jesus coming again for re-creation.

The book of Revelation is the last chapter in the story. And the second coming of Jesus is the high point, the denouement, of that last chapter. There are 210 chapters in the New Testament. 318 times in those 210 chapters the second coming of Jesus is mentioned. All of human history, all of our histories, look to that event. It is the defining moment of humanities' future.

If Jesus does not come again it means He was a liar or He was mentally unbalanced. If Jesus does not come again there is no resurrection. For the Bible says that the resurrection of our bodies will not happen until Jesus comes again. You will never again see, with your own eyes, those you love who have died already. If Jesus does not come again there is no end to the cosmic, universal and personal daily struggle between good and evil. Famine, war, earthquakes, hatred, child abuse, hurricanes, loneliness, and death will continue for millennia. The great hope of Christians, the great hope of humanity, is not just that many will become Christians, live in relative peace and affluence for a while and then go to heaven when they die! The great hope of humanity is that Jesus is coming again and will put an end to the evil that causes such misery and suffering in our world.

Recently, in just one day, I moved from place to place and from conversation to conversation where I saw the outcomes of evil. I sat with a young couple in a hospital room just hours after they learned that one of their twin babies, yet to be born, was dead and the mother's life was in jeopardy. We live in a fallen world where death destroys.

I went from that to a meeting with a middle-aged couple whose son and daughter-in-law are on the verge of separation after years of difficulty and a young child who loves them both. We are sinful and we live among fallen people where our own sinfulness destroys each other and even the children we love.

Next I talked with a man who hurts deeply as he watches his elderly mother face the difficulties of aging. Death destroys and the pain of watching it even slowly creep up on those we love is sometimes maddening.

I talked with a young woman who is still battling the emotional hurts of a childhood filled with conditional acceptance. I hate what our selfishness does to others—the destruction and pain it causes.

Then I went home and looked into the face of a smiling baby boy whose future is so uncertain that my heart hurts to even think about it.

But Jesus is coming again and when He does He will do away with all of that. He will destroy Satan the father of evil. He will destroy this fallen world and recreate it in wholeness. He will destroy all unrepentant, rebellious human beings. And He will recreate His forgiven children in His own image—spiritually holy, physically immortal – fit for the kingdom of God. Everything hinges on the second coming of Jesus. But there are definitely two perspectives on that second coming of Jesus. What will bring inexpressible joy to some will strike terror in the hearts of others. When the Denver Police Department pulls up, in force, in front of a house wherein people are being held hostage, you can easily believe that the people inside the house hear the sirens from two very different perspectives. The gunman hears threat and the hostages hear hope. So it will be with the coming again of Jesus. God's people can hardly wait and the others will mourn. We come to chapter 19 in our study of Revelation. Beginning at verse 11 we

reach the high point of human history—the literal, physical, personal coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ to this earth.

"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him,

***Jesus is coming again and when He does
He will destroy this fallen world and
recreate it in wholeness.***

riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

"And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, 'Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.'

"Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were

killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.”(19:11-21)

What a day that will be! He came the first time, born in a cattle manger, raised in poverty, despised by most, declared to be demonic, and killed to silence. But the next time He comes, it will be very different.

His Authority

Look at the authority with which He comes:

- He’s on a white horse—symbolic of authority.
- With justice, He judges and makes war—with perfect justice, He measures out the punishment due to those who oppose Him.
- His eyes are like blazing fire—His sight penetrates and illuminates everything—He misses nothing in His gaze on all humanity.
- On His head are many crowns—if one crown means authority, many crowns means all authority.

His Honor

Look at His four names:

- He is called faithful and true—He is the thoroughly reliable one.
- He has another name that no one knows—a mystery.
- His name is also the Word of God—He is the exact representation of the invisible God. He is God Almighty.
- And He has the name “King of kings and Lord of lords” - He is the supremely sovereign Lord of the universe.

He is Jesus!

His Power

Look at His power:

- He is dressed in a **robe dipped in blood**—actually spattered with blood would be a more accurate description. His clothing is bloody with the blood of those who defied Him.
- Out of His mouth comes a **sharp sword** with which to strike down the nations.
- He will rule them with an **iron scepter, meaning He will crush them.**
- He treads the **wine press of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.**

We saw that language back in chapter 14 when earlier John described the judgment of God on those who refused to follow Jesus.

Now before we look at what this judging, warrior God does, I want you to see who is with Jesus when He comes again. In verse 14 we read, *"the armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean."* Since we saw in the verses before this text a clear reference to the church as the bride of Christ and since believers are there described as wearing fine linen, bright and clean, it is reasonable to assume that the armies of heaven include both angels and all the people of God from all the ages.

But where did these people of God come from? What many of you have noticed already in our study of Revelation is that there is no mention of what we call a "rapture" anywhere in the book. The word "rapture" is the English translation of a Latin word that was translated from the Greek words "caught up." So we can rightly say either

"caught up" or "raptured." And yet we know from I Thessalonians 4 and from I Corinthians 15 that when Jesus comes again all believers who were already dead would be resurrected and all believers who were still alive when He comes again will be "caught up to meet the Lord" or as Paul says it in I Corinthians, *"the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed...in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye..."*

Paul describes how when Jesus comes again and the trumpet of God is sounded, those Christ followers who had died already will be resurrected and at the same time all Christ followers who are still alive when Christ comes will be changed instantly and together they will meet the Lord in the air and will come with Him as He returns to this earth as the reigning King.

Now I know not everyone agrees with this but I want you to see and decide for yourself about the timing of what we call the "rapture." In I Corinthians, Paul is talking about the second coming of Jesus. He says this resurrection of the dead and the changing of those who are alive will take place *"at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound"* and then the dead will be raised and the living will be changed. And when Paul is writing to the Thessalonians about the resurrection of the dead and the living being "caught up" or raptured, He again says it will happen when the *"Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God."*

This is second coming language wholly consistent with

Jesus' own words about His coming. He says in Matthew 24:30ff, *"At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other... Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."*

Dead believers will be resurrected and living believers will be changed and together they will go up to meet the Lord. I believe when we compare the language of all those references of resurrection and rapture to the language of Revelation 19 we best conclude that the "rapture" of the church takes place at the same time that Jesus returns in all His glory. I see no convincing reasons to accept a secret rapture of believers some time before the second coming of Jesus. Some might ask how such a rapture at the same time Jesus is coming actually would work—what would it look like? A good analogy might be the way the citizens of a city in John's and Paul's day would go out of the city to meet a visiting dignitary and escort him on the final stage of his journey to their city.

So using the same Greek words that were in secular usage in Paul's day, Paul describes how when Jesus comes again and the trumpet of God is sounded, those Christ followers who had died already (all Old Testament believers, all New Testament believers, as well as all believers down through the centuries) will be resurrected and at the same time all Christ followers who are still alive when Christ comes will be changed instantly and together they will meet the Lord in the air and will come with Him as He returns to this earth

as the reigning King of kings and Lord of lords. I know there are some Christians who believe that Christians are raptured or “caught up” before the tribulation begins and others who believe that Christians are “caught up” just before the worst of the tribulation. And I am in agreement with those Christians who have agreed to agreeably disagree on this issue. Good Christian people can disagree on this issue and not part company. But I will once again note that an interpretation that places the rapture coincident with the second coming of Jesus seems to be the simplest and most natural interpretation of these passages. But whether Christians were raptured earlier or right as Jesus comes again, I want you to see what happens when Jesus comes.

God let John see into the future. And what He saw was a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus—He is coming again!

"Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army." (19:19)

Back in chapter 16 John previewed this event. He wrote that he saw evil spirits come out of Satan, and the antichrist and the false prophet and they went *"out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God almighty...Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon."*

Here in chapter 19 we see that battle finally take place. And what happens?

"But the beast (antichrist) was captured, and with him the false prophet...The two of them were thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them (the kings and their armies - all unbelievers) were killed with the sword that

came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse..." (19:20-21)

Without the armies of heaven lifting one finger, without the people of God swinging one sword or firing one shot, the armies opposed to Jesus are decimated. They are killed by the powerful word of Jesus. Just as God spoke the worlds into existence, and raised people from the dead with His voice, so when He speaks His enemies will be destroyed.

God let John see into the future. And what He saw was a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus—He is coming again! And when He comes that whole worldly governmental system that so opposes God and His people, and that whole false religious system that so twists the truth to make evil sound good and good sound evil will be destroyed. All those who oppose Jesus and His people will be destroyed. The faith of God's people will be vindicated. All those years and all those experiences that tempted us to ask "Is it worth it?" All those times when circumstances caused us to doubt. All those people who somehow made us feel a little foolish for believing in spiritual life and resurrection and a literal heaven and hell. All the questions answered and all the doubts relieved; the whole picture becomes instantly clear—we see Jesus and He has come again. And He has come as our Savior and as the judge of the earth.

