

REVELATION

REVELATION
THE PERSPECTIVE OF HEAVEN

by
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PREFACE

THESE SERMONS were preached at Cincinnati Primitive Baptist Church between January 2023 and March 2024. I have never been one of those pastors who majors on the end-times or with debates over the details of the millennial positions. But the book of Revelation was not written to debate such issues. It was written to embattled churches in Asia Minor at the end of the first century who were struggling both with heresy from within and persecution from without. They needed a proper perspective in dealing with such pressures, and that perspective is exactly what is provided in the pages of this letter. It is the perspective of heaven, a perspective which reminds us that God is sovereign, Christ is triumphant, and that Satan and all who follow him and his ways will be finally and decisively defeated. It is a word that we need to hear today. Especially in the West, when it seems as if the gates of hell really are prevailing against the church, the book of Revelation reminds us that behind the curtains of our time-space universe reigns the God of heaven whose plan for his people cannot be defeated. This is a book of the blessed hope. May the God of Revelation open our eyes to read it, and in reading it, be blessed with such hope.

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CHAPTER I

HOW TO BE BLESSED BY THE BOOK OF REVELATION (REV. I:1-4)

I HAVE HEARD IT SAID that if you were to poll the average Christian on which book of the Bible they most want to study, the answer would be the book of Revelation. But if you were to poll the average preacher on which book of the Bible they most want to avoid preaching through, the answer would be the book of Revelation! The problem is what readers of the Bible probably all know something about: this book is so different from the rest of the New Testament, that we just don't know what to do with it. The symbolic language it employs seems to cast an impenetrable fog about its contents. In fact, the atheist Richard Dawkins uses the book of Revelation as a whipping boy to cast aspersions on the believability of the Bible and points to its bizarre figures and symbols as a reason why no one should take it seriously.

Unfortunately, its interpreters often don't help the situation. One man quipped, "And though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his commen-

tators.”¹ There are just so many takes on the book of Revelation and many of them are seemingly incompatible. With so many competing interpretations, how can we profitably come to the book of Revelation?

But as Christians, it is simply not an option to avoid it. And one of the reasons we cannot avoid it is that we should absolutely want the blessing it offers: “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophesy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand” (1:3). In this book, there are seven blessings scattered throughout its pages (see 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). The fact that there are seven of them is significant because, as we shall see as we work our way through this book, the number seven is a symbol in Revelation for Divine fulness and completeness. This is not therefore a haphazard coincidence; it is intentional on John’s part and meant to alert us to the fact that those who take up this book and read it and hear it and obey it will be certainly and assuredly blessed. But if you want the blessing, you have to take it with the book!

You may have heard someone say something like, “The book of Revelation says, ‘Blessed is he that readeth,’ not ‘Blessed is he that understandeth.’” However, this is not quite right. It doesn’t just say that those who read are blessed, but also those who hear and obey. You cannot hear and obey the book of Revelation if you don’t at some fundamental level understand what it is saying. In fact, the word which is translated hear in our Bibles often carries the connotation of hearing with understanding beyond just a bare hearing of the words. So the blessing is not for those who hear but walk away confused; it is for those who hear with at least some measure of understanding and then obey what they understand.

So the question is: how do we hear the message of this book so that we understand it, so that we can obey it and receive the blessing? What I want to do in this message is to try to help us get there by getting a big picture overview of this book and its contents. In particular, I want to ask three questions. First, What kind of book is Revelation? You don’t read poetry with the same expectations as history. Revelation is

¹Qtd. in Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Joy of Hearing* (Crossway, 2021), p. 17.

a different kind of book than the other New Testament epistles and gospels. Like the maps of old, it might be said of the book of Revelation, “There be dragons there” – yes – but what does all the symbolism tell us about what kinds of expectations we need to bring with us as we open this book and read it? The second thing we need to know is: what is its overall message? You might know that a book is a history book and not a poetry book, but you need to know what kind of history it is to profit from it. If you read a book on American history as if it were talking about Russian history you are going to be very confused! So we not only need to know what kind of book Revelation is (that’s the first question) but we also need to know what message the book of Revelation is communicating (that’s the second question). Finally, I want to ask, How are we to apply the book of Revelation? For if the blessing is attached to obedience, that means that we are not meant to read this, put it down, and then go our ways unchanged. There is to be an application of this book to our lives. We want to consider how to do this.

What kind of book is Revelation?

What kind of book is the book of Revelation? What should we expect from it? Well, to answer these questions, look at the opening verses. In the first several verses we learn three things about this book.

It is an apocalypse.

The word that in our Bible is translated revelation – “The Revelation of Jesus Christ” (1) – is the word from which we get apocalypse. And though this word is not used in a technical sense by John (as it has come to be used by certain scholars), it still points us to a category of literature that is known as apocalyptic. It points us back especially to the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel and Zechariah (we will see that John draws much of his material and ideas from these books), as well as to a number of intertestamental books like Enoch, The Assumption of

Moses, 4 Ezra, and The Apocalypse of Baruch. There are in fact a number of things these books have in common with Revelation, although Revelation is still in a category of its own.

What do these books have in common with Revelation? There are at least four things Revelation shares with them: (1) God's ultimate purpose for human history is revealed through visions, (2) these visions give us a "transcendent, God-centered, heavenly perspective on reality," (3) the visions are communicated through symbolic imagery much of which is drawn from the OT, and (4) these vision communicate the fact that despite present appearances, God is sovereign and will finally emerge decisively and universally triumphant over evil and his enemies.² We should therefore expect that in this book John is going to communicate his message through visions that incorporate highly symbolic language, but that the purpose of this language is not to confuse us but to clearly communicate to us God's ultimate purposes in judgment and salvation.

But why would John use symbols like dragons and locusts and beasts and so on? He does so I think to awaken our imagination as well as our affections to ultimate realities. These images communicate heaven's perspective on things. So, for example, perhaps one of the reasons the Kings of the earth and the final Antichrist can be likened (as they are in the book of Daniel) to beasts, is because though they seem powerful and omnipotent and omniscient to us, they are no more than dumb animals to God Almighty and he will have no problem overthrowing them in the end. This symbol also reminds us that though the enemies of God's people may be ferocious, nevertheless like Nebuchadnezzar of old, they are under the sovereignty of God.

I think one way to think about the book of Revelation is to compare it to the book of Ecclesiastes. The book of Ecclesiastes gives us an "under the sun" perspective on life and tells us that a life lived with this kind of perspective is vanity (see, for example, Eccl. 1:14). The book of

²Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone* (IVP Academic, 2019), p. 5-6.

Revelation, on the other hand, parts the heavens and helps us to see reality in view of heaven and eternity. The purpose of this book, in other words, is to help us change our perspective, from “under the sun” to “from the heavens.” In the short compass of Revelation’s twenty-two chapters, the curtain that separates heaven from earth is drawn back and we are allowed the privilege of viewing the events of human history from the vantage point of the throne of the Ruler of the kings of the earth (cf. Rev. 11:13). So you see, these pictures and images and symbols are not there to confuse but to communicate. As it was in these other apocalypses, the purpose in Revelation with all its symbols and pictures and images is through them to encourage the people of God who are suffering that God will be finally victorious and they with him.

Revelation is therefore not a puzzle book but a picture book.³ We err when we think that Revelation is just here to help us piece together a linear narrative of events as they are supposed to unfold right before the Second Coming of Christ. We are not to read this with a sort of “newspaper eschatology”⁴ so that every time someone sneezes in the Middle East we rush to our Bibles to figure out how that event fits in with the narrative of the book of Revelation. Rather, we are to read this in such a way that it changes our perspective right now from one of gloom and despair and sinful compromise to one of courageous obedience and faith and hope and triumph in Christ. The book of Revelation communicates the truth that God is sovereign and that the saints will finally persevere and will achieve ultimate victory and eternal life in Jesus Christ the Lord.

This is what we mean when we say that Revelation is an apocalypse. Because that’s what it is, we should expect in its pages to encounter visions conveyed in highly symbolic language rooted in the Old

³This is the way Vern Poythress describes Revelation in his interview with Nancy Guthrie in her Blessed podcast. See <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-blessed-the-organization-of-revelation-with-vern-poythress-episode-6/>

⁴Schreiner, p. 22.

Testament. But this is not language to confuse – this is language that communicates through its pictures the sovereignty of God through Christ over all history and through whose sovereignty and salvation God’s people will ultimately and eternally triumph.

It is a prophesy.

In verse 3, we read, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the word of this prophesy.” Now this tells us several important things about this book as well.

First and most importantly of all, it tells us that this is God’s word. This is not just John’s word: it is God’s inspired and authoritative word to us. In fact, John is just at the end of the divine chain of communication. It comes ultimately from God the Father, who gave it to his Son, Jesus Christ, who then “sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John” (1). So you have God -> Jesus -> angel -> John. It is therefore explicitly called “the word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus Christ” in verse 2. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ not only because it is about him, but most importantly because it is from him.

And it is not just God’s word; it is God’s word to us: “to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass” (1). Blessed are those who read, hear, and obey it (3). This is underlined and emphasized again at the very end of the book: “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (22:18-19). You can’t add or take away from these words precisely because they are God’s word (cf. Deut. 4:2).

As God’s word, there are two functions that prophesy fulfills: forthtelling and foretelling. We sometimes forget that much of OT prophesy is not about predicting the future, but rather is about call-

ing sinners to repentance and God's people to hope in him. The book of Revelation functions in this way as well. It is a call to the patient obedience of faith (Rev. 13:10; 14:12). It is a call to overcome (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). It is not therefore just a prophesy about events pertaining to the end of human history but a forthtelling of God's will for his people now.

But it is a prophesy also in the sense that it does predict future events. It tells us about the final judgment and the Second Coming of Christ. It tells us about a new heavens and new earth. It tells us about the kingdom of the Lord in its fulness. Over and over again, as can be seen especially clearly in the three cycles of judgment (seals, trumpets, and bowls), this book brings us to the threshold of the coming of Jesus back to this earth to save his people and to judge his enemies.

Revelation tells us about "things which must shortly come to pass" and that "the time is at hand" (1:1, 3). Now some read that language and take it to mean that Revelation just pertains to events at the time of the writing, that is, in the first century. However, we must remember that the fact that Revelation is prophesy points first and foremost to the fact that it is a word from God, and that it is the perspective of heaven, not man, that determines the connotation of words like "shortly" in verse 1 and phrases like "at hand" in verse 3. And since "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" is not incompatible with the fact that "the Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness" (2 Pet. 3:8-9), we must not wave off the possibility that from our perspective these things may still be far away, whereas from God's perspective they are not. Remember, this book is to help us transcend an "under the sun" perspective and to see the events of human history from God's perspective.

Nevertheless, we must also remember that when our Lord ascended into heaven, he ascended to be enthroned (cf. Dan. 7:13-14). The kingdom does not wait to be established; it has been established in Christ. Our Lord himself put it this way at the beginning of his earthly ministry in Galilee, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is

at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mk. 1:15). And though the kingdom awaits the future for its fulness, the coming of the kingdom had already been inaugurated even in John’s time. We shall see that Revelation is not just about the very end, but about the last days, days which stretch from the first to the second coming of our Lord, and which encompass our own times as well. So in that sense, this book deals with what is already “at hand,” even for folks way back in the first century, as well as for us.

It is an epistle.

Letters (epistles) in the first century had a very definite form. They began by the author introducing himself, then naming the recipients of the letter, followed by a greeting. What we see here in Revelation is this same pattern. John identifies himself and the recipients and then gives the greeting all in verse 4: “John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you and peace” (1:4).

The fact that this is an epistle addressed to seven real churches in the Roman province of Asia (think southwest Turkey), means that this was meant to address specific people in specific churches at a specific time with specific problems. In other words, we should not think of this book as some kind of abstract teaching on the end times disconnected from the day-to-day problems that the believers in these churches were facing in the culture of their own day. In particular, we must avoid the temptation to think “that modern readers interpret Revelation better than the original hearers.”⁵ We must also avoid the temptation to think that the epistolary aspect of this book is limited to the first three chapters. Rather, the whole book is an epistle and the whole book functions as such.

Nevertheless, the fact that we are told in the direct addresses to each of the seven churches, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) is an indication that

⁵Schreiner, p. 22.

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the message is meant for all believers of all time. It is a letter for us as well, and the exhortation to hear is to the church in every age.

Also the fact that John writes to seven churches is not an accident. Again, in the book of Revelation, seven is a symbolic number that carries the meaning of fulness and completeness. This then seems to be pointing through these particular churches to the whole church. Now I don't think that means that these churches weren't actually addressed; they were. But in choosing seven churches, it seems that John is indicating that the whole church in every age is also being addressed as well. And that means that this is just as relevant a letter to our church as it was to Ephesus or Smyrna or Pergamum or Thyatira or Sardis or Philadelphia or Laodicea.

So we need to see Revelation as a combination of these three things: an epistle, a prophesy, and an apocalypse. That it is an epistle means that it is not an abstract theological treatise but a letter to real people with real problems in the real world. It is a letter to the church. That it is a prophesy not only means that it foretells the future but most importantly that this is God's authoritative and powerful word to us. That it is an apocalypse means that this word is communicated in a highly symbolic and figurative fashion in order to give us heaven's perspective on reality. As an epistle, this is a practical word; as a prophesy, an authoritative word; as an apocalypse, it is a perspective-changing word. Together, they make Revelation to be a faith-building, hope-giving, and joy-filling word.

What message does Revelation communicate?

There have been several different ways Christians have read the book of Revelation over the years. The reason why they are different is simply because each of these ways looks differently at the overall message of Revelation and reads it accordingly. So we need to settle right now what is the overall message that John is trying to communicate, or we will be

hopelessly confused about the details. As we look at these approaches, I want to consider both the advantages and the disadvantages of each.

One approach⁶ looks at Revelation and sees all of it as dealing only with events in the first century. It sees the judgments and the coming of Christ as taking place in first century history, like the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It sees the beast of chapter 13 completely in terms of the Roman empire. The advantage of this approach is that it makes it very relevant to the first readers who were themselves situated in the first century. The problem with this approach is that Revelation doesn't seem merely to be talking about the triumphs and tragedies of the church in the first century, but rather to the complete destruction of evil and the eternal triumph of his people in the real, personal, visible, and glorious coming of Christ to judge his enemies and save his people. Revelation does not leave us with a world still grappling with the dragon, Satan, but with Satan finally and eternally cast into the lake of fire. Revelation does not leave us with struggling believers but with saints who are in the very presence of God in a renewed heavens and earth, where all things are new, and where evil, pain, sorrow, and death are things of the past.⁷

Another approach⁸ looks at Revelation as a linear narrative of church history between the two comings of Christ. This has been called the Protestant view because for a long time Protestant interpreters viewed Revelation as speaking about the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy through the symbols of the beast and the false prophet.⁹ The ad-

⁶Called the preterist approach.

⁷"It is difficult to believe that John envisioned anything less than the complete overthrow of Satan, the final destruction of evil, and the eternal reign of God. If this is not to be, then either the Seer [John] was essentially wrong in the major thrust of his message or his work was so hopelessly ambiguous that its first recipients were all led astray." Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation (Revised)*, (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 27.

⁸Called the historicist approach.

⁹George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. II.

vantage of this view is that it looks at history through the lens of God's providential direction of it. But there are a number of fatal problems with it. First, it is highly artificial and subjective in terms of which symbols point to which things in church history. It is also limited to Western church history, whereas the book of Revelation seems to be addressed to the whole church of every age. Finally, if this were so, Revelation would have been utterly incomprehensible to its original audience, and the call to hear and obey it would have necessarily fallen on deaf ears.

Yet another approach¹⁰ sees Revelation as dealing not with specific events in history per se but with ideas and principles that transcend history and that are true in every age. It doesn't interpret the symbols of Revelation as referring to specific kings and empires and events in history but as referring to the spiritual realities that are always operating in and behind human history. So, for example, these folks don't see the beast as referring explicitly to the Roman Empire or as the Roman papacy; rather, they interpret the beast as referring more generally to any kingdom in any time that oppresses God's people and seeks to seduce them into sin. But hence it also follows that for them both the Roman empire and the Roman Catholic church might be a fulfillment of what the beast symbolizes, and so may many other nations that have used force and cruelty against God's people.

The advantage of this view is that it makes the book of Revelation applicable to God's people in every age. The symbols don't refer merely to the past or the future but to spiritual realities which operate as much in the present as they have at any time. The problem with this view, as one commentator points out, is that "it denies to the book any historical fulfillment."¹¹ But surely the book of Revelation is not just about spiritual principles operating throughout history but also about the culmination of human history in the climatic return of the Savior and the final judgment of the wicked.

¹⁰Called the idealist approach.

¹¹Mounce, p. 29.

The last approach¹² is the one I most sympathize with: it sees Revelation primarily as dealing with the events of the Second Coming of Christ. Those interpreters who take this view see this book as a prophesy primarily in terms of foretelling. All the events described, either from chapters 4, 6 or 8, are thought of as describing the events immediately preceding the Second Coming. Now some folks will decry this by saying that if this is the case, then it makes Revelation irrelevant for its original audience. But I have always found this objection to be weighed in the balances and found wanting. This is because the most relevant reality for the Christian in any age is to live in light of the Second Coming. So even if this book were entirely about the events surrounding the Second Coming, it would be nevertheless incredibly relevant. It is the Second Coming that gives us reason to hope, no matter the present circumstances. Note how the epistle begins and ends – on the theme of the Second Coming (1:7; 22:20). The identifying mark of those who love Jesus is loving his appearing, and Revelation was written as a means to enflame this love (cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:8; Tit. 2:13). So I believe that Revelation was written to help us to living in light of this great reality, the coming of our Lord in glory and final judgment and salvation. As you will see, it is a modification of this approach that I will generally adopt in this sermon series.

Nevertheless, we must resist the temptation to see all of Revelation purely in terms of the future. The imagery of the book of Revelation does seem to point not only to a distant future but also to present realities. We shall see that the imagery of the beast would have reminded the original audience of various aspects of the Roman empire. And the call to endurance was a call to endure through the present tribulation that the believers in the seven churches were then experiencing.

So as we survey these different approaches, it seems to me that any one of them on their own is not enough. Rather, we should read the book

¹²Called the futurist approach.

of Revelation through a combination of each of these approaches.¹³ It is right to say that Revelation deals with issues that first century Christians were dealing with, and it appeals to them even in the imagery it employs through symbols they would have easily recognized, not only from their familiarity with the Old Testament but also from their familiarity with the culture in which they lived. Revelation also gives us spiritual principles that are always true no matter when you live, principles that can find multiple fulfillments throughout church history. So though I believe that Revelation is primarily about the Second Coming of Christ and the culmination of all things in the final judgment and New Jerusalem, this doesn't need to take away from the insights that these other approaches give us.

To give you an idea of how this works, and anticipating future messages, let me take the beast of chapter 13 as an example. I personally believe that the beast is ultimately fulfilled in the Antichrist whom our Lord will personally overthrow at his Return. But the beast is also prefigured in every power and prince that persecutes the people of God. And so it should not surprise us that the way John describes the beast in Revelation would have reminded his readers of the Roman empire and the way it was at that time persecuting God's people by its government and tempting God's people by its idolatry. I think this is the outworking of the principle of 1 John 2:18, where the apostle writes, "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time." The Antichrist is prefigured and preceded by many antichrists. It is the same thing with the symbolism of the beast. Does the beast point to this final, eschatological figure, the Antichrist? Yes, I believe it does. But does it also find fulfillment in the many antichrists

¹³I think Robert Mounce summarizes this nicely when he writes, "The author himself could without contradiction be preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist. He wrote out of his own immediate situation, his prophesies would have a historical fulfillment, he anticipated a future consummation, and he revealed principles that operated beneath the course of history." Mounce, p. 29.

throughout history who prefigure the final antichrist, whether they be hateful persons or hostile powers? Again, yes, I think it does.

With all this in mind, let me try, as broadly as possible, to give you a quick overview of the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation is structured around four visions, in each case introduced by the phrase, “I was in the Spirit” (1:10) or something similar. So you have the vision of Christ in chapters 1-3. In this vision, the risen Christ appears to John and gives him messages to the seven churches. Then you have the vision in heaven (see 4:2) in chapters 4-16. In this vision, John sees three cycles of judgment (seals, trumpets, and bowls) which come from the risen Christ as he sits enthroned at his Father’s right hand. In these chapters, you also see the present struggle between the people of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) and his enemies who are led by an unholy trinity (dragon, beast, and false prophet) who seek to mimic the holy, tempt the saints, and kill those who refuse to join them in their rebellion against God. The third vision is a vision in the wilderness (see 17:3) in 17-21:8. In these chapters, you see the fall of Babylon, the symbolic seat of beast, and the return of the King, Jesus our Lord. Finally, in 21:9-22:5, you have the vision in the great and high mountain (see 21:10), where we are shown “the bride, the Lamb’s wife” (21:9), and we see the descent of the New Jerusalem out of heaven where there will be no more tears or death and where God’s people will forever enjoy his immediate presence. In the final verses (22:10-21) we have the conclusion of the book which in many ways mirrors the introduction in chapter 1, together forming bookends for the total message of the book.

How then do we summarize all this? What is John trying to communicate to us through these four visions? Just this: he is telling us that though the devil is our enemy and is doing and will do terrible things to God’s people on the earth, yet his time is short (cf. 12:12). John is reminding us that the events on the earth are not determined by the dragon but by the Lamb slain, by the Lion of the tribe of Judah. God is sovereign. He will save his people and judge his enemies. No matter how bad things look now, there is hope because God, the

Almighty, reigns. Jesus is coming, Babylon will fall, the New Jerusalem will descend, and God's people will enjoy him forever. That is the message of Revelation.

What is the application of the book of Revelation?

Well, we are to hear it and obey it (1:3). What are we to obey? We are to obey the summons to overcome. We are to obey the call for the endurance of faith. We are to obey the call to recover our first love, to repent of any lukewarmness and to come to Christ as our great treasure. We are to obey the implicit call throughout this epistle to resist the temptation to love this world and rather to love the Lord our God with all our hearts. We are to see the visions given here and to correspondingly calibrate our hopes thereby. We are to live life in light not only of Christ's future distant coming but also in light of his present rule. He is not just going to be in some far future King of kings, but he is right now "the prince of the kings of the earth" (1:5). It means above all that our relationship to Christ is far more precious than all the riches and the power that could possibly be accumulated in this world.

Where are you at this morning? What is your relationship with Jesus Christ? Is he your Savior? Or have you plotted a course for your life that doesn't include Jesus at all? Is he your Lord? Revelation tells us that Jesus is your Lord whether you want him to be or not. And one day he will be your Judge. And let me tell you that at the last day, you will want the Judge to be on your side. The book of Revelation tells us that Jesus Christ will certainly save his people and destroy his enemies. Are you one of his people or one of his enemies? There is no third category! To be careless about him is to be against him. To treat Christ with indifference is to treat him with contempt.

If you see that you are a sinner before God and need to be saved from future judgment, let me tell you the good news. The good news is that the rebel doesn't get saved by placating the King through good works. Because we can't. Every sinner that is saved is saved by free grace, grace

that is given because the Lion of the Tribe of Judah is the Lamb slain. What John means by that imagery in chapter 5 is that Christ effects salvation for his people by dying for them, by taking their punishment upon himself. We aren't justified before God by trying but by trusting, not by looking to ourselves but by looking to Christ, not by relying on ourselves but upon Jesus alone. You can find peace today, not in your good works but in the redemptive work of Christ.

So what is Revelation about? It is about helping us to gain a heavenly perspective on reality. It is about calling us to put our faith in King Jesus. It is about giving the saint real comfort and hope and courage in a world that is dominated by beastly empires because above and over them all God reigns in Christ for the eternal good of his people. I like this quote from Matt Smethurst that I recently read. He says that in the Bible, Jesus is called a Lion and Satan is called a lion. But the difference is crucial: one is on a throne and the other is on a leash. This is what Revelation reminds us.

And so in hearing we are blessed. Blessed indeed, for this is not man's blessing but God's, and the blessing of God is a blessing that makes rich and with absolutely no sorrow added to it (Prov. 10:22).

CHAPTER II

THE GOD WHO GIVES GRACE AND PEACE (REVELATION 1:4-8)

THESE VERSES BEGIN with the author, John, introducing himself to his audience, the seven churches in Roman proconsular Asia: “John to the seven churches which are in Asia” (4). This is almost certainly John the apostle since the earliest testimony to the authorship of Revelation was virtually unanimous in ascribing it to him. He wrote this probably during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian in the late first century. Though we can’t be as certain about that, the fact that Irenaeus dated Revelation in this way is significant. For Irenaeus (a second-century pastor of a church in what is now Lyon, France) heard Polycarp preach, and Polycarp himself had been personally disciplined by the apostle John. No one else who wrote about this in the early times had that kind of direct connection with the sources, so I take his testimony to be very reliable.¹

¹For a good summary of the evidence for the authorship and date of the book of Revelation, see Leon Morris, *Revelation* [revised], (IVP, 1999), p. 27-41.

But the book of Revelation is not about John. Though John appears from time to time in the narrative, he is not writing about himself. He is only the one who is communicating the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1). The book of Revelation is about God. In fact, as Richard Bauckham puts it, “The whole of Revelation could be regarded as a vision of the fulfillment of the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘Your name be hallowed, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’”² It wasn’t given to us so we could piece together a program of the events preceding the Second Coming. It wasn’t given to satisfy our idle curiosity about the Last Days. It was given to help us to see who God is, and in seeing who God is, to worship him and to make us as a result more hopeful, more faithful, more courageous, and more holy. The book of Revelation is, as the rest of the Bible is, God-centered. And that is what makes it so wonderful and so practical.

Revelation is a practical book because your greatest need and my greatest need is God. We need God not only because in him we live and move and have our being, but also because we were made to know him and to see his glory and to love him and to experience communion with him. And so the book of Revelation reveals God to us so that this can happen. You see that here in verses 4-8. In these verses, we see who God is, that he is the God who gives grace and peace. Further, we see how it is that we can expect grace and peace from God. It is for three reasons: (1) because of who God is (4-5, 8), (2) because of what he has done (5-6), and (3) because of what he will do (7). The result of all this should be, and must be, praise on our part (6). And that is what I want to happen in this message – and every other message that I preach. I want to know God and I want you to know God. I want to taste and see that the Lord is good. I don’t want us to rest satisfied with bare facts about God, but I want us to see what John saw so that it resonates in the deepest part of our being. And I want the truths of these verses to so affect us that

²Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 40.

with John we register our amen to these truths about the sovereign and triune God.

So you see, Revelation is not about determining what millennial perspective you should take, and if we just come to this book to sort out questions of that kind then we are coming for all the wrong reasons. In fact, it shouldn't really matter whether you are pre-, post-, or amillennial, in terms of the interpretation of this book. You will notice that when I did an overview of Revelation last Sunday, I never even mentioned these terms. Of course you have to pick a position when you get to chapter 20, but apart from those verses, Revelation overall is not really that interested in the millennium. What is revealed to us in this book is the reality that God reigns through Christ in the affairs of men. This book is about God.

The God who gives grace and peace

It is also about the redeemed people of God, though not in the exalted way we talk about ourselves nowadays, but in terms of our need of God. You see it here in verse 4, where John wishes grace and peace to the seven churches of Asia. It is so easy to skip over these words and to miss their massive importance. This is not a greeting like, "Good morning" that you hear and yet don't hear. No, this is something you want to hear. For in these two words we have the sum and substance of the message of salvation in Christ.

Grace is God's unmerited favor which brings with it every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3). Because God did not spare his own Son but delivered him up for us all he is able with him to freely [graciously] give us, not just some things, but all things (Rom. 8:32). Grace is a reminder that we do not earn or merit any part of salvation and God's favor. Salvation is a gift, from first to last.

This is good news because apart from grace we would be hopelessly and irretrievably lost. We are sinners, unclean and condemned. We are rebels and traitors against the God of heaven, deserving only his wrath

and eternal fury and punishment. And yet the gospel tells us that there is grace for sinners. It tells us that God desires the salvation of ungodly men and women. It tells us that though we are dead in our sins, God has stepped in to save us through Christ.

So grace is a one-word summary of everything we receive in Christ for our salvation. It includes election and justification before God, adoption into the family of God, sanctification, and glorification. We all need this grace. There is no salvation apart from the free grace of God. This is what John prays for his audience in verse 4.

But he doesn't stop there. He also wishes them peace. Again, we have to be careful that we don't short-change this word. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones reminded folks in a sermon on Eph. 1:2, this doesn't just mean the cessation of hostilities. That's the way the world looks at peace. For them, peace is just that period of time between wars. But in the Bible, peace is much more than that. In relation to grace, I think it is right to say that peace is the effect of grace. Grace brings peace, above all peace with God and then peace with our fellow man. I think if you really want to get a handle on what peace looks like, you would have to read the last few chapters of Revelation. But here is a sample: "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (21:3-4). That is true peace!

Of course, there is a present experience of peace for the follower of Christ: "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7). This is only a peace which God can give since it is a peace that passes human understanding. But this internal peace and tranquility will one day in its fullness bring with it the peace of God in a new heavens and a new earth.

We can have peace now in part because of the fulness of peace that we know God will certainly bring in the eternal state.

This is what we need, isn't it? We need grace and peace. But there is only one way to get that, and that is through and from God. And so what we have in the rest of verses 4-8 is a meditation on who God is, what he has done, and what he is going to do. We need to hear these things, because it is through believing these truths that we can have confidence that God will give grace and peace to those who belong to Jesus. In other words, we need to know that the prayer for grace and peace is not an idle prayer. Why not? Because of who God is.