So how do we respond? Paul gives us an answer:

"Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." (I Cor. 15:58)

He has said He is coming again. Do you believe Him? I cannot make sense out of the evil in this world. I cannot imagine how anyone can remain sane in the face of so much suffering, pain and evil apart from knowing that

Jesus is coming again and He will make it right—justice will prevail. Evil will be destroyed. The question that remains is whether you and I will be caught up to meet Him when He comes or whether we will be among those who do battle against Him? Those who love His appearing are we who have repented of our sins and placed our faith in Jesus and His death for us to save us from the wrath to come and to make us children of God who will come with Jesus when He comes to judge the earth.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Millennium Revelation 20:1-10

Many people are interested in knowing the future. They are especially interested when they are currently in trouble. Getting sent to a specialist because your doctor saw a suspicious dark spot on your lung has a way of instantly raising your interest in the future.

The Apostle John in the book of Revelation was writing to people who were living in dangerous times; they were discriminated against even to the point of losing their jobs, their homes and some, their lives. The future held a great deal of interest for them. But it is not only people of John's day who were interested in what the future will bring, but people of our day, including us! If you've ever experienced the death of a loved one or if life, in some other way, has fallen apart, you become instantly fascinated with the future.

In the book of Revelation we not only learn that in the end Jesus wins but we also learn something about how the future unfolds. God graciously gives us some detail about what happens and what happens to us. I like the way the Apostle Paul said it to the Thessalonian Christians:

"We do not want you to be uninformed about those who die or to grieve like the rest of people who have no hope."

And then at God's direction, Paul spells out something of what happens to us after death. But it is John in the book of Revelation who gives us the most information about the future.

I want you to think with me about what John has shown us thus far in our reading of this book: In chapter 7 God

assures His people present and future that they are in His keeping—that He is the sovereign Lord and no matter what happens to them in this life, they will be with Him in eternity—they are in His care. Then in chapters 8 and 9, John begins to describe what it will be like on this earth in the few years just preceding the second coming of Jesus. In those days God begins to pour out His wrath on this earth and many unbelieving people are killed. But God again assures His people that they are not the objects of His wrath. But even though God's wrath does not fall on His own people, chapters 10-13 describe the ancient animosity of Satan against God and the rise of a worldwide governmental system and religion headed by the antichrist and false prophet that will focus its anger on God's people. At that, God turns up the heat and in chapter 16 we hear of those last terrible days of God's judgment on the earth just before Jesus comes again. In Matthew, Jesus called it a period of great tribulation and also said that God kept that time relatively short for the sake of His own people.

Soon we will see what Revelation says about what we call "heaven" – who will be in it, where is it, and what will it be like.

In chapters 17-18 and the first part of 19 we see a description of the celebration in the world over the fall of that worldwide governmental system and religion headed by the antichrist and false prophet. That whole system of evil rule in this world is called Babylon and Babylon falls when Jesus comes again. The last half of chapter 19 brings us then to the high point of the book—the actual return: the literal, physical second coming of Jesus to this earth. And as we saw earlier, the antichrist and the false prophet lead an army of kings and others from all over the earth to do battle with Jesus when He comes again. But with only His word, those armies are defeated. The antichrist and the

false prophet are thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur and the rest of the armies are killed.

What happens then? What about the dragon, the devil, Satan. His spokespeople, the antichrist and the false prophet, are sent to the lake of fire but what about Satan? And what happens to all the believers, the armies of heaven, who came with Jesus when He returned? And what happens to all the unbelievers, those who were already dead, those who died in that battle of Armageddon when Jesus came, and those who weren't in the battle? Jesus comes again—is that the end of the story? No. The last three chapters of Revelation give us much more. Look at Revelation 21: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away..."*

Soon we will see what Revelation says about what we call "heaven"—who will be in it, where is it, and what will it be like. Before that, looking at Revelation 20:11ff we will look at what happens to all the dead who have not believed God and have not trusted His way of salvation. *"If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."* What is this place we call "hell"? Who goes there? And is it fair?

But let's go back even before that and pick the story up at the point where Jesus comes again. What happens next? Chapter 19 ended with Jesus defeating the antichrist and false prophet and their armies. Chapter 20 continues the story. There are some Christians who suggest that Chapter 20 begins by recapitulating all of church history, as if John finishes chapter 19 by telling about Jesus' second coming and then he steps back and in 20:1-6 summarizes the great spiritual truths of Jesus' death and resurrection, where Satan is defeated and believers' become part of Christ's kingdom. But Chapter 20 is too obviously a continuation of the story for me to spiritualize it. I believe John is describing actual events that are yet to come. In chapter

19 we already heard what happened to the beast (the antichrist) and the false prophet. Now, I'm interested in knowing what happened to Satan himself.

Chapter 20 tells us:

"And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time." (Revelation 20:1-3)

There is no question **who** John is talking about here! He uses four ways to describe him so no one can miss who is being talked about. This is the serpent from the garden of Eden, this is the dragon of Revelation 12, and this is the "devil" who tempted Jesus; this is none other than Satan himself. Now we are about to hear what happens to Satan.

An angel comes from heaven, an angel with authority over the place where Satan reigns, the Abyss. The Abyss is the place where Satan's angels exist awaiting their judgment. According to Jude 6, *"And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home - these he has kept in darkness bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the Great Day."*

Back in chapter 9 we saw that it was from this Abyss the "locusts" came to torment people who didn't belong to God. These locusts are described in ways that lead us to believe they are demonic angels that are loosed on the earth. Well, the angel has authority over that place and he takes Satan and binds him with chains and shuts him in the Abyss. Whatever that place is apparently it is not a place anyone wants to go.

The demons Jesus cast out of the Gadarene or Geresene man pleaded with Jesus to be sent anywhere except to the Abyss. But it is to that place Satan is consigned for 1000 years.

There is a fair amount of language used to describe that Satan is somewhat incapacitated for that period of time. He is bound in chains and is locked and sealed in the Abyss. Now we know that Satan is a spirit and thus physical chains and locks would be useless, so what is the point? The point is that Satan is seriously hindered in his ability to do what he normally does. Specifically our text tells us he is unable to deceive the nations for this period of time. Back in

There is no question who John is talking about here! This is none other than Satan himself.

chapters 13 and 19 we learned that Satan was behind the success of the false prophet to deceive people into following the antichrist and then eventually in going up against Jesus when He returned to earth. So the Father of lies is shut out for a while.

But when you are reading the text you can't help but notice that John said Satan must be set free "for a short time." What happens then? Look at verses 7-10:

"When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will set out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth - Gog and Magog - to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and

night for ever and ever.”(Revelation 20:7-10)

Now we know what happens to Satan! The enemy of our souls, the arch foe of our lives is forever put away and punished. There is a day coming when he will have no power to do what he has been doing for millennia. Let me say it again: He will have no power; he will be forever out of the picture. That alone is cause for celebration.

But the text raises some interesting points of information about what happens along the way to Satan’s final incarceration. What is this about a 1000-year period of time during which Satan is in the Abyss but not yet finally put away? What is going on in this 1000-year period of time? And if Satan is imprisoned, where did these thousands of people come from that Satan rallies to fight against God and His people when Satan is finally released from the Abyss after 1000 years?

Satan will have no power; he will be forever out of the picture. That alone is cause for celebration.

To answer that we go back to the part of the passage I skipped over in my desire to show what happens to Satan. Verses 4-6 tell us something about what happens during the 1000 years. But they don’t tell us much! In these verses we read that certain people “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years”

Before we look at these verses, I want to remind you that this little phrase “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” has been the cause of no end of contention between Christians for nearly 1700 years. The thousand years is a “millennium” and Christians have differed sharply on what the millennium is, how long it is, and what happens during it. I’m certain most of you have been exposed to terms like these in the past:

- I'm a pre-millennialist.
- Well, I'm a post-millennialist.
- I'm not either, I'm an a-millennialist.
- And then there is the wag that says he's a pan-millennialist—he just thinks it will all “pan” out in the end.

While I sympathize with the peace-loving spirit of the “pan-millennialist,” I can't so easily dismiss my responsibility to learn from Revelation 20.

As you can tell from the prefixes there are basic differences between the three serious positions. The “pre” and “post” have mostly to do with the timing of Christ's return in relationship to the millennium—that 1000-year reign of Jesus on this earth. The “pre-millennialists” believe Jesus will come before the millennium and that His coming is what will usher in that 1000-year reign. The “post-millennialists” believe Jesus will come after the millennium and that the millennium is a period of time before Jesus comes again and that during it, as now, Jesus is reigning from heaven. The “a-millennialist” doesn't believe that the 1000 years refers to a particular specific period of time but rather is a symbolic way of describing the entire period of time from the first coming of Jesus to the second coming. They don't believe this passage teaches a literal millennial period, thus they are “a” or “no”-millennialists. I do not have time to adequately describe the reasons why Christians through the years have held these differing positions. Nor do I have time to fairly represent the “post” or “a” millennialist' positions. (See Appendix D for a list of good sources for further study.) As I said earlier in reference to the differing views among Christians on the “rapture” so I say now, in reference to the differing views among Christians on the “millennium,” there are godly, competent, Jesus-loving, Bible-believing Christians who

hold each of these views. And my prayer is that increasingly God's people will agree to disagree agreeably on the issue.