Who God is (4-5)

In these two verses, God presents himself to us as the Triune God. You see God the Father in the words, "him which is, and which was, and which is to come." You see God the Spirit in the words, "the seven Spirits which are before his throne" and you see God the Son in the words, "and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth."

Have you ever read a story or watched a movie with an unexpected plot twist at the end? It seems to me that there are two types of plot twists. In one kind, there is a revelation at the end of the story that you never saw coming, but it doesn't really add anything to the forgoing narrative. But the best kind of plot twist is not only the one that you never saw coming, but once you have seen it, it makes so many details in the previous pages make more sense and sheds light on the forgoing narrative. This kind of plot twist is not like the ones you encounter in so many of those cheap mystery novels out there, but this is something that actually adds to the meaning of the overall story.

I think the doctrine of the Trinity is like that. It is something you would never have seen coming if you just had the Old Testament, and yet, once you see it in the New Testament, it makes so much of the Old Testament make so much more sense. It is a mystery in the Biblical

sense of the word – we only know it because God revealed it to us. And yet, it is not an arbitrary doctrinal imposition on the text of Scripture. It is a truth that casts light on so many texts in the OT. For example, take Gen. 1:26, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Why us and why our? How can a monotheistic religion have God speaking in this way? Well, if God is triune – one God in three persons – then this certainly makes sense of this passage. Not that this verse in Genesis proves the doctrine of the Trinity, but the doctrine of the Trinity helps us to understand why the one God might speak in the plural! (We might also consider the Angel of the Lord in the exodus, wilderness, and conquest narratives in Genesis through Joshua, or Psalm 110:1)

That this is talking about the Trinity is certain for several reasons. The first reason is that grace and peace never come from angels or men; this is something that can only come from God (cf. Eph. 2:8). So the fact that grace and peace come jointly from God the Father and the Spirit and the Christ is a sure and certain indication that they all share the same identical divine nature. This means that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.

The second reason we can know this greeting is truly Trinitarian is that in Revelation the Father and the Son share the same divine names. This is clearly seen at the beginning and the ending of the book. So in 1:8, God the Father addresses himself to us at the “Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.” Then in 1:17, Jesus tells John, “Fear not; I am the first and the last.” To say that he is the first and the last is the same thing as if he had said that he is the Alpha and the Omega, since alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet and omega is the last. And if that doesn’t convince you, look at chapter 22. In verse 12, the Lord Jesus is speaking to John (“behold, I come quickly” – see verse 20); he goes on to say in verse 13: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.” Jesus clearly identifies himself along with God the Father as being the first and the last.

Now lest you think that the author of Revelation is some modalist, look in 1:6. Jesus, the divine Son, “hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father.” Here the Son is distinguished from the Father, his Father. So here in Revelation we see that the Father and the Son are equally God and yet they are not the same person. Three persons, one God!

What about the seven Spirits? One might argue that this would not make a trinity but a sort of nine-person Godhead. However, once again we must remember that in this book the number seven is symbolic. The number seven here is a reference to the fulness of the Spirit’s power. This is also a reference to Zechariah 4:2-7, where the seven lamps (verse 2) represent God’s one Spirit (verse 6) by which grace comes to the people of God, enabling them to perform God’s will for them in a hostile world (verse 7). In Rev. 4:5 the seven Spirits are called “the seven Spirits of God” which are again symbolized by burning lamps before God’s throne. In 5:6, we see Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah who is also the Lamb slain, and this Lamb has “seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent forth into all the earth,” indicating that the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, mediating his rule on the earth.

Let’s now consider briefly what is said about each person of the Trinity. Before we do so, however, we need to reflect on the fact that John is not giving a class here on systematic theology. The descriptions of God given in these verses were meant to put steel in the backs of these first century Christians who were a persecuted minority in the Roman empire. They lived under the shadow of the Caesars. They lived in cities whose every nook and cranny were cluttered with reminders of idolatry. In other words, these descriptions of God were not necessarily given to the seven churches so they could win debates; they were given so that they would have the courage to remain steadfast and faithful to Christ in a world that was against them. Even so, we inhabit a world that is still under the influence of the devil, and in which the pressure is not to be a faithful Christian but to abandon the faith for the love of this present evil world. So let’s read these descriptions with that in

mind. How can these descriptions of the Triune God fill us with holy boldness?

The One who is, and Who was, and Who is to come (4)

We can resist the temptation to cave into the pressures to conform to a world which is passing away because the God whom we serve does not pass away. He stands outside of time and over history. This world is constantly changing. The “right side of history” is constantly changing. The ones who are “in” and the ones who are “out” are constantly changing. And not only is the world changing, but it is also in constant decay. Death is always around us.

God is not. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). He always lives and is the source of eternal life. He is, as he revealed himself to Moses, “I AM THAT I AM” (Exod. 3:14), the unchanging, self-existent, eternal God. Therefore to be like Demas and to trade God for this world is like settling for dirt-clods when you could have diamonds.

It also means you cannot escape God. Thank God! No matter how far forward in time we might go, God is “to come.” If this world were to continue another ten thousand years, God would already be there. When all that defines this world now has fallen away into ashes, God will still be the one who is and who was and who is to come. Praise God, he will never forsake his people because the one who is, is for his people. He has been, is, and forever will be for his people. It is because God is like this that we don’t need to fear. As God declared in Isaiah the prophet, “Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming, and shall come, let them shew unto them. Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye

are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any” (Isa. 44:6-8). There is no one like our God!

Why can we be sure that we will receive grace and peace from God? Because he is the one who is, was, and is to come. He is unchangeable and he is unstoppable. There is no power on earth that can prevent God from being on the side of his people. This prayer for grace and peace is therefore not some vain wish; it is the will of the sovereign of heaven and earth. Notice in verse 8 that he is called Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the Almighty. God’s power is an unstoppable power, for he is universally, eternally, and unchangeably sovereign. Dear saint, let your fears be quieted in the confident recognition of God’s sovereignty willingly armed for the grace and peace of his people.

The Seven Spirits (4)

We’ve looked at the significance of the number seven here. We want to also note the fact that he is “before his [God’s] throne” (4). This is not meant to suggest distance. It is meant to suggest that the Spirit of God is the agent of God’s rule on earth (5:6). He is the one through whom Christ speaks to the churches (e.g. 2:7). It is the Spirit of God who communicates grace to the people of God. No, the mention of the Spirit of God is a reminder that God is not distant but that he rules for the good of his people, to give them strength and wisdom to carry out the tasks given to the church in a difficult world. So we need not fear that grace and peace might not come to us.

Jesus Christ the faithful witness (5)

When you read that description, “faithful witness,” what do you think? Well, you should think of martyrs like Antipas, who in the next chapter is called by Jesus himself, “my faithful martyr” (2:13) in the KJV. But this really means the same thing as “faithful witness” (same words

in the Greek text) in 1:5. Jesus was a faithful witness in the sense that he testified of the truth by his death. We are called to do the same – perhaps not by a literal martyrdom but by a willingness to lay down our lives in sacrificial ways for our love to Christ and his people.

We can do so because Jesus is not only the faithful witness; he is also the first begotten from the dead. We can lay down our lives for Jesus because in dying he has defeated death, and he has done so on behalf of his people. He demonstrated this by rising from the dead, and in doing so became the prince of the kings of the earth. We don't have to wait for our Lord to be enthroned: he is Lord of lords and King of kings even now. Caesar may seem great, but he is an ant in the shadow of Christ. And we may say the same of any other earthly power; they will all one day bow down before our omnipotent Lord. How then can we doubt that he will give us all needed grace and peace?

What God has done (5-6)

We are not only reminded of who God is, but also of what Christ has done for those who believe in him. In the second part of verse 5 and into verse 6, the apostle offers praise to Jesus Christ: “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” According to the apostle John, Christ has done three things for us.

First, he loved us. The one who is the ruler of the kings of the earth loves the church. Isn't this what the apostle Paul said? “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). Now I want to notice that this is put as if it were past. He doesn't say, “To him who loves us” but “to him that loved us.” Of course, he doesn't intend to suggest that Jesus doesn't love us anymore. But he does intend to make the love of Christ concrete. In other words, Jesus doesn't love his church by just telling us he does so – rather, he has proved it in past concrete actions that demonstrate beyond a shadow

of a doubt that he does love us in the present and will continue to do so for eternity.

So let us never forget this: Jesus loves his people. If this is true, can we not stand against all the evil of this world? Can we not let go of this world's deceitful love in order to hold fast to the love of Christ?

Second, he has demonstrated this love, above all, in dying for his church: and washed us from our sins in his own blood. Some versions have "freed us from our sins" – it's a difference of one Greek letter, but it makes no real difference. He washed us from our sins, and he freed us from our sins. He has granted us the full and free forgiveness of all our sins, not because of anything we have done, but because he bore the curse of our sins upon himself.

In the ancient world, Christians were not viewed kindly. They were seen as a blot on society. We are fast approaching the time when Christians will again be viewed this way, if we are not already there. And that means that there will be increasing pressure upon us to give into the world and to adopt its ways. How do you resist that? One way surely is by reminding yourself that if you are a believer in Christ, then he loves you and has granted you through his atoning death the full and free forgiveness of sins. On the other hand, those who reject the Savior, no matter how welcomed they are by the world, will die in their sins (Jn. 8:24). Surely better to be justified before God through Christ and be canceled by the world than to be smiled on by the world while under the wrath of God.

Third, our Lord hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father (6). This is almost certainly the fulfillment of what Israel in Exod. 19:6 was a type: "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." The apostle Peter applies this to the church in his epistle: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar [purchased] people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). Some translations have Rev. 1:6 as, "Jesus Christ . . . made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (ESV). I think this is a better

translation. The emphasis is that we are members in a kingdom, but this kingdom is such that all who are in it are priests. What this means is that through Christ every citizen in this kingdom has direct access to God. You don't have to make it through Mary or a saint. If you are in Christ, the Father hears your prayers. We will see this vividly illustrated later in this epistle. And though it is true that we will experience this priesthood in its fulness in the new heavens and new earth, yet even now we are able through Christ to approach the throne of God and obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). What can the world give that approaches this kind of privilege?

Can we not see that this prayer to God for grace and peace is no idle prayer? Can we not have confidence that he will grant it? For behind it is the eternal and sovereign Father, the powerful Spirit, and the Savior who loves us, washes us from our sins, and make us kings and priests to God. However, John doesn't stop here. There is even more encouragement for us in verse 7.

What God will do (7)

We are told in verse 7, "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen."

There are many commentators that take this to be a fulfillment of Dan. 7:13-14 and Zech. 12:10. However, we have to be careful here that we don't blindly stuff those verses into this verse in the wrong way. There is similarity of language, but not of meaning. Jesus ascended into heaven and to his Father's right hand in clouds (Acts 1:9-11). This is what the Daniel passage is referring to. But the angels at the ascension also tell us that Christ will return in the same way. That is what John is telling us here. In Daniel 7 we have Christ's ascension; in Revelation 1 we have Christ's return. The Daniel passage has the inhabitants of heaven beholding the ascending Christ; the Revelation passage has the

inhabitants on earth beholding the returning Christ. There is similarity of language because Jesus returns in the same way that he ascends.

In the Zechariah passage, the tribes of Israel (rather than the tribes of the earth) mourn in apparent repentance over the pierced Messiah. But in Revelation 1:7 it seems to me that the wailing is not from repentance but from terror. In fact, the only other place in Revelation where this word wail is used is in Rev. 18:9-10, where you have the scene of Babylon's demise: "And the kings of the earth, who have committed fornication and lived deliciously with her, shall bewail her, and lament for her, when they shall see the smoke of her burning, standing afar off for the fear of her torment, saying, Alas, alas that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come." This is not the wailing of repentance but the wailing of regret. A similar scene is portrayed in Rev. 6:14-17, which I believe is about the Second Coming of our Lord: "And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" There is certainly a lot wailing going on here (though the word itself is not used), but it does not stem from godly grief but from worldly sorrow.

But why would John rejoice over such a thing? Why would he worship Christ because the world will wail in regret over his return? Well, wait until you are persecuted a little bit and I think you will understand. Wait until you are banished to a penal colony, as John was, and you might understand. Wait until you are put in a gulag for twenty years, and you will understand. Wait until the jeering and the celebrating of the wicked in their apparent triumph over goodness and decency and righteousness makes you wonder if there will ever be a future for the

righteous, and you will understand. Wait until you feel like the psalmist did, when he cried, “But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps. 73:2-3). He only found resolution when, as he put it, “I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction” (17-18). Though it is not right to harbor a vengeful and spiteful attitude towards the enemies of God’s people, it is right to rejoice in God’s righteous judgment over them. And this is what John does here. It is a reminder that despite the fact that although now “the whole world lieth in wickedness” (1 Jn. 5:19), there is coming a time when “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). And with John we say, “Even so, Amen!”

How can we be sure that grace and peace will come to us? We can be sure because Christ is risen, and he will return to judge his enemies and save his people. He has not forgotten us because he is coming for us.

And how can this reality steel us to be courageous in a world that is increasingly anti-Christian? We can do so because whatever comfort and respect the world can give you now, it will all be worthless and less than worthless when Christ returns again. There is no sinful joy, no wicked pleasure now, that will lessen the terror and the eternal regret of those who reject the Savior.

And so let us join with John, as say with him, “To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

CHAPTER III

THE VISION OF THE RISEN CHRIST (REV. 1:9-20)

“**Y**OU HAVE TO GO FIND YOURSELF.” “You need to discover who you are.” Have you heard that before? I bet you have, and I bet you’ve heard it more than once. The funny thing about this is that if you had said something like this to someone a hundred years ago, they would have looked at you like you had sprouted horns or were growing a tail or something. Such a statement would have been utterly incomprehensible to our forefathers, not because they were stupid, but for the simple reason that they already knew who they were!

So what is meant by that? “Go find yourself,” they say. Well, it is the motto of a culture that has elevated self-sovereignty over everything else. The primary value of our time is the freedom of the self. And so, according to the world, you get to decide who you are. It comes out in phrases like, “You can be whatever you want to be,” an obviously false statement. It comes to us in its most extreme form currently in the transgender movement, in which people are told that even their DNA is not a constraint on their personal identity as male or female.

I find that particularly interesting because it used to be the case that in common parlance DNA referred not only to biological realities, but

also to the essential core identity of something, like that of a business or organization or group. You would hear people talk about the DNA of some organization, and what they meant by that was the essence of that organization, what it was, what it was about, what it stood for. But now, we want to divorce our identity from our DNA (which determines whether we are male or female) because according to the values of secular humanism, human freedom must have no objective or external constraints. Our culture is actually advocating the idea that there is no such thing as a real, objective essence to the human being.

This is a fragile identity. It's fragile because it means that our identity is ultimately founded on how we feel about ourselves, on our emotions. To let the foundation of your identity rest on that may at first feel freeing, perhaps even dizzyingly so, but it also results in an incredibly brittle identity. To rest your identity on how you feel about yourself is like building your house on quicksand. There is nothing fixed or firm or objective about that at all. For what are your feelings fixed upon? You have already rejected everything objective; there is nothing there upon which to hang your feelings. They are hanging on nothing; they exist on thin air.