But having said that I want you to see what I believe the text teaches about what happens during the thousand years. First look at the text:

"I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years."
(Revelation 20:4-6)

I believe that what John is describing is that period of time after Satan is bound and locked in the Abyss (20:1-3) and before Satan is released to do battle with God one last time (20:7-10). In other words, we are talking about that period of time John calls the "thousand years."

Let me ask you what will seem silly but is actually an important question: How long is a thousand years? You might think the right answer is 1000, 365-day years but I think that would be wrong. I think the right answer is, "a thousand years" is a long time. I recently made the comment that I was a youth pastor once, about 100 years ago. What do people assume I mean by that? That I'm over 120 years old now? Of course not. They know I am using hyperbole to make the point that it was a long time ago.

In the book of Revelation John uses numbers differently

than some people want to think. When he speaks of ten thousand times ten thousand standing before the throne of God in heaven he means a great number are standing there. When he writes of 144,000 who are protected by God, he is using 12 to indicate the 12 tribes of Israel X 12 to indicate a great number X 1000 to indicate a really great number. When he says that the persecution of God's people goes on for 3½ years it means a short time. I think there is ample evidence from Scripture to prove that John is not using numbers in some precise way but is using them to indicate relative lengths of time.

Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.

I think it has been an embarrassment to the church through the years that some Christians have been literalistic about these numbers and have tried to do what Jesus specifically said not to do—try to figure out exactly when Jesus is coming again. A lot of people make a lot of money from other's inappropriate curiosity as to exact timing. How many books have Christians purchased during every world crisis—books that tease and titillate with dates and names for which there is no basis.

For example, many tried to make much about the year 2000 but others tried to make much of the mention of Gog and Magog in chapter 20, verse 8. Because Gog is mentioned in Ezekiel along with two places called Meshech and Tubal, some have tried to make Meshech sound like Moscow and Tubal sound like Tobolsk, both in Russia. And because of the years we loved to hate Russia, we made Russia the evil empire of the north that would attack Jesus'

armies when He comes. But the etymology alone of the words shows what utter nonsense that is. Let's not get caught up in using words and numbers in ways that John never intended and in ways that embarrass the cause of Christ. It is enough to say that the thousand years is a relatively long time but exactly how long, we don't know; God obviously didn't mean for us to know.

We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

And so what happens during this "millennium," this relatively long period of time? John says first that he sees thrones and those who were seated on them had been given authority to judge or rule. Who is seated on the thrones? John specifically mentions those Christ-followers who had been killed during the tribulation and it seems that he also mentions all those who had not followed the antichrist or false prophet—in other words, all true Christians. And he says, *"They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years."*

When does the Bible say that dead Christ-followers will come to life?

"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of God and with the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ shall rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

(I Thessalonians 4:16)

He said the same thing to the Corinthians.

Dead Christ-followers will be resurrected and living Christ-followers will be “changed” and together we will be caught up to meet the Lord. When? When He comes to this earth again. John called this, *“the first resurrection.”* (Rev. 20:5b) I believe what John is describing in Revelation 20:4-6 is that all those, who through the ages have believed and trusted in God, will be resurrected or raptured when Jesus comes again and they will be the ones who sit on the thrones. This is symbolic of ruling on this earth during this thousand-year reign of Jesus on this earth. Daniel predicted it. Jesus told His disciples, *“I tell you the truth at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man (Jesus) sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* (Matthew 19:28) Paul wrote to Corinthian Christians, *“Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?”*

So what will happen during the thousand years? All believers—Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, David, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul, Priscilla, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Whitfield, Spurgeon, my grandmother, me and you, if you are trusting in Christ—we will be resurrected (or “changed” if we are still alive when this happens) and we will come with Christ to this earth and will reign with Him for the thousand years on this earth. Revelation 20:5a tells us that, *“The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.”* Soon we will look at that resurrection, the second resurrection, the resurrection of all through the ages who have not believed and followed God and His Christ.

But John doesn’t turn his attention to them just yet. Instead, he wants to tell us a little more about those who are part of the first resurrection, the resurrection that occurs just as Jesus comes again.

“Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them,

but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.” (Revelation 20:6)

John is writing to the Christians in Asia Minor but God’s word can be applied to us today. I believe John is saying no matter how difficult it becomes now or even how difficult it will become when Satan has his final push to defeat all of God’s people, know this: there is coming a day when you will be resurrected or transformed into an immortal body and you will be with Jesus.

In your resurrected/transformed body you will never again be subject to death either physical or spiritual. And furthermore, in spite of being ridiculed and discriminated against all of your life because of your faith, you will reign in this world with Christ.

Know this: there is coming a day when you will be resurrected or transformed into an immortal body and you will be with Jesus.

One question stood out in my mind throughout my study of this subject of the millennium: Why the millennium? Why not Jesus comes and we go right to the judgment and then the new earth? Why the millennium? I cannot be dogmatic about this but let me suggest three reasons for the millennium: The faithfulness of God’s people is vindicated and the sovereignty of God is demonstrated in an obvious way when all unbelievers see God’s people no longer suffering and persecuted but see them ruling with Christ on this earth—in the very same places where through the ages they were maligned and mistreated.

The patience and mercy of God and the sinfulness of human beings is demonstrated when Jesus actually comes to earth for a long period of time, rules with justice and in peace, and **still** thousands and thousands refuse Him. We

will look at that later but the 1000 year refusal of Christ will only confirm the justice of God in condemning unbelievers.

I believe it is possible that it is during the millennium that Paul's declaration of Israel turning to Jesus in large numbers, may take place. (Romans 11)

It seems that for whatever reasons, God has determined that when Jesus comes again He will set up an earthly kingdom and believers of all the ages will rule with Him. It will be a time of peace on the earth as never known before and it will be only the beginning of what is in store for those who trust in Jesus.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Hell Revelation 20:11-15

Today I want to talk about one of the most serious and terrible subjects in the entire Bible. It was 6:21 a.m. on Tuesday April 21, 1992 when Robert Alton Harris was executed in the California San Quentin Prison gas chamber. Forty-nine witnesses watched including the father of one of the boys killed by Harris. At 6:21, the cyanide was lowered into the sulfuric acid below the chair and Harris said his last words: "You can be a king or a sweet-sweeper, but everybody dances with the grim reaper." When George Bernard Shaw completed a study of death he said he had come to one firm conclusion: one out of one dies! Someone else wrote, "Death is the most democratic institution on earth... It allows no discrimination, tolerates no exceptions."¹

God says it this way in Ecclesiastes 8:8, "*No one has power over the day of his death.*" But don't let my illustrations confuse you; the serious subject about which I write is not death. It is, "What happens after death?" More specifically it is about what happens to unbelievers after death. Most specifically it is about the phrase used by John in Revelation 20:11-15: "the lake of fire." The questions are: What is it and who goes there?

I called this a serious and terrible subject because if there is a lake of fire or a "hell" as we popularly call it and human beings actually go there, the implications are almost unbearable. C.S. Lewis wrote, "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay...in my power. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, 'All will be saved.' "² I wish there were a way I

could justly avoid the subject because I have no desire to cause pain for those here who have loved ones who do not know the Lord or have even had loved ones die who apparently did not trust in Jesus. I know for you this subject will be painful. But I offer this consoling reminder: If you know Jesus then you know He is good. And you know that though now it is painful to think about the death and eternal destiny of those who do not trust God, there is coming a day when you will stand before God and you will say, "God you were good and right in everything you have done. I trusted You before but I see it now—even the eternal destruction of the ungodly is perfectly right!" Abraham summed up this concept with his rhetorical question: *"Will not the judge of all the earth do right?"* (Genesis 18:25b) Until we see it and understand it more fully, we must simply trust Him.

What does it mean the dead were judged according to the books?

With my limited understanding of things, I'm with C.S. Lewis in wishing there were no hell and that everyone eventually went to heaven. But I cannot rely on my wishful thinking; I must rely on what God reveals in His Word and what Jesus, Himself, taught. If I'm going to have the privilege of believing what God teaches about heaven then I am forced to believe what He teaches about hell. It all becomes unreliable intellectual mush if I pick and choose what I want to believe.