Is it any wonder then that the modern man in the modern world is so confused and anxious and depressed? How can it be that people who walk around with supercomputers in their pockets wrestle with despair? But they do. It is amazing to me that despite the amount of power that we possess today, the modern man and woman can find no rest for their souls. There is a reason for this; and I think the fundamental reason for this has to do with our rejection of God's sovereignty over us, replacing it with the pursuit of ultimate personal freedom and independence from God.

So one of the things I want to do in my message today is to offer a Christian alternative to the self-sovereignty which is preached by the elites and entertainers and educators of our post-modern world. For the identity of a Christian doesn't hang in thin air. Rather, it is defined by who Jesus Christ is. And that is good news. For the message of Christ

to us is the same message to John: “Fear not” (Rev. 1:17). And we can be confident that this is not a message which will change because he is “the first and the last” (11, 17), the one who “was dead; and behold, I am alive forevermore . . . and have the keys of hell and death” (18). Whereas the world cannot ultimately find freedom from fear, or at least has no rational basis for it, the Christian does. The security of our identity doesn’t hang on the flimsy film of personal feeling, but upon Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8).

That is where these verses come in. Jesus Christ is revealed to us in these verses (Rev. 1:9-20). In these verses, we have the beginning of the first of four visions which will determine the contours of this book. This is the vision of the risen Christ, beginning in 1:9 and going on to the end of the third chapter. In this vision, Jesus comes to John in his glory as the resurrected Son of God and commissions him to write this book that we are reading. Then in chapters 2 and 3, he will speak to the churches in Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

What does this have to do with our identity as Christians, you might ask? Well, John begins by defining his audience who are Christians in Christian churches, and the point I want to make is that this identification is determined by who Jesus is. In other words, in these verses we have Biblical confirmation that if you’re a Christian, you don’t look for personal meaning, you don’t find yourself like the world does, by looking inward. Our identity is not shaped by our feelings; rather, our feelings are meant to be shaped by our identity in Christ. The Christian doesn’t look to himself or herself – the Christian looks to Christ. This is the Christian alternative that I am talking about.

In these verses we have three things. First of all, we have The Question: What is a Christian? We will see the answer to that in verses 9-11. Then we have The Tension: how can we presently belong to God’s kingdom and yet be called to endure with patience through tribulation? This tension of course arises from the answer to the question of what the Christian is, for a Christian is defined by tribulation, kingdom, and

endurance in verse 9. I have been saying that the modern quest for personal identity is fragile. But how about the Christian's? Is our identity in Christ robust enough to endure through the worst that this world has to give us? (And we're going to see, as we go through this book, that we are called to expect the worst from the world!) But then we have The Solution: the glory of the risen Christ resolves the tension, for he entered into glory through suffering, and he calls on us to do the same. More than that: we can be sure that we will enter into glory because we are united, not to a defeated Christ, but to a victorious and living Christ, the one who is the first and the last. We will see that in verses 12-20.

All of this book flows out of this vision. This is why it is first. You cannot understand any of the book of Revelation if you don't see it as a vision anchored in this reality, that Jesus is not dead but that he is risen and has the keys of death and hell. And so those who are united to him by faith will also conquer death and rise victorious over death, hell, and the grave.

With that being said, let's now look at these three things: The Question, The Tension, and The Solution.

The Question: What is a Christian?

John writes in verse 9, "I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ." What is a Christian? In this and the following verses a Christian is defined by the following things.

First of all, the Christian is a member of the family of God. Notice how John begins: "I John, who also am your brother and companion." Here is the great apostle, and yet he does not advertise himself in that way. Rather, he identifies with them. And he reminds us that the Christian is a member of a family. God is our Father, and Christ is the first-born among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). We in turn are brothers and

sisters in Christ. No matter what the world thinks about us, no matter if they reject us, the church ought always to be a welcome and loving place for the followers of Jesus.

Unfortunately, this is not always so, and it is a sad commentary on the church that we are too often at each other's necks when we ought to be at each other's feet. What a terrible witness this is! Instead of pushing each other away, we ought to be embracing one another. Unity in the family of God is a given, but we often don't act like it. We need to therefore remember this. We need to endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). We are to be companions, fellow-laborers, and fellow-burden bearers. Are we? Do we? Do we receive each other as Christ received us to the glory of God (Rom. 15:7)?

How do we keep the unity of the Spirit though? What does this look like concretely? Here is where the doctrine of the church is so important. It is very easy to say, "Yes, I agree that we should be unified with other believers," and yet when it comes to the local church, the local church can look like an evening at the fights. And we can become weary and want to disengage ourselves from the church. But before you do that, consider what our text has to say to that.

Where is Jesus here? He is "in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks" [or rather, lampstands] (Rev. 1:12-13). What are the lampstands? They "are the seven churches" (20). We've already made an argument from the significance of the number seven that these churches are meant to be representative. Now it's important that we understand how they are representative. They are not representative in the sense that they describe the progression of church history, as if Ephesus represents the apostolic era and Laodicea the period of time immediately preceding the Second Coming. They are in the order they are in because all seven churches lay along an ancient postal route in Roman Asia, and they are listed in the order in which you would have met them along that route. In other words, their order has everything to do with geography and nothing to do with history! Rather, they are representative in the sense

that this group of churches stands for the church as a whole in every place and in every age.

So when the text says that Jesus is in the midst of the lampstands, it is not just saying he was present with these churches, but that he is present with the church in every age (cf. Mt. 28:20). Jesus is present in the church. If you want to experience the presence of Jesus, you should seek it in the church. Now I believe in the idea of the universal church. But you should not divorce the church universal from the church local. These churches represent the universal church, and yet they are also specific local congregations. This means that if Jesus is so committed to the local church, so should we. It is simply misguided and unbiblical to detach ourselves from the local church.

Consider also – looking ahead a bit – that of the seven churches, only two are not rebuked for sin. And yet Jesus is in their midst! I want to be where Jesus is, don't you? He is knocking at the door of Laodicea; he is calling for Ephesus to repent. Let us not be so quick to give up on the church. Let us not be so quick to become discouraged by the church. We pursue the unity of the Spirit in the context of real relationships with real people (sometimes difficult people!) in real churches. What is a Christian? He or she is both a member of God's family and a member of God's church.

Next, he describes three common realities that every Christian experiences. Are you a Christian? Then can you identify with John in these three things?

The Christian is someone who is enduring tribulation: “your . . . companion in tribulation.” The entire NT witness agrees. “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33). “And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter

into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21-22). “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12).

I don’t doubt that the tribulation in verse 9 refers at least partly to persecution for the sake of the gospel. This is how it appears to be used most of the time in Revelation (cf. 2:9-10; 7:14). Here, in 1:9, John refers to the fact that he has been exiled to the island of Patmos “for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.” In other words, it appears that the Roman authorities didn’t like the fact that he preached the gospel and so they banished him to this rocky little island in the Aegean Sea off the western coast of Asia Minor.

But tribulation comes in many flavors. Physical sickness, depression, and trials in the family and business are just a few of the ways we can endure tribulation. Here’s a list from the apostle Paul, not all of which are directly related to persecution: “in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” (2 Cor. 11:23-29).

This bottom line is this: we shouldn’t think that because we are going through difficult times that God is against us, or that we must have messed up really badly somewhere. Not at all: this is the road every Christian must take. It is in the way of tribulation that we find sanctification and nearness to God. More holiness is gotten through severity than through softness.

The Christian is someone who is entering a kingdom: “your companion . . . in the kingdom . . . of Jesus Christ.” I say entering because

the kingdom of God is both present and future. We are already in a kingdom (Rev. 1:6) but we are also in the process of entering a kingdom (Acts 14:22). God's kingdom comes in its fulness, and our experience of this kingdom, after the return of our Lord in the Second Coming and resurrection of the just and the unjust. Right now we may not look like much, but consider that our Lord said that there is coming a day when "the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Mt. 13:43).

Brothers and sisters, remember this: you are not only members of a family, but you are royal children, sons and daughter of Almighty God. Do you believe that? "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God" (1 Jn. 3:1)!

The idea of a kingdom evokes images of privilege, power, and prosperity. Kings and queens are not wanting for many things. They have the most advantages. They have the most freedom. They have the most pleasures. And this is the word that is used to describe the Christian. And it is important to understand that we are not only in a kingdom, the kingdom of God, but we reign with him: "And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father" (Rev. 2:26-27). The life that is granted to the believer is called a "crown of life" (2:10; cf. 2 Tim. 4:8).

It is true that the fulness of this is to come. The crown of life is not granted yet. But it already belongs to the sons and daughters of the Most High. I am reminded of the advice that was given to Elizabeth I, when she had to hold the crown during her sister Mary's coronation: "It will not seem so heavy when it sits on your head." Right now we have the heavy task of holding a crown for others. But be of good cheer: it will not feel so heavy when it sits on your head – and if you belong to Jesus, it will!

Third, the Christian is someone who is exhibiting patient endurance: "your companion in the . . . patience of Jesus Christ." The word trans-

lated patience here is rendered in the ESV as patient endurance. It's the idea of perseverance. A Christian is someone who is persevering in the faith of Christ. This is important because, as our Lord put it, "he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Mt. 24:13).

It's called endurance because the Christian is not only defined by the reality of the kingdom but also by the reality of suffering and tribulation. Again, Acts 14:22 put these things together: we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom. Endurance is the thing that connects present suffering with eternal glory. Not that our endurance merits the kingdom and the glory. But endurance is the fruit of God's grace in bringing us out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son (Col. 1:13, 23).

Now I think it is important to note here that all three things – tribulation, kingdom, and patience – are defined by Jesus Christ. The tribulation that we endure is the tribulation of Jesus Christ. The same with the kingdom and the patience. The Christian is not someone who has just had a hard life. Or just because you have high hopes for the afterlife does not make you a Christian. Just because you don't give up when things get hard doesn't make you a Christian. None of these things makes a person a Christian. Fundamentally, what makes a person a Christian is that they belong to Jesus Christ. And the way they show that they belong to him is by faith in him, embracing him as their Lord and Savior, and by repentance of sins. They show it by taking his name upon themselves in baptism. They show it by identifying with his people, the church. A Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ as he is presented to us in the New Testament, in the gospel.

The Tension: how do you hold the kingdom and the tribulation and patience together?

The tension here is a tension throughout Revelation. On the one hand, God reigns (cf. 11:15-17). But on the other hand, so do the dragon [Satan] and the beast [nations and states under Satan's control]

(13:1-2). Because the beast reigns, the saints endure tribulation and persecution, even to the point of martyrdom (cf. 12:17; 13:7-10). But because God reigns, the saints are members of an eternal kingdom. Now the question is really this: how do you hold these two things together in your head as you are going through tribulation so that you endure to the end? That's the tension. How does the promise that you are kings and queens of an eternal kingdom keep from letting the suffering you are enduring cause you to deny the faith? For, as we have said, the kingdom comes in its fulness in the future. But the suffering is in the present. The future can look so far away at times that it does not appear worth it to remain faithful to Jesus. I mean, after all, if God really does reign, why doesn't he give us the kingdom now? It's questions like that which can be so unsettling to our faith. That's the tension that I'm talking about. It's the tension between the present and the not-yet, between the tribulation which we have now and the kingdom which comes later. The solution to this is found in the vision we have of Christ in verses 10-20.

The Solution: the Vision of the Risen Christ

Before we look at the details of this vision, I want to briefly pause and observe when and where John saw it: "I John . . . was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. . . . I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet" (9-10). John didn't see this vision as he was luxuriating on the beach at an oceanside resort while on vacation getting some much-needed rest. In fact, I'll be honest with you; in all my reading of church history, I read about some pretty remarkable encounters that people have had with the Lord, and none of them – none! – happened when they were enjoying a barbeque with friends. Now don't get me wrong; I'm not saying vacations and barbeques are bad, far from it! But I am saying that the place where people meet God in a life-changing way is almost always in the context of some kind of suffering. And that

is where John was, exiled away from those he loved most. There is some evidence that Patmos at that time was a penal colony. But it was in that place that he had this incredible vision that has blessed the church for two thousand years.

My friend, let's not short-change God. You might think that you need to get out of whatever trouble you are in right now in order to get to a place where you can get alone with God and get right with him and experience personal revival. But John was "in the Spirit" on Patmos, on a penal colony, in exile. He was a companion with all who suffer tribulation. It was precisely here that the apostle was taken by the Spirit to a place where he was able to meet with Jesus Christ in all his resurrected glory. Maybe the Lord has put you in a difficult place so that you too can truly meet with him.

Let's also notice when this happened. It was "on the Lord's day" (10). Now some folks think that this is a reference to the day of the Second Coming. They argue that the language of the "the day of the Lord" is synonymous with "the Lord's day." And since "the day of the Lord" is a reference to that final day of days when Jesus returns and makes all things right, that must be what John is referring to here. In other words, the Spirit has put John in a time-capsule, so the speak, and they have traveled through time to the last day.

That's not what John is talking about. For one thing, the word used here, *kyriakos*, is never used in the Bible – not even in the Septuagint – to refer to the Day of the Lord. For another, we know for certain that the early church from about the middle of the second century on uniformly used this very language to refer to the first day of the week when our Lord rose from the dead. That is what is being referred to here. This is the first day of the week, the day on which Jesus was resurrected. The church has from the beginning recognized the significance of this day. This is the day on which the church has met for worship from the start. Perhaps the reason John tells us the day here is to inform us that he was, whether alone or with others, worshipping the Lord, and it was then

that God met with him. May we have the same expectation of meeting the Lord on his day!

But what did he see? What we will see is that John saw Jesus Christ who revealed himself to John and to us as a Prince and a priest who was defined by matchless purity, unequalled power, and incomparable perfection. First of all, we are told that he heard something, “heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet” (10). He “turned to see the voice that spake with me” (12). After turning, he sees seven golden lampstands and in the middle of the lampstands “one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the waist with a golden girdle” (12).

This is a description, first of all, of a Prince (cf. Rev. 1:5). I say that because of this phrase, “one like unto the Son of man.” This is the language of Daniel 7:13-14 – “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.” The Son of man is a king whose kingdom is eternal and indestructible.

But this is also the description of a priest. The garments worn by this Son of man were priestly garments (Rev. 1:13). This, along with several other features, also points us to the heavenly being that Daniel saw in Dan. 10. Many of the features of Christ here are identical, or similar, to the features of the one the prophet saw. The difference is, however, that Daniel saw a vision of the preincarnate Christ; John sees a vision of the resurrected Christ. We should expect this, because Jesus didn’t come out of nothing – he is the expectation of OT hope and the parallels between Daniel 10 and Revelation 1 show this.

The features that follow in verses 14-16 show us that Jesus Christ is not only risen but that he is risen in purity, power, and perfection. First of all, consider how the purity of Jesus is communicated in this vision.