In light of that, we are forced to ask the question: "What eventually happens to those who do not trust in and follow Jesus Christ?" Let's look at what God says in Revelation 20:11-15:

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was

no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

The paragraph is fairly straightforward but there are several words and phrases that must be looked at more carefully to better understand exactly what is being described here.

Before we decide that we know what John is describing here we probably better make certain we know the answers to some questions about this passage:

- What is this throne and who is on it?
- Who are the "dead" who stand before the throne?
- What does it mean the dead were judged according to the books?
- Who are death and Hades who give up their dead?
- What is the lake of fire and why is it called the second death?
- What is the book of life?

The Throne

Let's start with the setting. What did John see first?

"I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence..."

Daniel predicted it and you will see in Daniel's words many

similar words that are used by John in Revelation 20:

"Thrones were set in place and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as the snow, the hair of his head was white like wool. This throne was flaming with fire....Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated and the books were opened."(Daniel 7:9-10)

John, in Revelation 7:9, spoke of this throne:

"A great multitude (144,000, symbolic of all believers) was standing before the throne and in front of the lamb. They were wearing white robes and...they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb."

He who sat on it is obviously God (the triune God). The issue here is not to distinguish between Father, Son and Holy Spirit but to indicate that it is the awesome God who is on the throne.

Standing Before the Throne

What does John see next?

"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne..."

Who are the "dead" that stand before the throne? Earlier in this chapter we are told about a "first" resurrection. Speaking of the Christians who had been killed during the tribulation and in all the ages John writes, *"They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years...This is the first resurrection."*(20:4b and 5b)

Paul wrote of this First Resurrection in I Thessalonians 4:16:

"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven...with the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first and after that we who are still alive...will be caught up to

meet the Lord..."

This is the first resurrection, the resurrection of all believers of all the ages, which will occur as Jesus comes again.

So if all **believers** are already resurrected as Jesus comes, then at the great white throne, the dead must be unbelievers who are resurrected and stand before God. Back in Revelation 20:5 we learn this must be the case: *"The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended."*

Now when we come to Revelation 20:11-15, the thousand years is ended and we see another resurrection. Here's the way verse 13 speaks of that second resurrection:

"The sea gave up the dead that were in it and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them..."

Who are the "dead" that stand before the throne? Speaking of the Christians who had been killed during the tribulation and in all the ages John writes, "They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years..."

"Hades" is the Greek word for the place of the dead—the place where the **unbelievers** went when they died waiting for this final judgment.

John's point in mentioning that the *"sea gave up the dead that were in it"* and that *"death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them"* is that John wants us to know that every **unbeliever**, no matter when they died or how they died, or how important they were in life, was resurrected to be present for this judgment day. The picture thus far is of God seated on a throne and all unbelievers of all the ages have been resurrected and are standing before God.

The Books

The next thing John notes is that some books are opened and the dead are being judged, *"according to what they had done as recorded in the books"* (20:12) He reiterates that point in the next verse: *"...and each person was judged according to what he had done."* (20:13) Daniel had spoken of books being opened at the judgment. Other Old Testament writers spoke of books in which people's deeds were recorded. And John uses that same metaphor to describe God's complete knowledge of everything we have thought, said or done. Here's the way the author of Hebrews wrote it:

No amount of good deeds can ever compensate for our sin against a holy God.

"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight, everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account."

In Matthew, Jesus said it this way:

"But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken..." (Matthew 12:36-37) and in Luke 12:3, *"what you have whispered will be proclaimed from the rooftops."*

In Romans 2:16 it says our thoughts will be uncovered and in I Cor. 4:5, Paul says even our motives will be revealed. And James says both what we do that we shouldn't have and what we should have done that we didn't, will be revealed. (James 2:10 and 4:17)

Unfortunately for over 2000 years people have mistakenly believed that if they are judged according to what is in the books, according to their deeds, they will some how make it. There is a book written between the Old Testament and the New Testament called the *Testament of Abraham* in

which it says that two angels record everyone's deeds and then another angel weighs them to see if the good outweighs the bad. That false concept has persisted for all these years in spite of what God says. And what does God say?

- Romans 3:23 – "All have sinned..."
- Romans 6:23 – "The wages of sin is death..."
- Galatians 2:16 – "By observing the law no one will be justified."

No amount of good deeds can ever compensate for our sin against a holy God.

Death and Hades

And to support that truth, notice what happens in Revelation 20:14:

"Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire."

All of the resurrected **unbelieving** dead were judged according to what they had done and **with no exceptions** everyone was thrown into the lake of fire. No one will ever be judged righteous or acceptable to God by his or her deeds in this life.

The Book of Life

But the text clearly implies that many were not thrown into the lake of fire. Who were they?

"If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:15) By implication, who wasn't thrown into the fire? Those whose names were in the book of life. There were two kinds of books opened at the judgment: the books in which were recorded the thoughts, words and deeds of the unbelieving dead and a "book of life" which had names written in it.

Back in the Old Testament book of Exodus, Moses spoke of a book that contained the names of God's people. Daniel wrote of it this way:

"There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people - everyone whose name is found written in the book - will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:1)

David wrote of the book of life and Paul spoke of it. Again we can see this is metaphorical language to describe those who truly belong to God. In his Gospel, John said it this way, *"...to all who received him (Jesus) to those who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God."* (John 1:12)

We become part of His family, we are given His name, and we are placed in His family book—that is the book of life.

Staying out of the lake of fire is not about getting a good grade when the reports are read. Paul said it this way, *"for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith... not of works."* (Ephesians 2:8)

This text is very clear: everyone who stands before God at that judgment and tries to claim a relationship to God built on what they have done in this life will be condemned. If your name isn't in the book of life and God judges you by the other "books," it's too late.

The Lake of Fire

And to what are they condemned? To the lake of fire! What is this lake of fire? Verse 10 gives us a description:

"And the devil...was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

(20:10)

- In Mark, Jesus said it was a place "Where the fire never goes out."
- In Matthew 3:12, He called it a place of "unquenchable fire."
- In Luke 12:58, He likens it to prison.
- In Revelation, He called it a pit.
- In Matthew 22:13, Jesus calls it a place of darkness and where there is weeping (grief) and gnashing of teeth (anger).

Often Jesus referred to this place as "gehenna." Gehenna was an actual place just west of Jerusalem in the valley that was used as a dump for the city and fires burned there continually. You can imagine it as a place of refuse, fire and worms, maggots, etc. By New Testament times this valley had become symbolic of the place of eternal torment for the wicked. Using many very negative metaphors, the Bible describes the lake of fire as torment, agony, wrath, anger, pressure, oppression, destruction—it is a place of ultimate horror. John Calvin wrote, "Now because no description can

We become part of His family, we are given His name, and we are placed in His family book—that is the book of life.

deal adequately with the gravity of God's vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is by darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth and unquenchable fire. By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intends to confound all our senses with dread."³ Terrible is the end of those who ignore God: The unbelieving dead are physically resurrected to stand before the judgment throne of God and then they are thrown into

the lake of fire.

For how long? I know there are some, and I am among them, who would like to believe that unbelievers are sent to the lake of fire and that after a while they simply cease to exist. But what does God say?

In Revelation 20:10 we read that the lake of fire into which the devil and the beasts were thrown is a place where they will be tormented forever and ever.

In I Thessalonians 1:8-9 Paul wrote, *"God will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord..."*

Jude (7 and 13) writes of the *"eternal fire."* Jesus says it is an *"eternal fire"* (Matthew 18:8) And most convincing are Jesus words in Matthew 25 when He contrasts the fate of **un**believers with believers:

It is difficult to argue for an everlasting heaven if you try to argue for a temporary hell. Jesus says they are both eternal, everlasting, and forever.

"Then they (unbelievers) will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." It is difficult to argue for an everlasting heaven if you try to argue for a temporary hell. Jesus says they are both eternal, everlasting, and forever.

I know that is a terrible judgment and I want to come back to that issue in a minute. But before I do I hope to clear up some confusion about the words we use in describing what happens to people after death. The Bible describes three periods of time for people: Their life on earth, their death, and their resurrection to eternity. Death is sometimes known as the "intermediate state" between life as we know

it here on earth and the life to come.

In the intermediate state, after death, and before the resurrection, what happens to people? Where do they go? For unbelievers, the Old Testament called it Sheol, the New Testament calls it Hades—it is the place where unbelievers go when they die, awaiting the second resurrection and the judgment. We sometimes call it “hell” (though that is not technically correct). But it is important to distinguish that place from where unbelievers go after the judgment because in this intermediate place the unbeliever has no body—he is only a spirit, a soul. But according to Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, even though the unbeliever in this temporary place has no body, he is still suffering. The Old Testament likewise refers to this waiting place as a place of awareness and punishment. This is not “limbo” and it is not “purgatory”—two places that are 16th century inventions that have no biblical basis whatsoever. The destiny of unbelievers, according to Jesus, is sealed at their deaths. Then, as we have seen, after the Millennium, the unbelieving will be resurrected at the judgment throne and they will be physically thrown into the “lake of fire.” Exactly what that experience will be like, we obviously don’t know because words can’t describe it, but it will be terrible and it will be forever. Jesus refers to the lake of fire as “hell.”

What about believers? According to Jesus and Paul, when believers die they go immediately into the presence of the Lord. Since Jesus is with the Father in a place we call heaven it is appropriate to say that a believer goes to heaven when he or she dies. But again remember, the believer, before the second coming of Jesus, does not have a body—that will come in the resurrection. And when we are resurrected and the Millennium is over, God will create a new earth on which we will live for eternity—that place we also refer to as heaven.

What is it like before the resurrection for believers and unbelievers? Listen again to John Calvin's wise advice:

"Now it is neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our soul's intermediate state. Many torment themselves overmuch with disputing as to what place the souls occupy and whether or not they already enjoy heavenly glory. Yet is foolish and rash to inquire concerning unknown matters more deeply than God permits us to know. Scripture goes no farther than to say that Christ is present with them, and receives them into paradise that they may obtain consolation, while the souls of (unbelievers) suffer such torments as they deserve. What teacher or master will reveal to us that which God has concealed?"⁴

While we don't know much about the intermediate state, we are told much about our eternal circumstances. Unbelievers will spend eternity in the lake of fire. But that fate is so terrible that some of us reel at the thought of it and wonder, "How can that be fair of God?" Some ask it this way, "How can a God of love send innocent people to hell forever—to such a terrible eternity?"

There are two major errors in the question. First of all while God is a God of love He is also a God of holiness. In fact, God's holiness is spoken of far more often in the Bible. We like to focus on God's love but when we do so to the exclusion of His holiness and justice we create in our minds a caricature of God, not the real God. If we had an understanding of how holy God is we would not wonder at the punishment of unbelievers. Jonathan Edwards said it this way, "The punishment is no greater than the glory and greatness of God against whom we have sinned. God's very nature is more averse to sin than (our physical bodies) are to eternal punishment."⁵

The second error in the question, "How can a God of love send innocent people to hell forever?" is the phrase

“innocent people.” There are no innocent people. Romans 1 and 2 deal with that issue extensively. Everyone who is thrown into the lake of fire willfully chose to reject God. Everyone who is in the lake of fire would have to admit, if honest, they chose it. They did not want God—they did not want the life He offered. They wanted their own life and their own way. Will anyone still charge God with unfairness if people are getting what they deliberately chose and not getting what they willfully rejected? C.S. Lewis wrote,

What about believers? When believers die they go immediately into the presence of the Lord.

“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in hell chose it.”⁶ “I willingly believe the damned are, in one sense successful, rebels to the end; the doors of hell are locked on the inside.”⁷

When Jesus said that in the lake of fire there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth, the gnashing of teeth is, as I pointed out earlier, an incredible anger at God. People in hell will not wish themselves with God—they will spend eternity cursing God. Is the terrible “lake of fire” fair? Tragically it is!

What response do we have to this teaching of God in Revelation 20? I suggest two:

- I must do anything to avoid this place.
- I must do all I can to help others avoid it.

Escaping the lake of fire is as simple as acknowledging, asking and believing. It is to acknowledge that I am a sinner deserving eternal punishment and that I’m ready to repent—to turn from my sin. It is to ask God to forgive me

for my sins and give me life based on the fact that Jesus died for my sins; He took the punishment for me and rose again from the dead. And it is to believe that He will forgive me and give me His eternal life and name if I ask Him to. Have you? If not, will you ask Him today?

End Notes

¹ Blanchard p. 44

² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 106

³ John Calvin

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes, Book III chap xxv sec 6*:

⁵ Jonathan Edwards

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p. 16-17

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 127

Chapter Twenty-Three

Heaven Revelation 21-22:5

Most of us don't want to go to heaven....now! Most of us have little desire to leave this life except when we are in the midst of physical or emotional pain so great that we say, "Anything but this!" For most of us, heaven is a great alternative to hell but we don't think of heaven as a great alternative to life as we now enjoy it. It is true that God built into us a survival instinct that makes us cling to this life but there is something else going on in this disregard for heaven: we think so little about the life to come that what we have seems more secure and attractive to us than the future we don't understand.

Do you truly want to go to heaven? Again I don't mean just instead of going to hell—do you want to go to heaven? Honestly, many of us don't. Why not? We have no vision, no picture of the future that has captured our minds and hearts. I want Revelation 21 and 22 to give us such a vision of the future that absolutely nothing will deter us on our way to heaven. I want us to have such a picture of what it will be like to be with God that any hardship in this life will seem insignificant compared to what is coming. I want us to carry with us every day an impression of what is yet to come to encourage us, challenge us, and give us life-focus and purpose. The Christmas poem says "Twas the night before Christmas...the children sleeping all snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums danced in their heads." I want visions of heaven to dance in our heads.

My task feels impossible! I have laid hold of a subject too high, too wide, and too deep to get the arms of my mind around. I feel like the Apostle John must have felt when he

saw what he describes in Revelation 21 and 22—this is indescribable! But as hard as it was to describe, when he was done telling what he saw, what do you think he expected his first readers to know and feel?

To whom was he writing?

- To those in Ephesus he said, “you have endured hardships for Jesus’ name.”
- To those in Smyrna he wrote, “some of you will be put in prison” and some of you will die.
- To those in Pergamum he said that some had been threatened with death.
- To those in Philadelphia, he said he knew they were very tired.

Life in some ways, was not good but to each of them he also said, “another day is coming!” In fact John’s reason for writing is declared in the first verses of the letter when he writes, *“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.”* Likewise Jesus said to him, *“Write what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”*

John is describing the place where God’s people live forever with God after history as we know it comes to an end.

John wanted his readers to know how the story ends. He wanted them to know what would eventually happen to them.

Anyone with any familiarity with the Bible knows there is a story line that runs throughout: the story began with God creating everything including people but soon people messed it up royally with sin. And the bulk of the story told in the Bible is of God’s gracious intervention in human

history to restore His creation—to redeem what He made and to remake it into what He originally intended. That’s why Jesus came—to remove the barrier of sin and give us a new life. That’s why the Holy Spirit comes to each of us—to begin his work of remolding and reshaping us into the humans God intended. So God’s people are a work in progress.

But is that the end of the story? Will we be forever in process? No! God says Jesus is coming again and when He does the work He began in us will be completed. The story of the Bible doesn’t end with an unending history of people becoming Christians and then dying and going to heaven. No, there is a full end to the story. Think of it this way also: John was writing to people who were in trouble and he said a new day is coming. Then for the next many chapters of Revelation, he describes how most things will get worse—God’s wrath will be poured out on the earth, Satan and those who follow him will persecute God’s people, but then Jesus will come and destroy those who oppose God and His people. And then after Jesus’ millennial rule on earth, a judgment day is coming when every unbeliever will be resurrected from the grave and thrown into the lake of fire forever. Evil is defeated forever and evildoers are eternally incarcerated. End of story? No! What about us? What about believers? Ah, yes! The rest of the story!

Revelation 21 and 22 tell it. The first thing I want you to see is that what John is now describing in these chapters is what we usually call “heaven.” He is describing the place where God’s people live forever with God after history as we know it comes to an end. After briefly describing the place in verses 1 and 2, John writes, *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”*

Later in the description he writes that no one will live there except *"those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."* (21:27) We saw that Scripture describes those who truly belong to God—genuine believers. In 22:5, speaking of those same believers in that same place it says, *"they will reign for ever and ever."* Telling the end of the story in chapters 21 and 22, John is describing heaven.

Again I feel it is important to remind you to distinguish between the two ways we refer to what happens to believers after death. Because the Bible says that Jesus is now in heaven and because God says believers go to be with Jesus as soon as they die, it is right to say that believers go immediately to heaven. But that is not the heaven being described in Revelation 21-22. We know that a dead believer does not have a body until the resurrection takes place when Jesus comes again. So when Jesus comes again and the bodies of believers are resurrected, then after the millennium, all believers will enter the heaven described in Revelation 21-22. Now I have not described that heaven yet; I've just noted that the heaven being discussed here is not what we usually think of when we speak of someone today dying and going to heaven. We here are discussing the heaven to come—the one in which God's people will live forever and ever in resurrected bodies.