Fire and light are often in the Bible associated with purity. Jesus is incomparably pure, he is perfectly holy, and this is seen in a number of his qualities. For example, we are told that “his eyes were as a flame of fire” (14) – his gaze is penetrating, so that no one is able to hide their sin or escape his judgment. We are told that “his feet [were] like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace” (15), so that he is able to crush the serpent’s head and all his enemies. We are told that “his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength” (16), reminding us of Paul’s description of God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16).

We see the power of Christ in the “voice as the sound of many waters” (15). When you see pictures of tsunamis and the power they possess, and when you realize that Christ is the one who created the oceans, and that this is communicated in the overpowering sound of his voice – you get an unmistakable picture of power. You see it also in the picture of a sharp, two-edged sword coming out of his mouth (16), “that with it he should smite the nations” (19:15). You see it in the fact that he holds in his hand “the seven stars” (16). (By the way, this shows that this is not meant to be a literal description; these are figures of speech that are communicating very important realities.)

In all these things, we behold perfection. The one whom John beholds is not someone who is in danger of dying. Indeed, he tells John, “I am the first, and the last, I am he that liveth, and was dead: and, behold, I am alive forevermore . . . and have the keys of hell and death” (17-18). There is no weakness in him, no imperfection either of character or ability.

This is a divine figure. We must not miss that. Now in the King James Version, Jesus addresses himself to John as “Alpha and Omega, the first and the last” (11; cf. 17). Most modern versions omit the phrase “Alpha and Omega” in 1:11. However, they all include this self-description of Jesus in 22:13. In other words, whatever the manuscript evidence is for the inclusion or exclusion of this phrase in 1:11, the fact that everyone agrees it is included in 22:13 means that this is how our Lord understood himself. And since the Father announces himself to us in this same

way in 1:8, we have indisputable proof that Jesus understood himself as possessing the divine attributes of self-existence, immutability, and eternity. The Son of Man is the Son of God, co-equal and co-eternal.

You also see this in 1:14, where John sees that “his head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow.” How is that significant? Remember Daniel 7? There the “Ancient of Days” – clearly a description of God, and OT version of the “Alpha and Omega” – is described in this way: “the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool” (Dan. 7:9). The fact that Jesus is described in this way means that this is not just a description of a heavenly created being, but of someone who shares fully in the divine nature of the Ancient of days.

Now how does this vision solve the tension created by the definition of the Christian as a suffering king? How can we be kept from giving up on the future kingdom because of present suffering? The tension is solved because of the fact that the Christian belongs to Christ. He represents us to the Father, and he upholds us by his Spirit. We are connected to him and to his resurrection life like branches are connected to the life of the vine (Jn. 15:1-7).

And that means two things. It means that if we are followers of Jesus, we should expect suffering. For who is Jesus? He is the one who “was dead” (18). He is the one who washed us from our sins “in his own blood.” He achieved his victory through suffering, and he calls on those who follow him to do the same. This does not mean that we are meant to redeem ourselves or others, as Christ did. It simply means that following Christ means death to oneself, death to the world, even to the point of losing one’s physical life in this world. Suffering is not something to surprise us; it is something to be expected.

But the reason why we can do this is because Jesus didn’t just die. He rose from the dead. He conquered death. Again, he achieved his victory through suffering. Suffering is no proof that we are on a fool’s errand. If we belong to Jesus, it is the path along which we endure to eternal life. This is the point of the phrase, “I am alive forevermore . . . and have the

keys of hell and death” (18). To have the keys means to have authority over. If you belong to Christ, death cannot have the last word. It cannot have authority over you. It no longer reigns over us; indeed, through Christ we reign over death. As the apostle Paul writes, “That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:21).

And this reality is communicated in all the features displayed in John’s vision of the risen Christ. This is the picture of the divine, powerful, eternal, holy, victorious, and sovereign Lord. This is not the picture of a defeated Christ; it is the picture of the one who has conquered. And because we belong to him, not because of our goodness but because of his grace, we can have supreme confidence that we will conquer with him and in him.

By the way, this is still a proper picture of Jesus for us. For “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore, Amen” (Rev. 1:18). The Jesus who John saw is the Jesus that we worship and serve today. He is the same today as he was then. He is the same unchanging and unchangeable.

He is risen. And he is risen for the church. He walks in the midst of the churches, the lampstands. And he holds in his hand the seven stars which “are the angels of the seven churches.” We’ll consider in our next message what the angels are. But for now we note their connection to the churches. Christ died for the church. He loves the church. He is coming again for the church.

And please hear this, he rules history for the church. It’s not like we have to wait until the end of history for Christ to reign. Brothers and sisters, he is reigning right now. This is the point of the command: “Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter” (19). Now some take this to be a basic outline for the book of Revelation. “The things which thou hast seen” is supposed to be chapter 1, “the things which are” refers to chapters 2-3, and “the things which shall be hereafter” chapters 4-22. I doubt that such a neat outline is meant by this. I think rather the point

is this: Revelation is a prophesy that deals with past, present, and the future. The point I want to make here is that Jesus speaks just as easily about the future as he does about the present and the past. Do you know why? Because he is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. He rules history, and he rules it for the church. So, brother and sister, what Jesus said to John applies equally to all who belong to him: “Fear not.” Fear not the present and fear not the future. Fear not past failure or future uncertainties. Fear not your sins and fear not death. Be not afraid but be strong and courageous! Why? Why not? Look who your Lord is! Look where he is, what he has done, look who he is!

But this of course applies only if you belong to Jesus. Where are you this morning? When it comes to the person of Jesus Christ, the gospel both invites us and warns us. For sinners who need a Savior, it invites: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30). “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (Rev. 21:6-7). But for rebels who persist in their self-sovereignty, it warns: “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8). Oh may we respond to the invitation and heed the warning!

CHAPTER IV

FIRST LOVE LOST (REV.

2:1-7)

JESUS CHRIST LOVES HIS CHURCH. You see that in all the letters. Even in the rebukes his love shines forth: “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent” (Rev. 3:19). His love for the church at Ephesus comes through as well in every aspect of his letter to the Ephesian church, and this is what I want to explore with you in our message this morning on Rev. 2:1-7. I think this point is worth emphasizing because whenever sin is pointed out and rebuked, and whenever we personally feel the sting of guilt and sinful failure, we can tend to turn inward in order to fight back to where we need to be. But there is a reason why this letter, and every letter, begins with a reminder of who Jesus is. It is so that we will turn to him who is our Lord and Savior for cleansing and forgiveness and repentance. In this letter, our Lord begins by reminding them that he is the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (2:1). For the one who can remove the lampstand is also the one who can restore it and keep it in its place.

This letter, and the ones that follow, are addressed to the angels of the seven churches. So this begins, “Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write” (2:1). Who are these angels?

Most scholars, it seems, believe that these are heavenly beings, what we would normally think of when we hear the word angel. The argument is basically a statistical one: every other instance of the word angel in the book of Revelation outside the first three chapters does refer to those ministering spirits sent forth to serve those who are to be heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14). And this is a strong argument. This argument, however, is further strengthened by the observation that in the book of Daniel angels were associated with different nations (cf. Dan. 10:18-21). So if a nation can have an angel, why not a church?

However, the objection I have to this interpretation is that it doesn't make sense to rebuke an angel for the sins of a church or to call them to repent, which is exactly what we have here. Angels don't sin and don't need to repent. It also doesn't make sense to interject an angel in the process of delivering these letters, since we are already told that God the Father gave the Revelation as a whole, and these letters in particular, to his Son Jesus, who gave it to his angel, who then gave it to John (1:1). Why do we need another angel on the other side of John?

Others say this is a reference to the “spirit of the church,” or to its overall attitude. But again, you don't call on the spirit of a church to repent; repentance is something specific people both as individuals and as a group are to do. Also, it is a problem that, as far as I know, there is no other instance of the word angel anywhere in the Bible where it is used in this sense.

It seems to me that this must be a reference to a human being, either to messengers of the churches who carried the letters to their respective congregations, or to the pastors of each congregation, and I lean toward the latter. Here is why I think this way: first, statistics doesn't preclude outliers. As long as the word angel can bear a meaning appropriate to a human being, then just because that connotation in a certain place happens to be statistically improbable doesn't rule it out as a genuine

possibility. And here's the thing: angel just means messenger. This is the way it must be translated, for example, in James' epistle: "Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers [angels], and had sent them out another way?" (2:25). It can be a human or a heavenly messenger; context must decide. Here I think the context is decidedly in favor of a human messenger.

That these are the pastors of the various churches seems to be indicated by the fact that they are represented by the seven stars in Jesus's hand (1:20). It's hard for me to imagine why the guys who are just delivering the letters to the churches would be represented in this way. However, the pastors in a real sense represent the church and its witness – it seems to me, at least, very appropriate for them to be referred to in this way and to be addressed the way the angels are addressed in these letters.

This angel, this pastor along with his church, is about to hear an awakening message. There is sincere affirmation but there is also a stinging rebuke. But the angels are the stars, and the stars are in the hand of Christ. He holds them, not only accountable but also as the one who empowers, cleanses, and forgives.

Now what does he say to this church? There are four elements to our Lord's message to the church in Ephesus: Praise (2-3, 6), Plight, (4-5), Prescription (5), and Promise (7). In each of these elements, we hear the love that our Lord has for his people. These are not the words of a stranger. These don't come from someone who doesn't care. Rather, these are the words of the Good Shepherd who has given his life for the sheep and who lovingly guides and teaches and rebukes them.

We need to remember that these letters were not only given to these particular churches, but to the church as a whole in every age. That doesn't mean that every single problem these churches were dealing with are going to be problems our particular church is dealing with. But it does mean that we should see the things these churches are praised for as things we should aspire to, and it means that we should see those things for which the churches are rebuked as a call to examine our own

hearts and to do some repenting where needed. Note well the words in every letter: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This is a call to every believer in every age: listen carefully to what the Spirit is saying here – and obey.

With that in mind, let us hear what the Spirit said to the church at Ephesus.

Praise

We will note in a moment that there is a serious sin that needs to be dealt with in this church. Yet, even though our Lord knows this and is about to address it, it is remarkable to me that he spends more time underlining their achievements than he does in rebuking them for their sin. This speaks to the genuine love that our Lord has for these people. He cares for them, and that means that he is not constantly looking for reasons to get on to them, or that he is constantly suspicious of everything they do. Do you know people like that in your life? People who are always suspicious and always looking for something to criticize are not commending themselves to us as people who care for us. But if you truly love someone, you don't gravitate to their faults (though it doesn't mean you ignore them, either); instead you tend to notice their talents and strengths and accomplishments. That's what our Lord does here.

He begins by saying, as he does with every church, “I know thy works” (2:2). No one can escape the penetrating gaze of Jesus (cf. 1:14). This is true of churches, and it is true of individuals. He will tell the church of Sardis that even though they had a reputation of being a vibrant church, he knew they were dead (3:1). Our Lord always knows our true situation. Even when we have convinced others that we are better off than we are, and even when we have deceived ourselves about our true state, Jesus knows the truth. We might be able to get away with hidden sin when it comes to people, but not with the Lord. On the other hand, this is also encouraging because it is just as true that sometimes our achievements

are either hidden from or forgotten by or even despised by others. But not the Lord: “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Heb. 6:10).

It is very important that we hear what they are praised for. It comes down to two things: doctrinal faithfulness and tireless labor for the kingdom. Here is how our Lord describes them: “I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted” (Rev. 2:2-3). One thing that’s interesting here is how our Lord not only praises them but repeats the praise – twice they are praised for their labor and twice for their patience.

When our Lord praises a church for something, you know it is true. This was a church that was willing to do hard work for the kingdom. And they didn’t give up: they labored and did not faint. They didn’t grow weary. They didn’t get fatigued in the service of Christ.

To appreciate this, you need to understand where these saints were at. These saints didn’t live in a context that made it easy to be a Christian. They not only lived in a pagan city, but in some sense they lived at the cultural heart of that pagan society. Ephesus was a port city and was the doorway into the heart of Asia Minor. With a population of at least 250,000, Ephesus was considered one of the most important cities of proconsular Asia as a commercial and export center. Multiple valuable trade routes passed through here. And the city was impressive and stunning. Mounce writes, “The traveler from Rome landing at Ephesus would proceed up a magnificent avenue thirty-five feet wide and lined with columns that led from the harbor to the center of the city. . . . [The city] boasted a major stadium, marketplace, and theater. The latter was

built on the west slope of Mt. Pion overlooking the harbor, and seated some 25,000 persons.”¹

But most impressive, and for the church most daunting, aspect of this city was the Temple of Artemis (Diana), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Again, Mounce gives us the details: “About four times the size of the Parthenon, it was adorned by the work of many great artists. . . . Pliny the elder gives the dimensions of the temple as 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and sixty feet high. He also notes that the 127 pillars were of Parian marble, with thirty-six of them overlaid with gold and jewels.”²

We learn of just how important Artemis was to the inhabitants of Ephesus through an event recorded in the book of Acts. Because the gospel had come to Ephesus through the labors of the apostle Paul and had flourished through his three-year ministry there (Acts 19:10), the pagan idol-makers became incandescently furious and provoked a riot that eventually ended up at the theater (see Acts 19:23-41). One of the Asiarchs appealed to the rioters to cease because, as he put it, “Ye men of Ephesus, what man is there that knoweth not how that the city of the Ephesians is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana [Artemis], and of the image which fell down from Jupiter?” (35). Ephesus was not only a pagan city; it was proud of it. Not only were the townspeople proud of it, but they could also be violently defensive against those who threatens the status quo.

Furthermore, not only was the worship of Artemis central to the life of the city, but we are also told that Ephesus was a center for the magic arts, or, as we would call it today, witchcraft (19:19-20).

So this was not a church on the buckle of the Bible belt. This was a church in a city devoted to superstition and idolatry and witchcraft. In other words, the entire culture was opposed to the things that the Christians believed and taught. The lifestyle commended by the wor-

¹Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, Revised* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1998), p. 67.

²Ibid.

ship of Artemis was antithetical to the lifestyle commanded by Christ. The fixtures of their culture were just so many roadblocks to a faithful living-out of the gospel. It was in that context that the Ephesian Christians labored!

Do you feel burnt-out in your faith? Let's take a lesson from the Ephesian church. Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we will reap if we faint not (Gal. 6:9).

Not only were they faithful in laboring for the kingdom, but they were faithful in adhering to the faith once delivered to the saints. They had "tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars." This is a church which had had a wonderful legacy of mighty spiritual leaders. First the great apostle Paul (Acts 19-20), followed by Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3), followed by Tychicus (2 Tim. 4:12). Early church tradition also links the apostle John's name to this church. This is a rich heritage, and the church guarded it well.

Perhaps they remembered the words of the apostle Paul to them on his last visit with the elders of the church: "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:27-32).

Again, this is important. Our Lord commends them for this. We are to care about doctrinal fidelity. We should want to communicate the truth with clarity and boldness. The Ephesians were doing this. They were guarding the gospel that had been entrusted to them. We need to do the same. In a day when people tend not only to be careless about

Biblical truth but even judgmental when you ask for carefulness, this is a timely reminder. Just because someone says they love Jesus and is working for Jesus doesn't make them faithful to Jesus. Just as there were false apostles in the first century, there are false teachers in our own day. We need to be able to discern and to call out the liars and to hold fast to the truth.