Now to describe this eternal heaven John says,

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men...'" (21:1-3)

Here John describes the eternal dwelling place of believers in two basic ways: He calls it a new heaven and a new earth and he calls it a Holy City. What I want you to see is

that the “heaven” in which believers will live forever with God is not “out there” somewhere. I looked at some of our gospel songs and hymns to get an idea of where we think heaven is. The song we sang earlier says, “When the roll is called up yonder.” Where? Another song entitled, “In the sweet by and by” says we will stand on that “beautiful shore.” Where? Yet another says, “We shall see him face to face, far beyond the starry sky.” Where? *I’ll Fly Away* to “God’s celestial shore” Where? And, *Marching to Zion* says “to fairer worlds on high.” Now, where is that?

We here are discussing the heaven to come—the one in which God’s people will live forever and ever in resurrected bodies.

Much of our language of heaven places it somewhere **out there**. I think the reason for this is because we mix the two uses of heaven—we know that believers who die now are not here so they must be “out there” wherever God is and then we fail to correct the location of heaven when we speak of where believers will be for eternity. But the Bible says that the eternal heaven is actually the new earth and the universe surrounding it. Another point of clarification: when John writes in verse 1, “*I saw a new heaven...for the first heaven...passed away*” he is not saying the place where God now resides passed away; he is using the word “heaven” in the way we do when we look into a beautifully starry sky and say the “heavens are marvelous tonight.” The heaven that passed away and the new heaven are references to the sky and universe around the earth. This is the same way we understand Genesis 1:1 when we read, “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” So again, the place where God’s people will live with Him forever is on the new earth and the universe that surrounds it. So we can rightly say, we don’t go to heaven, but

heaven comes to us. Maybe the reason some Christians, especially young believers, don't have much appetite for heaven is because they have a wrong perception of where heaven is and what it is. The popular media and even some of our songs leave us with the impression that heaven is made up of pudgy little angelic bodies floating on white puffy clouds with nothing else around them except other pudgy little angelic bodies with harps and halos listening to some Musack with an occasional interruption from some synthesized deep-bass voice that only accentuates the idea that God is somewhere else. Others sing or speak of mansions on streets of gold in some literalistic fashion that makes it sound like a perpetual suburbia. No wonder some are not very interested in heaven.

In some way, whether by literal fire and destruction or otherwise, God is going to renovate, transform or recreate this earth into a new earth.

But heaven is not "out there" on the beautiful isle of somewhere. Heaven is the new earth. Now this starts to sound interesting. Where does the new earth come from? John doesn't tell us but Paul and Peter do. Peter describes it this way: *"...the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men...But the day of the Lord will come... The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."* (2 Peter 3:7ff)

Paul said it this way:

"For the creation itself waits in eager expectation...in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Romans 8:20ff)

In some way, whether by literal fire and destruction or otherwise, God is going to renovate, transform or recreate this earth into a new earth. Because of what Jesus' resurrected body was like and what God teaches about the resurrection of our physical bodies, (in that they will be the same but transformed, new but the same, truly our bodies and at the same time new bodies—physical and recognizable) so I believe the new earth will be this earth but new, the same but transformed, physical and recognizable. God will refashion this world into what He originally intended it to be before sin entered it and warped it.

Now having said all of that, how does John describe the eternal heaven on the new earth? I think that if I asked you what you think "heaven" will be like many of you would speak of beautiful remote places—a south sea island, a mountainside in the Alps, a garden in Eden. But when God describes the eternal heaven, how does He describe it? Do you see it? A city! Most of this longest description of heaven in the Bible is of a city. (Revelation 21:9 - 22:5) When we think cities we think of crowded, crime-infested, frenetic, places that many people would rather escape. In verse 5 God said, *"I am making everything new!"* Is He ever! He is taking the most obvious evidence of the failure of human beings to make their own heaven, cities, and He will make it heaven.

I don't think John is hereby declaring that the eternal heaven is one gigantic city on the new earth. While I assume there will be cities on the new earth, I think John is using the symbolism of a great city to describe what heaven will be like. And it is called the Holy City, Jerusalem,

because all through the Bible, Jerusalem is the spiritual, cultural, and geographical center of the presence of God and the people of God. The word "Jerusalem" came to stand for the people of God.

Beauty

So what will heaven be like? First of all it is a place of indescribable beauty. It was bright with light: *"It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal."* (21:11)

"The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." (21:23)

He describes the place as immense—1400 miles on each side. Its walls are made of a precious stone—jasper, translucent, crystal green. The city is of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations are decorated with every kind of precious stone. He then mentions 12 different kinds of jewels that make up the foundations. The main street, for there was usually one main street in ancient cities, was pure gold, like transparent glass.

You can't get all those descriptions to fit what we know about precious stones, architecture, metal work, etc. You can't take these descriptions and make them fit a literal city—they are once again John's attempts to describe the indescribable. What makes jewels, precious stones, so valuable is what they do with light. They reflect light in such a way as to allow us to see color in a more pure way than any other way. This entire city that John sees is a kaleidoscope of color.

The new earth will be brighter, and sharper, and more colorful and more beautiful than even its most beautiful place now. Do you know what it's like to climb a high mountain and finally reach the summit and look around and

be struck with the beauty around you? Have you watched a sunset on the plains or over the ocean and thought that nothing could be more spectacularly colorful or awesome? The beauty you see in this earth today is just a foretaste of what it will be when God redeems the earth.

I wonder if in all of us there is a yearning for what that will be like. Does that explain our fascination with babies? You look into the face of a baby and you see the closest thing you will ever see in this life to what God intended humanity to be: the freshness, the newness, the innocence, and the

"The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."

beauty that will all too soon bear ever-increasing scars of the sin that runs rampant in this life. But for just a short while, we catch a glimpse of the perfection that will be the new physical creation.

Meaningful Labor

But John's vision of the new Jerusalem not only demonstrates the physical beauty of the eternal heaven on earth but it also demonstrates the activity of heaven. Some people aren't too eager to go to heaven because they've been led to believe that heaven is a place where you either rest forever or at best you stand around and sing for eternity. While singing will clearly be part of heaven, it is not one continuous worship service, at least not as we think of worship services. On the new earth there is activity—there is work. Work transformed.

When God created Adam, He put him to work. And it wasn't until Adam sinned that work became a chore, a labor in the negative sense of that word. On the new earth there will be work but the work will be purposeful and

fulfilling. Revelation 22, verses 3 and 5 say, *"the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him...And they will reign for ever and ever."*

You who are so full of life and so full of energy right now, consider this: heaven is not doing nothing forever. It is a new earth filled with every perfect opportunity to work in ways that matter and bring the greatest satisfaction.

God knows that our true humanity is lived in relationships. And heaven will be a place where all God's people belong.

Have you ever been involved in a project that you just couldn't put down? Even though you had to sleep, you could hardly wait to get back at it? You felt alive, productive and creative? And you found the greatest satisfaction in seeing the task completed and successful? Such is heaven, a place where every task is that fulfilling.

Relationships

Heaven is beautiful, it is purposeful activity and most of all, it is relationships. I'm convinced that is the primary reason God shows John a city as the symbol of heaven on the new earth. Nearly 100 years ago a writer captured the point:

"The ideal life which God sets before us as the life of heaven is the life of a city, with streets, and walls, and gates, and boys and girls playing in the streets thereof. Because the instinct to seek a common life, to form a complicated web of mutual dependence, which is represented by a city is after all a true one, and the opportunity for its exercise essential alike to man's true happiness and the full development of his powers. It is not good for man to be alone; neither is it good for a family to be alone, nor yet for a group of families; and this vision shows us (that heaven) as realized in the corporate life of

humanity, is a society so vast that none of God's children is left out of it, and yet so compact that it can best be described as the society of those who dwell in one city."¹

We long to belong! Human beings were created to relate to each other. We have so warped that, and so abused each other that often times we think of heaven as getting away from people. But God knows that our true humanity is lived in relationships. And heaven will be a place where all God's people belong. Can you remember a time when you were with someone and it was just very enjoyable? The subject of conversation wasn't what made it so good—it was just one of those experiences when you felt like there didn't need to be an agenda, it was just good to be together. It was two friends enjoying life with no point to prove. That is just a glimpse of what relationships can always be in heaven.

Have you ever been part of a family or of a group where you just knew you belonged? You didn't have to prove anything to anyone in the group, you knew they accepted you. Into most groups you have to break in and prove your worth as a conversationalist or humorist or servant but in this group you are family—you just belong and it feels so comfortable with no pressure to perform. That's heaven. Have you ever known the love an other person—a husband, a wife? A special love that knows no limits, no secrets—just openness, warts and all and yet a wholeness of love? The complete safety of another person's complete knowledge of you with no judgment just acceptance—just love? That's heaven

And who will we most be looking forward to seeing face to face? Jesus Himself. And John says that He will be there and He will be our God and we will be His people forever and ever. Have you ever been caught up in the worship of God? Have you ever just lost track of time in His presence? Have you ever just basked in His love and delighted in

telling Him that you love Him? Have you ever had those too fleeting but intense times of joy in being with God? That was a taste of what heaven will be forever.