In fact, our Lord comes back to this again in verse 6: "But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." The Nicolaitans were promulgating false doctrine in the churches. We don't know exactly what they taught, although the fact that they were associated with those who held the doctrine of Balaam (2:14-15), indicates that they probably justified idolatrous and immoral practices. According to Victorinus, the first commentator on Revelation, the Nicolaitans were "false and troublesome men, who, as ministers under the name of Nicolaus, had made for themselves a heresy, to the effect that what had been offered to idols might be exorcised and eaten, and that whoever should have committed fornication might receive peace on the eighth day."³

Jesus hated the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, and he commends the Ephesians for hating it and for not bearing with those who were evil. Don't miss that! If you love the truth you are going to hate heresy. To be soft on false teaching is to be soft on the gospel. It is to be unfaithful to Christ. We must learn to hate teaching which corrupts our minds and hearts so that we do not give it a single square inch in our own thoughts, or homes, or churches.

Plight

"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (4). What a stinging rebuke! If you have any genuine love for the Lord, then for Christ to have something against you must cut

³Qtd. in Leon Morris, *Revelation, Revised* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1987), 61.

you to the quick. There are many important lessons that this one verse can teach us.

First of all, this teaches us that we should not think that doing right makes up for what we are doing wrong. Note the “nevertheless” at the beginning of verse 4. What they were doing is good, even very good, and very commendable. But it does not give them an excuse for the sin in their lives. Beware of letting a sin fester in your heart by silencing your conscience with other acts of obedience. Remember the warning in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Mt. 7:21-23). Here were people who, like the Ephesians, were doing “many wonderful works.” But they were also “ye that work iniquity.” What was their end? “Depart from me,” our Lord said to them.

Second, it’s important that we understand the nature of their problem. They had left their “first love.” Now there are differing opinions about what exactly this is. Some say that they had lost their love for their brothers and sisters in Christ. Others say that they had lost their love for unbelievers and as a result had stopped being witnesses for the gospel. Still others say that they had lost their love for Jesus. Honestly, I don’t think you need to pick here. You cannot separate love of the Lord from love of his people and a burden for the lost. The apostle John also wrote this: “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 Jn. 4:20).

It is called first love because it was the love they had for Christ at their conversion. It was then at a fever pitch, and they were completely sold out for the Lord. But something had happened over the years. Their zeal

had waned and the vibrancy of their walk with the Lord had become replaced with a spiritual barrenness.

But how are we to square this with the foregoing verses? How could people be doing all that they were doing and no longer love Christ the way they ought? One way some have sought to resolve the problem is by claiming that the works for which they were commended were all in the past. However, this just isn't true. The works, labor, and patience were all present realities (note that the phrase "hast patience" in verse 3 is present tense). It just goes to show that you can be very busy for the Lord and yet be so without a heart for him even as you "serve" him. Such are like fake flowers: they may look real and genuine, but they have lost the fragrance of true godliness.

This is alarming, because what this shows is that some of the deadliest sins are sins which no one else can see. Like the church of Sardis, we can have a reputation for being spiritually vibrant and yet be dead (Rev. 3:1). It's just not good enough to have other folks slapping you on the back telling you what a great job you are doing. What matters is that when you meet the Master he says to you: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt. 25:21).

What are some of the signs that we might have lost our first love? What are the signs of incipient declension of the soul? I would suggest the following.

First, the neglect of prayer is a sign of declension in the soul. Prayer is speaking to the Lord, bringing our needs to him, worshiping him, and expressing our need of him. It's hard to want to talk to someone that you don't love like you used to. Open and free communication is a fruit of union and communion, and that is a fruit of love. In particular, the neglect of private prayer is a sure sign that we have left our first love. It is easy, like the Pharisees, to pray in a church service where everyone can see you, not because you love Jesus but because you love the praises of men. On the other hand, when the prayer closet finds you a frequent visitor, it is a sign of a healthy faith and a vibrant love to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, what is the state of your prayer life? If you are getting by with barely a prayer here and there, it is a sign that the very thing our Lord condemned the church at Ephesus for is a problem in your own life.

Second, the neglect of watchfulness over the soul is a sign of declension in the soul. What do I mean by this? I mean being careful over the state of our hearts. It means to “Keep thy heart with all diligence: for out of it are the issues of life” (Prov. 4:23). It means to police our minds and affections with the word of God. It means to pray the prayer of David and mean it: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24). It means to be careful about our life before God that no one else can see. And though it is true that you might be able to be negligent in this area and fool people for a long time, you won’t always be able to do it. Sin in the heart will eventually manifest itself, as Paul warns Timothy: “Some men’s sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after” (1 Tim. 5:24). Or as Moses warned the children of Israel, “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23). To be watchful over the soul means that it is not our sin that is finding us out, but that we are finding out sin out and rooting it out. It means not only caring about the “big sins” but rooting out the little ones as well. In fact, I would argue that your holiness depends more upon what you do about the little sins than it does upon what you do with the big sins. The one who is faithful in little is the one who is faithful in much.

This requires great diligence and spiritual care. It is a part of working out your salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). And therefore it can be difficult work. It means putting to death the deeds of the body (Rom. 6:11-4; 8:13). It means going to war against the flesh. And you are not going to do that if you don’t love Jesus. Because if you don’t love Jesus, or if you love him less than you ought, it will only be because you love something else instead. And to love something else in the place of

Christ is sin. And that sin will slowly choke your devotion to the Lord, and the heart sins will become more and more prominent.

Brothers and sisters, what is the state of your heart? Are you watching over your souls?

Third, treasuring lawful things more highly than Christ is a sign of spiritual declension in the soul. There are things that are not sins in themselves. But if you love that thing more than Jesus, then that is sin. It is not a sin to eat, but if I love food more than Jesus, that is sin. It is not a sin to be entertained, but if I love entertainment more than Jesus, that is sin.

How can I tell if I love lawful things too much? I think the words of the apostle Paul are very helpful here: "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6:12). If that thing that may be lawful in itself brings me under its power, so that I lack self-control in its enjoyment, then that is sinful. Is Jesus really King in my heart? When we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven," we need to pray that this begins in our own lives and in our own hearts.

Fourth, a lack of love and concern for people, not only in terms of their physical needs but also in terms of their spiritual need, is an evidence that we have lost our first love. We are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt. 5:13-16). It is not for no reason that the church is likened to a lampstand. We are to shine the light of Christ upon others. It is the love of Jesus that compels us to do this, just like the apostle Paul: "For whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:13-15). Those who hide their light and put it under a bushel are only evidencing that they care more about their own selves than they do for the cause of God and truth.

Could this be the reason why the judgment threatened here is what it is? For if the Ephesian church does not repent of this sin, our Lord warns them that “I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:5). If they do not shine their light, Christ will take the lampstand away. The church will cease to exist. This is a very serious warning, and it shows just how serious this sin is. We are reminded that sin is not something to be trifled with; it is something to eradicate, no matter how painful or difficult it might seem to be.

Brothers and sisters, do we care about people? Has our commitment to orthodoxy, though good and commendable, only taught us to hate but not to love?

Prescription

I am thankful that our Lord doesn't see our sin and then write us off. Instead, he calls us to repentance, just as he did the Ephesian church: “Remember therefore from whence thou are fallen, and repent, and do the first works” (5).

First of all, I want you to notice the gentleness of our Lord here. It is there in that word, Remember. He is not piling up mountains of penance for them to do as a precondition for the lampstand to stay. As the Egyptians did of the ancient Israelites in their bondage in that land, he is not taking away the straw and yet requiring of us the same amount of bricks to make. He is not putting on us burdens too heavy to bear. He is not constantly moving the goal line so that every time we get close we have to do a little bit more.

No, not at all! What does he tell them to do? Simply this: go back to what you did when you first became a Christian. It is as if our Lord were saying to them: “Remember the zeal you had for me when you first came to know me as your Lord and Savior. Remember the joy you then had. Remember that and go back to that.” This is not something extra. If you are a Christian, this is something we have done. This is

something we have experienced. We know this can be done because we have done it.

But it is not just that they were to remember the love they had at the first, but that they should remember what it was that sparked that love. As the Lord spoke to the children of Israel, so our Lord speaks to the church today: “I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the LORD, and the firstfruits of his increase” (Jer. 2:2-3). Let us remember the redemption purchased for us by Christ. Let us remember the burden of sin that rolled off our backs and into the tomb of Christ. Let us remember the declaration of sins forgiven and righteousness granted when we stopped trusting in ourselves and put our faith in Jesus Christ alone. Should we not with Christian in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* give three leaps for joy and join him in his song?

“Thus far did I come laden with my sin,
Nor could aught ease the grief that I was in,
Till I came hither. What a place is this!
Must here be the beginning of my bliss?
Must here the burden fall from off my back?
Must here the strings that bound it to me crack?
Blest cross! blest sepulcher! blest rather be
The Man that there was put to shame for me!”

Do the “first works.” How does a Christian begin? They begin by looking to Jesus Christ as he is presented to us in the gospel. So go back to the gospel. Stay there, linger there until the old fires are rekindled. And if you have never known what this is; if you don’t know what it means to have your sins forgiven and to feel the peace of God through faith in Christ, I want to encourage you to come to Christ and in him you will find rest for your souls.

And repent. Faith and repentance are two sides of the coin we call conversion. They are not something we do just at the beginning of the

Christian life, but they are marks of the entire Christian life. We don't just remember; we also repent. There must be a dramatic turn from sin to God. We must put away our idols. We must put Christ first. We must seek his kingdom first (Mt. 6:33). You cannot really love Jesus and then love what he hates. Jesus hates sin; so must we, and we evidence that by turning from it and by fighting against it.

Promise

Every letter to the churches ends with a magnificent promise. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7). The promise has to do with the new creation, which our Lord will bring about as a result of his victory over sin and death. Through Adam paradise was lost, but in Christ it is regained. In other words, the promise of paradise is a promise to participate in the redemption and regeneration of our world that has become marred by sin and death.

To see that this is what John is talking about, we should note that this word paradise is used two other times in the NT. It is used in the promise of Christ to the thief hanging on the cross next to his in Luke 23:43 ("Today thou shalt be with me in paradise.") and by Paul in 2 Cor. 12:4 ("caught up into paradise"). In both these instances, it is clear that it is talking about heaven, the blessed abode of God and of the souls of just men made perfect. But the word "paradise" itself points us back to Eden. According to G. R. Beasley-Murray, this word is used in the Septuagint in Gen. 2:8, 15, 3:23f., to describe the garden of Eden. The word itself "is a Persian loan word . . . meaning a walling round, and so a park surrounded by a wall." In Jewish writings the garden of Eden and paradise had "become interchangeable terms . . . for the abode of the blessed in the future life."⁴ The implication is clear: God is not content

⁴G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Wipf and Stock, Eugene: 1981), p. 79-80.

simply to take this world ruined by sin and do away with it. No, he is going to redeem it. Paradise was lost and it will be reclaimed, and the promise here in Rev. 2:7 is that the people of God are going to enjoy paradise again in a new heavens and new earth, and we see a preview of this in Rev. 21-22.

In other words, the promise is meant to motivate us to be faithful and to remain patient and to repent and to do the first works and to return to our first love. It motivates us to this by reminding us that what awaits the believer is infinitely better than anything that can be gotten by taking the easy way of capitulation to the values and standards of this world, in rebellion as it is against Christ. Paradise is unattainable here: but it is the sure and certain and everlasting possession of all who belong to Jesus. We are to live in light of the age to come. After all, as the apostle Paul put it, the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18).

However, we also need to notice to whom this is promised: "To him that overcometh." Who is this? What does it mean to overcome? What do we overcome? Well, to answer that question, let's listen to what the apostle John writes in 1 Jn. 5: "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (4-5). It is the world that is overcome, the world in its values and thinking and lifestyles. The "world" here is not a reference to planet Earth but rather to lost humanity in rebellion against God and his Son Jesus Christ. We know this is what John means because he said it himself: "And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness" (1 Jn. 5:19). We overcome the world when we refuse to join it in its wickedness and idolatry and immorality and rebellion.

It is by faith that we overcome, a faith that is granted to us in the new birth. Not just any faith, but faith in Jesus Christ. It is by faith in him that we quench the fiery arrows of the devil (Eph. 6:16). It is by faith that we join the ranks of believers in Heb. 11 who overcame incredible odds

and opposition. It is by faith that we are like Abraham, “Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:18-22).

We need to take such a promise like this seriously. It would be meaningless if both overcomers and those who apostatize from the faith enter into paradise. Are you an overcomer?

Now some of you may look at this and it scare you to death. Because you know the sin that is within you. And so I want to encourage you that the overcomers are not those who have confidence in themselves – they are those who look to Jesus and who trust in him. And so I want to leave you with this promise from Jude, and let it encourage you to stand firm in the faith: “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen (Jude 24-25).

CHAPTER V

FAITHFUL AND FEARLESS

(REV. 2:8-11)

SMYRNA WAS A CITY SITUATED along the coast of the Aegean Sea, about 40 miles north of Ephesus. Back in the first century, it vied with Ephesus for the title of “First City of Asia,” and it was widely considered the most beautiful city in that part of the world. In fact, on their coins they had inscribed, “First of Asia in beauty and size.” It was also one of the few planned cities in the ancient world. At one end of the town stood Mount Pagos, around whose base ran the Golden Road “like a necklace on the statue of a goddess.”¹ Though the city of Ephesus no longer exists, Smyrna still does. It is known today as Izmir, one of the largest cities in modern day Turkey. And apparently there are still Christians in this city, its witness surviving both pagan and Islamic persecution to the present day.

Despite all its beauty and wealth and commerce, however, ancient Smyrna was dedicated to paganism and the cult of Rome. In addition to all the temples dedicated to the various gods of the region, Smyrna had a temple to the god of Rome. In fact, long before Rome had become a

¹Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, revised (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 73.

world empire, when it was still fighting it out with the Carthaginians in the Punic Wars, Smyrna had allied itself with Rome, so it had a long history of allegiance to the Roman empire.

Smyrna also had a large Jewish population. By the end of the first century, when Revelation was written, the Jewish community and the church had long separated and although the church was made up of both Jew and Gentile, the hostility the non-Christian Jews felt against the believers was fierce. They apparently had no problem joining with their pagan neighbors in seeking the downfall of the church in that area.

So you see, Smyrna may have been a wonderful place to live if you were a pagan Gentile or an adherent to first-century Judaism. But it was not hospitable to Christians. To be a Christian meant that you had to separate yourself from the community for all intents and purposes. It meant being ostracized. It meant being called unpatriotic or a traitor. For some, it even meant martyrdom.