What will the eternal heaven on the new earth be like? Beauty beyond description. Activity and fulfillment that we only catch fleeting moments of now. Relationships that are genuine, unfailing, satisfying and forever—no death or separation there. And Jesus.

Do you want to go to heaven? If there is such a future, such a place, I'm with the Apostle Paul in saying, "*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*" And God said, "*To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.*"

I want the reality of such a place to be so clear in our minds and hearts that it shapes us today.

End Notes

¹ C Anderson Scott in Smith, *Unveiled Hope*

Chapter Twenty-Four

Maranatha Revelation 22:6-21

How do you end a good book or a good letter? If you were the Apostle John how would you end the book of Revelation? For that matter, if you were God how would you end the Bible? For the last words of Revelation are also the last words of the entire Bible.

The Bible has one overarching story that begins with "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" And the story ends with "*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.*" But the Bible, as a book, doesn't end with the end of the story. Like many books, the Bible has an epilogue—the final words at the conclusion of the book. Again I ask, if you were going to conclude the book of Revelation and the Bible, what would you write? I must admit I'm only mildly curious about what you or I would write but I am intensely interested in what God had John write. In the book of Revelation, John gave us a vision of the future. He spent much of the book describing the last few years on earth before the end comes. And the story ends with, "*And they will reign for ever and ever.*" (22:5) That's how the story ends, but how does John finish the book?

John was very invested in the people who first read the book. Before being exiled to the island from which he wrote the book, he had most likely been their pastor. He wanted very much for them to get the point of the book and the point of the Bible. And what is the point? It is given to us in chapter 22, verse 7: "*Behold, Jesus says, I am coming soon. Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.*" He made the same point at the beginning of the

book: *"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."*(1:3)

The point is, it is our move. God has told us what is happening and now it is up to us to respond.

To get to that point I think John does three things in this epilogue: He speaks of certainty, warning and invitation.

1. As to certainty, he stresses that the things he has seen will most certainly take place.
2. As to a warning, he stresses that what he has written must be taken seriously.
3. As to an invitation, he says, one last time—believe and live.

Certainty

Do you believe Jesus is coming again? For forty days after Jesus' resurrection, He met with His disciples, proving He was most certainly alive. Then, we are told, He led them outside of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives and *"he was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight."* As they were standing there thinking about what had just happened, an angel of God appeared and said to them, *"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*

Jesus Himself described His own return when He said, *"They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory."* Do you believe Jesus will literally, physically return from the sky to this earth—with no plane, no balloon? Do you believe in the supernatural? John writes that he wants us to believe it, to know it, to count on it, and to let it alter our lives because of it.

To underscore how certain we should be of this coming

event, the return of Jesus, John includes several statements in his epilogue. John writes in 22:6 that an angel came to him and said, *"These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place."* John says I didn't just make up all of this; I have written about the end of the world. An angel from God showed me these things. That same angel declared these things will absolutely take place. That same angel said the same God who prophesied through the prophets of old has told us what will come. It will happen!

***Do you believe Jesus is coming again?
John writes that he wants us to believe it,
to know it, to count on it, and to let it
alter our lives because of it.***

Then in verse 7, John reminds his readers of Jesus' own words from Matthew 16: *"Behold I am coming soon!"* It will happen! Then in verse 8, John says that he isn't just making this up—he is a prophet of God. John is called a brother prophet. The angel of God gave John the authority to accurately declare what would take place. You have it from an angel, you have it from Jesus and you have it from a prophet, John—it will most certainly happen!

So concerned is John that we believe this with absolutely certainty that throughout the epilogue he reiterates the point:

- *"the things that must soon take place"* (22:6)
- Jesus speaking, *"Behold, I am coming soon."* (22:7)
- The angel said, *"the time is near."* (22:10)
- Quoting Jesus again, *"Behold, I am coming soon."* (22:12)

- Again quoting Jesus, "*Yes, I am coming soon.*" (22:20)

Did you catch it? If there is one truth John wants to drive home so that it will not be forgotten but rather, acted on, what is it? Jesus is coming again.

I'm certain you couldn't help but notice that every time Jesus says, "I'm coming," He includes the word, "soon." Wasn't this book written nearly 2000 years ago? How could Jesus mean "soon"? When the word, "soon" is used, there are two possible emphases being made: One emphasis might be on time, as in how many minutes or hours. Another emphasis might be on expectancy, as in "you can count on it happening." Have you ever had a young child

The second thing John does with his epilogue is to plead with us take this second coming of Jesus seriously.

ask you when something very enjoyable or very distasteful was to happen and you said "soon"? What did you mean and what did they understand it to mean? You meant, "You can count on it happening—it is coming!" They understood it to be happening in the next 30 seconds. You were focusing on the certainty and they were focusing on the duration. You were speaking of expectancy and they were thinking of immediacy. As they get a little older they come to understand that soon doesn't have to mean immediately but can mean some time yet to come but they can retain a sense of expectancy because it is so certain to happen. John is, I believe, using the word in that sense of "expectancy" and "certainty"—You can count on it, mark it down, consider it done, know for certain it will happen.

Now again I ask you, "Do you believe He's literally coming again?" Do you believe what God has said about what will happen when He does come again? Do you believe there is

a lake of fire to shun and a new earth to gain? What difference does it make to you? The question is not do you believe Jesus is coming again in some generalized, spiritualized, non-specific way but do you believe He is actually, physically coming again as King of kings and Lord of lords and that He will judge everyone who has ever lived? John concludes his book and the Bible by saying, "Please believe it—it will happen!"

The Warning

The second thing John does with his epilogue besides emphasizing how certainly Jesus is coming, is to plead with us through a warning to take this second coming of Jesus seriously. Look at verses 18-19:

"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."

The warning is this: Don't add or subtract from what you have heard. The warning is **not** first of all to textual critics or translators of the Bible but to everyone who hears the message; don't distort the basic message of this book—hear what God is saying and respond! The warning is to those who don't take the content of the prophecy seriously—who assume an unbelieving attitude toward it or if not unbelieving then unresponsive. The warning is not to someone who doesn't fully understand it but to the one who knows what the point is but doesn't accept it or act on it, choosing instead to discount it, ignore it, put it off, or outright reject it. The warning, I think, is to those who trivialize the book making it little more than something about which to argue fine points of eschatology.

One author wrote, "It is easier to engage in ecstasies than

to engage in obedience. It is easier to pursue a fascination with the supernatural than to enter into the service of God."¹ It is easier to get caught up in the minutia of the symbolism of Revelation or attempting to get every eschatological "t" crossed than to take the basic message of Revelation and respond to it: "Jesus is coming! Am I ready?" John warns against being more interested in predicting the future than preparing for it.

John not only declares how certainly Jesus is coming and how seriously this matter is to be taken, but he also extends one last invitation.

Back in verses 14-15, John reiterates what in the previous chapters he spent much time on: There are only, and ever will be only two kinds of people in the world—insiders and outsiders:

"Blessed are those who wash their robes that they might have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

Insiders and outsiders. Using the symbolism of clothes that have been cleaned, John describes the "insiders" as the people who have been forgiven for their sins through what Jesus did on the cross. Using very different and denigrating symbolism (dogs), John describes "outsiders" as those who will stand before God to account for the sin in their lives. John is greatly concerned that you and I take this book very, very seriously.

It is fascinating and frustrating how many sit in church week after week and don't connect. They won't seriously engage and interact with the truth as if they are detached

from reality. How many listen to the Bible preached or even read it but ignore it? If you believe Jesus is coming again, it demands a response of life not just apathy or passing thoughts. John writes, "Don't miss it, this is serious life and death business!"

An Invitation

But in his epilogue, John not only declares how certainly Jesus is coming and how seriously this matter is to be taken, but he also extends one last invitation. The grace of God is woven through every page of the book and appears again at the very end. Look at verse 17, *"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life."*

The Holy Spirit of God and the bride, the church, say, "Come!" Everyone who hears and receives the message of life says to others, "come!" God extends the invitation to anyone who is thirsty for life, anyone who desires to receive forgiveness and new life—"Come!" He says.

Ken Ross, pastor of St. Nicholas Episcopal Church in Colorado, formerly served with pastor Thad Barnum in his church in Pennsylvania. Through Ken I heard this story: Thad said that late one evening Michael, a parishioner, called him.

"My dad's dying!" Michael's 78-year-old father was dying of congestive heart failure. Michael went on,

"It's hard because Dad and I haven't had a good relationship. I was the last of four boys and by the time I grew up, Dad didn't have much time for me. He worked at his shop 12 hours a day, six days a week and played golf on Sunday. Dad isn't a friendly man. Doesn't talk much and never calls. The only time I felt his love was when he looked at my firstborn son and smiled. I'm scared Thad,

really scared.”

Thad asked, “Are you afraid of being without him?”

“It’s not that. I’m afraid of what’s going to happen to him. Dad only went to church when he had to. As far back as I can remember, Dad opposed religion. He said it was for sissies. Jesus Christ is the name he uses when he swears. Mom took us to church. I received Jesus as my savior and Lord at a Billy Graham crusade and Jesus changed my life. I told my dad what happened and he said he didn’t want to hear it. He called it nonsense. He told me I’d get to be his age one day, and then I’d know that it’s all superstition—an old wives’ tale. He didn’t want to discuss it any more. I don’t know what to do, I love him so much. I don’t want him to die without knowing the Lord. I’ve prayed for my father every day since college. I think it’s too late—the doctors said he might die tonight.”

Pastor Barnum prayed with Michael over the phone and Michael prayed, “Father please give me one more chance to talk to my dad. Please open his heart like you did mine.”

Michael went back to the hospital the next morning and afterward called Pastor Barnum.

He said, “I got to his room before seven. I couldn’t believe it; Dad was awake, half sitting up in bed, and drinking juice. He was weak but the night’s sleep seemed to have revived him. As I sat on the edge of his bed I knew the Lord had given me one more chance. No one else was in the room and I went for it. I said, ‘Dad, I have to talk to you. There’s something bothering me.’ He looked up at me encouraging me to go on.

I said, “Dad, what is going to happen to you when you die?”

He looked at me and said in all seriousness, “I don’t know, son.”

I said, "Dad, you'd listen to me if I told you about stock you could make some money on. Well please listen to me now."

So I started at the beginning and told him about what happened to me and how Jesus saved me, a sinner. I said right out, "Dad he came to save sinners and he came to save you, too!"

"You won't believe this, Thad, but he started asking me all kinds of questions: How did I know? Why did Jesus die? Is the resurrection really true? Can anyone be sure he's really going to heaven?"

He asked me, "How could God ever forgive me for all I've done in my life?"

"Pastor Thad, we talked for over an hour and finally he asked me to pray for him that Jesus might forgive his sin and save his life too. My father! On his dying bed. The Lord saved my dad!"

***"Please give me one more chance to
talk to my dad. Please open his
heart like you did mine."***

Michael's father lived another week and his sons and his wife said he was a changed man. But Michael's father is not in heaven today because he finally listened but because he finally yielded. He had heard the message before but before he had refused to respond.

I am perplexed by how many people can hear about God, sin, judgment, forgiveness and life **but never humble themselves** to personally, intentionally, verbally, out loud to God, admit their need and ask Him to do what only He can do—forgive and give new life. It is disturbing how many are afraid to admit such deep-seated, desperate, I-can't-help-myself need, and are afraid to openly declare themselves—to humbly acknowledge that Jesus alone can

save them from themselves. Afraid that maybe it won't work and then they will be fools. Afraid of the commitment it might entail—the lifestyle changes it might demand.

But through all that stubbornness and even fear, God says “Come!”

How about you? You’ve heard about it for years. Have you ever responded? To you who are already Christians, what will you do with the information you have from the book of Revelation? How will it affect your life? What does it say about your priorities? What does it have to do with your values, your actions?

1. What do you truly believe about the end of the world.
2. What does that mean you are to value?
3. How will that shape your priorities?
4. What actions will result from reshaped values and priorities?
5. How will your life be different because you know Jesus is coming again?

How will it affect your marriage, your family life, and your relationships with your neighbors and co-workers? What does it say about your recreation, your financial investments, the way you spend your money, and your service for the kingdom of God? I can’t apply it for you but God’s Holy Spirit can. Will you give Him time to speak and will you listen?

End Notes

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 186

Appendix A

Chronology of Revelation Events

Old Test.	Cross	Now	Tribulation
		(4-5) Throne	
		(6) 5 Seals	(6) 6 th Seal
			(8-9) Trumpet
			(10-11) Persecution of church
	(12) Dragon		(13) Persecution
			(15-16) Bowl Judgments
			(17-18) World Government

Explanation:

Chapter 1	Anytime after the Cross and Resurrection
Chapters 2 and 3	Early "Now" – 1 st Century
Chapters 4 and 5	Anytime in "Now"
Chapter 6:1-11	Anytime in "Now"
Chapter 6:12ff	Tribulation
Chapter 7	Just prior to Tribulation
Chapters 8-18	Tribulation
Chapter 19	At the Second Coming
Chapter 20	Millennium – 1000 years
Chapter 21	Eternity

Second Coming

Millennium

Eternity

(7) 144,000

(14) 144,000 and Harvest

(16:141f) Armageddon

(19:1f) Celebration

(19:11f) Second Coming

(20) Millennial Kingdom

(20:7f) Final Battle

(20:11f) Final Judgment

(21) New Earth

Appendix B

Study notes on the "42 Months" of Rev. 13 and other places

- 42 months (13:5 beast's authority; 11:2 Gentiles trample the holy city),
- 1260 days (12:6 woman to desert; 11:3 the witnesses will prophesy),
- Time, times and half a time (12:14 woman to desert)
- Daniel 9:25ff:
- 62 "sevens" and 7 "sevens" = 69 "sevens." Usually interpreting "sevens" as years thus 483 years between decree to rebuild Jerusalem following Babylonian captivity and the coming of the Messiah.
- Re. 483 years the NIV note on Ezra 7:11 is helpful: Many regard the letter of Artaxerxes I as the beginning point of Daniel's first 69 "sevens" (Dan. 9:24-27). Others regard the commission of Nehemiah by the same king as the starting point of this prophecy (Neh. 1:1,11; 2:1-8). By using either a solar calendar with the former date (458 B.C.) or a lunar calendar with the latter date (445 B.C.), one can arrive remarkably close to the date of Jesus' public ministry."

Daniel 9:25 refers to a time when the saints will be handed over to a kingdom that will "devour the whole earth" and "oppress the saints." The saints will be handed over to him for "time, times and half a time."

Daniel 9:24 *"Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to*

sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy."

Apparently the 70th 'seven' is spoken of in 9:27, *"He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven'. In the middle of the seven he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end is decreed is poured out on him."*

This is a difficult verse to know who "he" is. In Matthew 24:15ff, Jesus refers to this *"abomination that causes desolation"* and I think places it in the future during the tribulation period.

Because the first 69 'seven's are apparently years, each seven standing for seven years (69 sevens = 483 years - though this is debatable) it is reasonable to assume the 70th 'seven' refers to seven years. But it is very hard to make that work in Revelation. Nowhere in Rev. are 3½ and 3½ ever added up to equal 7.

Instead in:

- 11:2 the 42 months (3 1/2 years) seems to refer to the tribulation.
- 11:2 the 1260 days (3 1/2 years) seems to refer to that same period of tribulation
- 13:5 the 42 months seem to refer to the tribulation activity of the beast.

But back in

- 12:6 the 1260 days seem to refer to the age in which we now live - the time after the "male child" is snatched up to God and the "woman" is taken care of by God.
- 12:14 the "woman" is nourished for "time, times and

half a time" again apparently referring to this present age.

But in Daniel 9:25 the "time, times and half a time" had referred to the tribulation period.

Thus:

"1260 days" is used of two periods of time, one of which has already been 2000 years while the other is apparently a relatively short period of time (tribulation).

"Time, times, and half a time" is used in Dan 9 as apparently referring to the tribulation period but in Rev. 12:14 it refers to this present age.

Tentative conclusion:

The reference to 'seven's were not meant to be taken literally as years but as some "unknown to us" period of time. The 3½ (1260 days, 42 months, time, times and half a time) are all references to periods of incompleteness.

3½ can indicate a long period of time (present age) and it can refer to a relatively short period of time (tribulation). A tribulation of literally 7 years is a theory but cannot be exegetically supported.

42 months is the traditional indication of a limited period of time for persecution of believers according to Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 221.

Appendix C

Further study on “millennialism” - Premillennialism, PostMillennialism and Amillennialism.

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The meaning of the Millennium—Four Views, Edited by Robert Clouse, IVP. This book presents four views, by the proponents of each, in easy to understand language: Historic premillennialism, Dispensational premillennialism, Amillennialism and Postmillennialism.

Contemporary Options in Eschatology—A study of the millennium, Millard J. Erickson, Baker Publishing.

The Millennial Maze—sorting out Evangelical Options, Stanly Grenz, IVP.

Millennialism, The Two Major Views: The premillennial and amillennial systems of biblical interpretation, Charles Lee Feinberg, Moody Press.

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The Message of Revelation: Jesus wins!

God, through the Apostle John, encourages His children giving instructions on how to live while they wait for the coming again of Jesus. Some things in life are certain—God will bring an end to time and all wrongs will be righted. Revelation speaks to the subjects of heaven, hell, suffering, the Millenium but all in the context of how to live the Christian life now!