In the verses before us, we are told of the tribulation of the church (9), a word which refers to “serious trouble, the burden that crushes.”² Our Lord, who knows these things, goes on to describe this in terms of poverty. To help us to understand what this means, R. C. Trench noted long ago that the Greek word used here means that they had “nothing at all.”³ They were, as we would say today, dirt poor. This is probably due to the fact that they could participate little or not at all in the political or economic life of the city. As Christians who could not fellowship with the cult of Rome or of the emperor, they were seen as undesirable traitors in the midst. As people who could not worship at any of deities in the pagan temples, they were seen as atheists. They were almost certainly boycotted and sanctioned economically. The result was that they had nothing.

They also endured “the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (9). Blasphemy here does not carry the religious connotation we associate with the word today;

²Leon Morris, *Revelation*, revised (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987), p. 63.

³Qtd. in Mounce, fn. 6, p. 74.

rather, it just meant to be reproached. The Jews in that community reviled and slandered the Christians in the city. So along with the poverty, the Christians in Smyrna had to put up with being despised on all sides and, like their Savior, rejected of men. Jesus had warned his disciples that this would come: “ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake” (Mt. 24:9). The Smyrnaean Christians found this to be true.

In addition to the present poverty and blasphemy, our Lord warns them that they are about to endure more aggressive forms of persecution: “the devil,” he says, “shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (10). The persecution is going to go from being forced to be materially destitute to becoming martyrs for the faith of Christ.

Christian history has left a remarkable illustration of the sufferings of the Christians in Smyrna several decades after Revelation was written in the martyrdom of Polycarp.⁴ What is fascinating to me is that it is very likely that when Revelation was read to the church of Smyrna for the first time, Polycarp was probably in the congregation. He was personally discipled by the apostle John and later (in AD 115) he became the bishop of the church in Smyrna and held that position for many years.

But in AD 156, Polycarp was martyred during a public festival. The enemies of the Christian church had cried for Polycarp’s blood, and they moved the authorities to search for the bishop. They finally found him in a farm on the outskirts of the city. However, those who were sent to arrest him were amazed that people wanted this gentle, godly man arrested and executed and they tried to persuade him to offer sacrifice to Caesar and to denounce Christ so that he wouldn’t have to suffer. He refused.

⁴The following details can be found in *The Letter of the Smyrnaeans*. See, for example, the translation by J. B. Lightfoot: <https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/martyrdompolycarp-lightfoot.html>

They then led him before the governor who also strongly encouraged him to say, “Caesar is lord.” He pressed Polycarp: “Swear the oath [to Caesar], and I will release you; revile the Christ.” To which the aged bishop famously replied, “Eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”

The governor next angrily threatened to throw him to the beasts. To this Polycarp answered, “Call for them.” He then threatened to have Polycarp burned at the stake. (Polycarp had previously had a dream in which his pillow was on fire, which he interpreted to mean that he was to be burned at the stake.) The bishop replied, “You threaten that fire which burns for a season and after a little while is quenched; for you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do as you will.”

Seeing he could not convince him, the governor ordered Polycarp to be burnt at the stake. Even the Jews, though it was a sabbath day, broke the sabbath by joining with the pagans in gathering wood for the pyre. He thus sealed his testimony by his blood. It is said that after his death, the persecution ended, giving the church in Smyrna a much-needed respite.

The “ten days” of persecution mentioned in verse 10 was probably not a reference to this later episode fifty or sixty years later, but to something that happened to the church in the apostle’s day, at the end of the first century. But we can see that the lessons of a previous generation had strengthened the church to remain faithful in future persecutions. Polycarp not only heard the Revelation read; he took it to heart and lived out its lessons and truth in his own life.

My hope is that it will do the same thing for us. I don’t know what the future holds. I don’t know if persecution on the level that the church of Smyrna experienced is in the future for the church in the United States. Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t. I’m not a prophet. But I do want all of us to be the kind of Christian who refuses to bend the knee to the image

of Baal, no matter what the cost. And even if we never face the kind of grinding poverty and ostracism and martyrdom that the Christians in the first century world faced (or that Christians in other parts of the world face today), there are still other ways the devil can get at us to wear us out and down so that we will not remain faithful unto death. You will notice the two times the devil's name is mentioned here. He is Satan in verse 9 which literally means "the adversary," and in verse 10 he is the devil, which literally means "the slanderer." He opposes the church, and he slanders the church. If you are a Christian, he will oppose you too: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:8-9; cf. Eph. 6:10-20).

Our Lord's word to the church at Smyrna and his word to us therefore is this: "Be faithful unto death" (10). His word is also, "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer" (10). The two of course go together. Those who give into fear will give into cowardice. They will not be faithful; they will not overcome. So we want to be people who are not fearful but who are faithful. The question is, how to we become people like that? How do we become faithful and fearless people for Christ?

These verses suggest that at least two things need to be true of us if we are going to be this kind of person. First of all, we need to rest in God's sovereignty. Second, we need to rejoice in God's sufficiency.

We must rest in God's sovereignty.

Note how Jesus the Lord addresses this persecuted church. He comes to them in these words, "These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive" (8). This is drawing of course from the revelation of himself to John in chapter 1: "And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death" (1:17-18). This is especially relevant for the

church at Smyrna to hear because they, or at least some of them, are facing the prospect of death. How are they to do that? And how are they to do that so that they don't give in to fear and remain faithful unto death? They are to do that by remembering who Jesus is, that he is the one who faced death for us and defeated it for us. Because of that we know that death cannot have the final word. For the Christian, there is life after death – not life merely in the sense of existence, but life in its fullest sense. This is eternal life, the life of Christ shared with him with never-ending, ever-increasing joy.

What makes this even more certain for us is that the one who died and rose again is also “the first and the last.” What does this mean? We considered it briefly when we first encountered this expression in chapter 1. In 1:8, God reveals himself to us in this way: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.” To be the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending, is the same thing as being the first and the last. It means not only that God is eternal but that he is Lord is history. It means that he does whatever he pleases in heaven and earth. It is why these terms are put together with the description of God as “the Almighty.” It means that God's wields his sovereignty as the one who is omnipotent, who has all power.

Isaiah also describes God in these terms to demonstrate his superiority over all other gods as the only one who is truly in control over human history. So we have these wonderful statements about God in that section of his prophesy that is sometimes called the “trial of the gods.” “Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the Lord, the first, and with the last; I am he” (Isa. 41:4). “Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God” (44:6). “Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure” (46:9-10).

So even as our Lord reveals to John the future for the church, he speaks of things as if they are already accomplished. “And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely” (Rev. 21:6; cf. 22:13). It is because our Lord is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, that he can say of something not only entirely future but impossible to bring about on human terms, that “It is done.” It is the same principle on which the apostle Paul speaks when he tells us about the future glorification of the saints: “whom he justified, them he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). This is what we mean when we say that God is sovereign.

Unfortunately, there are some Christian teachers who teach that God cannot know the future exhaustively, and that God is not sovereign over human history. What they will say is that God knows everything that can be known, but that he can't know everything. In particular, they argue that God can't know the future choices of men and women who are exercising their free will. Otherwise, they say, their choices couldn't be truly free. One of their motivations for this is to let God off the hook when tragedy strikes. If there is a tragedy they will say, “Oh, but God didn't have anything to do with that. He never even saw it coming.”

What are we to say to that? Well, the first thing we must say is that it is a fundamental rejection of the Biblical witness to God. It's a rejection of what God says about himself in these passages we've looked at in Isaiah, for example, and it is a rejection of the revelation of Christ of himself to the churches. He declares the end from the beginning. God knows the future as clearly as he knows the past. That's part of what it means that God is the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega.

And when you consider the fact that nothing can happen in the universe apart from God – for even our being is held moment by moment in existence by the omnipotent power of Christ; he is the one who upholds all things by the word of his power and who holds everything together (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3) – then the explanation for God knowing the future is not simply that God is a good guesser. God knows the fu-

ture because, as Paul puts it to the Ephesians, he works all things – not just some things but all things – according to the purpose of his will (Eph. 1:11).

Now there is mystery here, for men are free in a real sense. We are not robots. We are accountable for our actions. But we must not say that in such a way as to deny the ultimate sovereignty of God over all things. We have to say that there is mystery at the place where God's sovereignty and human responsibility intersect. But I do know that the Bible unabashedly teaches both that God is sovereign over history and that man is responsible for his actions. It teaches that God is not the author of sin even as it teaches that even sin is permitted by God according to his eternal plan.

But how does the doctrine work? How are we to use it in our lives?

First of all, we don't want to use this doctrine to feed fatalism. We don't want to take this doctrine and become fatalistic. That is not Biblical either. It is wrong to adopt the attitude that it doesn't matter what we do. It's wrong to think that it doesn't matter whether we pray or work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. It does matter because God's word says it matters. It matters whether or not we are faithful. It matters whether or not we fear not or whether we give into fear and unbelief. This text wouldn't make any sense if it didn't matter.

But second, neither should we use this doctrine to feed our expectation of worldly comforts. You can tell if you are there when you get disappointed or bitter at God when things don't turn out the way you wanted them to. The doctrine of God's sovereignty does not function to give you hope that you won't get sick or that if you do you'll get well soon. It doesn't mean that you won't experience loss or failure. It doesn't mean that you will have your best life now.

How do we know that? Well, just look at the church of Smyrna. There is nothing here in the text to indicate that there was anything wrong with the church. This was one of only two churches of the seven that weren't rebuked for sin. The poverty and persecution aren't happening because they are being judged by God.

However, neither is this happening because God is unaware of their situation. Jesus knows (8). He knows their poverty and the persecution they are enduring. But instead of relieving them of it, he warns them of more to come. Instead of delivering them from suffering, he calls on them to be faithful.

God is sovereign over all things, including our suffering, but that does not mean that he always removes the suffering for us in this world. Or, to put it another way, just because our persecutors are victorious over us doesn't mean that God is not sovereign. Just because a thorn in the flesh is not removed doesn't mean God is not in control. Just because the cancer didn't go away doesn't mean that God doesn't rule or that he doesn't care. We are overcomers (see ver. 11!), which means that we get the inevitable victory. And God is sovereign over that. But sometimes that victory is only achieved through much earthly loss. Sometimes it even means martyrdom. God's sovereignty doesn't mean we don't bear a cross. It means we get resurrection into life eternal after the cross.

So why does God reveal his sovereignty to us? What is the purpose of this? Why did Christ reveal himself to the Smyrnaean Christians as the first and the last? He did so, not to relieve us of our responsibility. He did so, not to give us false hopes of earthly bliss. He did it, rather, so that we would rest in his sovereignty and be faithful and fearless in the face of imprisonment, poverty, and martyrdom. Indeed, I would put it this way: we are strengthened in our resolve to be faithful and fearless because we rest in the fact that God is in control and that Christ rules overall for his glory and the good of his people. Men may kill us. They may take away our goods and our reputations. But they will not have the last word. Not even death can have the last word. How do we know that? Because God is in control. We don't know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future. God holds the beginning and the end and everything in between.

You can see how belief in God's sovereignty works to strengthen the faith and fearlessness of his people all throughout the Bible. You see it in the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel

3, who were threatened with being thrown alive into a burning, fiery furnace if they didn't bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image. Here is their response: "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (Dan. 3:16-18).

So dear saint, rest in God's sovereignty. Let the truth of Rom. 8:28 make you a fearless and faithful for the cause of God and truth.

We must rejoice in God's sufficiency.

What kind of person magnifies the riches of Christ to a watching world? Certainly not someone who is shriveled up by fear or who has become faithless out of bitterness. But neither is it a Christian who somehow remains faithful but who has lost their joy in Christ. Now I'm not saying that you have to go around constantly with a smile on your face. Nor am I saying that you have to pretend to be happy when you are not. The Christian groans and grieves. But there is a difference: we do so in hope. And you cannot separate hope from joy. It's why Paul exhorts the Roman Christians to "rejoice in hope" (Rom. 12:12).

So how do you do this? It is by understanding that in Christ we have true riches. You will note what our Lord says to the church at Smyrna. Though they are poor, he says, the reality of the situation is that they are rich (9). Now I think it is interesting to contrast Smyrna with Laodicea at this point. Whereas the church in Smyrna was really poor in the material things, the Lord says that they are truly rich. Of course he means that they are spiritually rich. The Laodiceans were the exact opposite: "thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). Which do you

think is better? Our Lord clearly is of the opinion that material wealth often blinds us to our true riches and leaves us spiritually impoverished.

We can forget this. If you belong to Jesus, you are rich and you are rich with an inheritance that no one can take from you. The value of something is often determined by how much it costs. Yet how can you compare spiritual riches to earthly ones? There is no comparison! For it came at the cost of the very life of the Son of God! As the apostle Paul writes, “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). The apostle Peter reminds us that we were purchased by “the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). It is why Paul calls the gospel he preaches “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:8).

Or the value and worth of a thing is determined by what it does for us. But what has Christ done for us? He has given us the forgiveness of sins – that alone should make us shouting happy if we really grasped the significance of it. As the hymn puts it,

My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part, but the whole:
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

But there is more: we are given freely by faith the righteousness of God, acceptance with God, adoption in his family, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and everlasting and eternal life – the “crown of life” as our Lord puts it here in verse 10. Do you believe this? Must we not say then with the apostle Paul that no matter how terrible our suffering is in this life, “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18)? In sum, we have been brought to God (1 Pet. 3:18), not as a criminal in chains, but as children to their Father. We have “all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3) – not some, not most, but all spiritual blessings!

Further, we determine the worth of a thing by how long it lasts. Man, I wish they made washing machines the way they used to. Things are not made to last anymore, it seems. But that is the way of all earthly things, isn't it? Rust and moths and thieves are the correlates of earthly wealth. But not so the true riches. We have in Christ "a better and an enduring substance" (Heb. 10:32). As our Lord promises the believers here, "He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death" (11).

No matter how wealthy a person is here, no matter how famous, no matter how comfortable, if they have not Christ, they will not escape the second death. What is this? It is the death of the soul as well as of the body. It is described in chapter 20 as the place into which death and hell are cast (14). It is the lake of fire, into which the beast and false prophet receive their final judgment, "tormented day and night forever and ever" (10). My friend, I cannot think of anything possibly worse – nothing! To be condemned to this is to lose all hope forever. It is to be banished to into the iron grip of despair and torment with no possible reprieve for eternity. This is what the believer is rescued from, something which we all deserve, but which Christ frees us from. Instead of the second death they get the crown of eternal life. The second death – nothing worse! The crown of life – nothing better!

Thank God, this gift of eternal life is something which is eternal also in the sense that the saint can never lose it. I am thankful for that. We need to take seriously the exhortation to overcome. But we must not read that as if God's people will somehow fail to overcome. They will overcome. Why? Not because they are better than the next person but because God keeps them. They overcome because of the truth of Romans 8:37-39: "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How do we know this is true? We know it is true because of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done. Who is he? He is the one “who was dead, and is alive” (Rev. 2:8). Christ conquered death. We know this because the historical record points to this just as much as it does to any other fact of human history. We know it because no other explanation accounts for the fact that the message of Christ’s resurrection was believed by people who could have inspected the tomb if he had in fact been there. No other explanation adequately accounts for the fact that his own disciples believed it and many of them went to their deaths because they preached it. No other explanation adequately accounts for the fact that since that time millions of Christians have met the risen Christ in their own lives and found themselves transformed by the power of his grace.

Would you meet the risen Christ? Would you be saved? Do you want the forgiveness of sins? Then come to Christ, and by faith and repentance receive him as your Lord and Savior. The Scripture testifies that all who do so will be saved for the Lord is rich unto all who call upon his name.

CHAPTER VI

NO COMPROMISE (REV.

2:12-29)

PERGAMUM AND THYATIRA were two very different cities. Pergamum was the capitol city of the Roman province of Asia, whereas Thyatira was comparatively unimportant among the seven cities addressed in Rev. 1-3. The former was known as the center of the Roman cult, being the first city to have a temple built for a living Roman emperor, Augustus, in 29 B.C. Other temples to Rome were built there later, and it is probably for this reason that Pergamum is described as the place “where Satan’s seat is” (Rev. 2:13), or more literally, “Satan’s throne.” It was also a religious center for other deities, being a center for the worship of Zeus. In fact, some think that the giant altar to Zeus on the hill that dominated the city was the object behind the designation of Pergamum as Satan’s throne. Additionally, it was the center for the worship of the serpent-god Asclepius. However, it is still most probable that the reference to Satan’s throne is a pointer to the fact that the power of Rome was worshiped here, because it was through the power of Rome that the church was persecuted. In fact, we are told of the “days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth” (13). Here is the first instance,

apparently, where the Greek word *martus*, which literally means “witness,” was first used for someone who sealed their witness for Christ by their death.

Thyatira, on the other hand, was no great religious or political center. Trade thrived here, however, and Thyatira was home to many trade guilds, among which were those devoted to “wool-workers, linen-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronzesmiths.”¹ It might be that Lydia, who was one of the founding members of the church in Philippi, and who is described in the book of Acts as “a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira” (Acts 16:14), was a representative of one of these trade guilds. The notable thing about these guilds is that membership almost certainly involved participation in idolatry. G. E. Ladd explains, “These trade guilds enjoyed common meals which were probably dedicated to some pagan deity.” He goes on to say that “such social meals would often end in unbridled licentiousness.” Unfortunately for Christians, “It would be nearly impossible for a citizen to participate in trade and industry without membership in the appropriate guild.”²

You can see how that in these cities, as indeed in all pagan cities of the time, the pressure to participate in idolatry, whether of Zeus or of Rome, and the pressure to join in with others in moral debauchery, would have been very strong. Idolatry and immorality were not just features of pagan society; they were part of the warp and woof of the way of life. The apostle Peter gives us some insight on how non-Christians would have viewed Christians when they refused to join them in their way of life: “For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign

¹Sir William Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Hodder, 1904), pp. 324 f., qtd. in Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987), p. 69.

²G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1972), p. 50.

you; but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead” (1 Pet. 4:3-5, ESV).

There were several options open to Christians living in this environment. One was to refuse to participate in pagan society in terms of its worship and lifestyle. The Smyrnaean Christians did this and as a result were brutally persecuted and utterly impoverished. Seeking to avoid this, others advised that it was okay to participate in pagan worship and that it was also okay to adopt their lifestyle and still be called a Christian. This, it seems, was openly permitted to be taught and embraced by some in both the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira.

That is why we are dealing with both churches at once. There is little doubt that though their places were different, their problem was the same: worldly compromise. This is the “a few things against thee” (2:14, 20) that our Lord holds against both these churches. What we see is that in both churches there was a mixture of good and bad. It appears that not everyone in either church followed the path of compromise, but it was significant enough in both that our Lord threatens terrible things if they will not repent.

In the church of Pergamum, the compromise group is called “them that hold the doctrine of Balaam” (14). In verse 15, we are told, “So [or, in the same way] hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.” It appears that the Nicolaitans were those who held to the doctrine of Balaam.

To help them understand what he means by this, our Lord goes on to say of Balaam, that he “taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication” (14). This is a reference to events recorded in the book of Numbers, especially chapter 25. Balaam is the quintessential false prophet, described by the apostle Peter as one “who loved the wages of unrighteousness” (2 Pet. 2:15). He was hired by the king of the Moabites (Balak) to curse Israel so that they would not be able to defeat his people in battle (Num. 22-24). God turned Balaam’s curse into a blessing and defeated his purpose. Unfortunately, after this the children of Is-

rael “began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods, and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto Baal-peor: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel” (Num. 25:1-3). Though Balaam is not mentioned there, we are told later that the Moabites seduced Israel to join them in idolatry and immorality through the advice of Balaam (Num. 31:16). Balaam was the one who was the principal means by which the Israelites compromised their integrity with the Moabites and Midianites, particularly through participation in idolatry and immorality.

“Those who hold the doctrine of Balaam,” then, were those who wanted to remain Christian and yet who also wanted to join in with their neighbors in their idolatry and immorality. We don’t know exactly how they justified this. But the fact is that they did. Perhaps they argued that since idols are nothing, it didn’t matter whether they participated in a meal in honor of one of the local gods (cf. 1 Cor. 8:4-6). It could also be that this was an early form of Gnosticism which taught that matter was evil and that it didn’t matter what you did with your physical body as long as your doctrine was correct. This was the problem in the church of Pergamum.

But it wasn’t just there. In Thyatira, a city halfway on the road between Pergamum and Sardis, this kind of compromise was occurring because of a false prophetess: “Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols” (20). Exactly the same problem, but from a different source.

Her name almost certainly wasn’t literally Jezebel. Our Lord gives her that name to call our attention to another infamous Old Testament personality. Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab who ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the ninth century B.C. We are told that, “And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for

him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him. And he reared up an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him” (1 Kings 16:30-33). Jezebel was Ahab’s inspiration to do evil, and specifically to abandon all pretense in serving the Lord for the worship of Baal.

Jezebel then, like Balaam, was a person who caused God’s people to sin through idolatry. In the church of Thyatira, the woman our Lord calls Jezebel functioned as a prophetess and identified as a Christian. But she also encouraged Christians to lay aside any scruples they would have had when it came to the worship of idols and the immoral lifestyle that inevitably followed.

Our Lord addresses himself to these problems. The way he does this shows us that he means business. This is no light matter. To the church of Pergamum, he comes as the one who has “the sharp sword with two edges” (12), to protect his church by judging his enemies. Thus, he warns them, “Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them [those who hold the doctrine of Balaam] with the sword of my mouth” (16). To the church of Thyatira, he comes as the one “who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet like fine brass” – eyes to see their sins, and feet of burnished bronze to crush his enemies (18). Indeed, he has already given them time to repent (21) and now threatens to cast Jezebel and her followers into a sick bed (pestilence) and “into great tribulation except they repent of their deeds” (22). More than this, he says, “And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts, and I will give unto every one of you according to your works” (23).

This is serious business. Our Lord will not go half measures against this kind of evil. Which means that this is something we need to take seriously. Let the one who has ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying even today to the churches.

The doctrine these verses teach is that the Son of God demands that his church be separate from the world in its beliefs and behaviors. It is not possible to remain a church with his blessing while wallowing in the sins of the culture. That will inevitably bring judgment upon the church if it refuses to repent. This is what I want to try to unpack for us in this message. In doing so, I would like to consider three things. First, what this means; second, the seriousness of this; third, the encouragement given in the promises to stay faithful in a world that wants you to compromise.

What it means to be separate from the world

Before we look at what this means positively, I think it is necessary to point out what this does not mean. This also is necessary because it is easy to think that you are not compromising in this area, that you are avoiding the sin of worldliness, when in reality you are still worldly but in a less obvious way.

It does not mean retreat from society. It doesn't mean that you don't engage with non-believers and pagans. How do I know this? Because to the church in Pergamum, our Lord says this: "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth" (Rev. 2:13). Our Lord is commending the church here, and one of the things they are commended for was the fact that they lived where Satan lived. Where did they dwell? They dwelt in the place where Satan had his throne! Our Lord didn't say, "Look guys, you're in a real bad place. You need to change your address. You need to move to a safer place, a place where the devil's activity is not so prominent." Rather, they are commended for being faithful in a place where the very adversary of the church set up court. Our Lord will not cede one inch of this world to Satan. The gates of hell will not prevail against his church. No, the fight against worldliness does not mean moving to safe

places. It doesn't mean moving into the wilderness and away from your lost neighbors. (Although sometimes they have been forced to do so. But that is different from making that your first inclination.) Rather, it means being a light in the world full of darkness.

It also doesn't mean being different for the sake of being different. Another way to put this is that we should not confuse being old-fashioned with a stand against worldliness. Leon Morris wisely states that Christians "must not deny their membership in society. The cause of Christ is not served if Christians appear as a group of old-fashioned people always trying to retreat from the world."³ This is a subtle error. Old does not mean better. (Though new doesn't necessarily mean better, either.) For the world has always been bad, whether the world a thousand years ago or the world a hundred years ago or the world ten years ago. The point is that we don't guard against worldliness by just appearing to adopt customs from a by-gone age in our dress or habits or even in our worship, especially if those things prevent our witness to the world. The point is faithfulness to Jesus and his word no matter when or where we live.

Nor does it mean that we don't adopt new technologies. Worldliness is not the cause of technological advancement, though sin always warps new things and misuses them. We want to avoid the sinful use of technology, not technology altogether. Though it may be wise at times to fast from certain gadgets, requiring this of everyone at all times is just another form of legalism, not the holiness God demands.

At the same time, we need to understand that the call to be separate from the world is unmistakably clear in the New Testament. Christ is calling these churches to be separate and to discipline those members who are compromising with the world. But this is a call throughout the NT. So, for example, the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what

³Morris, p. 71.

part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:14-18). Notice that Paul is saying that a Christian cannot participate in idolatry and immorality, as was being advocated by some in both Pergamum and Thyatira. We cannot serve Christ and idols; light cannot have fellowship with darkness.

But how does this work? What does this look like? Well, I think our Lord’s words in his high priestly prayer in John 17 help us here. Listen to the way he puts it: “I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world” (Jn. 17:14-18). You will notice that our Lord is saying that believers “are not of the world.” But that does not mean that they are to be taken “out of the world.” On the contrary, our Lord sends us into the world, even as the Father sent him into the world.

Hence, the fight against worldliness is a fight for obedience to all of God’s word in all of life. It is a fight to be molded, not by the thoughts and practices of the world, but by God’s word: “Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). It means adopting the patterns of behavior taught in Scripture and rejecting the patterns of behavior taught by a corrupt culture. Or, as the apostle puts it to the Ephesians, to put on the new man and to put off the old (Eph. 4:22-24). It means to not be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our mind that we may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:1-2). It means, in terms of the ways

the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were praised: holding fast the name of Christ and not denying his faith (13). It means to have love and service and faith and endurance and to be growing in these things (19).

In what ways is the church today particularly susceptible to the danger of compromising with the world, with worldliness? There are two ways in which I think the church today (especially the evangelical church in the West) is particularly susceptible to this evil. The thing is that we aren't particularly in danger of falling in with overtly pagan practices. But I think the essential evil into which these churches fell is the same thing into which we are in danger today, and that is the attempt to retain Christian orthodoxy while adopting worldly patterns of behavior.

Let me illustrate how this works. It happens when churches are happy to retain perfectly orthodox statements of faith and yet go soft on and even quietly encourage immoral and unbiblical behavior. It happens when churches adopt lifestyles and structures of authority in the church that are alien to the express commands of Scripture, often in the name of addressing abuses in the church.

People will say, "I may have a different view on sex that you do, but hey, I embrace the Nicene Creed." Or, "I may have a different view on the role of men and women in the family and in the church, but hey, I believe in the authority of Scripture." They may even claim to be Calvinistic! It is becoming easier and easier to claim orthodoxy on certain matters of historic doctrine all the while untethering from the clear and unmistakable teaching of the Bible on other matters, especially those in the areas of marriage and sexuality. What I am saying is that you can't have it both ways. You can't take Christ's word on his divinity and then reject his word on sexuality. But that's exactly what people are trying to do today, and it's what was happening in Pergamum and Thyatira. This is still a very relevant word to the church.

I think the word that our generation needs to hear above all else is this from our Lord: "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Lk. 6:46). You can't pick and choose from the words

of Christ. You can't choose which of his apostles to follow, either. You can't say, "Well, I'll take the words of Jesus in the gospels, but I don't like the apostle Paul." John put it this way: "We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error" (1 Jn. 4:6). If you don't hear the apostles, you aren't of God. The words of all Scripture are the words of the Spirit of God; to obey God is to obey all his word – the ones that are easy and the ones that are hard.

Another way we are susceptible to the spirit of worldliness is in the attempt to retain Christian orthodoxy while embracing the attitudes of secularism, even if we don't overtly embrace its assumptions. You see, the idolatry of the first century expressed itself in pagan temples and polytheism. That is still the problem in some parts of the world. But the problem in our part of the world is not polytheism but secularism. That is the idolatry of the modern West. It expresses itself primarily in an attitude of godlessness, in a life that is void of God. It seeks to banish God from life and from public spaces. And my point is that the Christian can fall into step with that, sometimes without even realizing it. You can tell it when you become embarrassed by the claims of Scripture, either in terms of its supernaturalism or in terms of its ethical requirements. It happens when we try to make our Christianity a private thing, and to hide it away as much as possible.

I've quoted him before, but I think David Wells's definition of worldliness is worth repeating. He writes, "For worldliness is that system of values and beliefs, behaviors and expectations, in any culture that have at their center the fallen human being and that relegate to their periphery any thought about God. Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd."⁴ Secularism is the form of worldliness in our day that makes sin look normal and righteousness seem odd. And I think we are very much in danger of that.

⁴David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1994), p. 29.

What this means, at the bottom, is that worldliness is fundamentally defined by patterns of thought and emotion before it is defined by patterns of behavior. This is a matter of the heart. We always set up the idol first in the mind before we begin building temples in the world. It is a matter, in other words, of worship. What do you worship? What has your heart? What captivates your thought life? It is godless or godly? Is God at the center or is something else? You will notice that our Lord says in verse 23 of Rev. 2, that when he judges the sin of worldly compromise in the church, “all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts.” “Reins” is the old word for “kidneys.” In the ancient world, the kidneys were viewed as the source of one’s emotions. The “heart” on the other hand, was the center of the mind and of the inner man. Our Lord doesn’t just look at our behavior. He looks at our minds and our affections. Our Lord knows that long before idolatrous and immoral behavior happens, the heart has already been captivated by sinful and worldly attractions.

This is why the apostle John says that the battle against worldliness is primarily about what you love: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

The fight against worldly compromise, then, is the fight against the love of this present world and its values that are contrary to the love of God and the values of his word.

The seriousness of worldly compromise

Just how seriously should we take this? Well, I think these letters were written to people who had failed to take this seriously and to wake them up. Perhaps we need to be awakened from our sinful slumbers as well.

For one thing, we can tend to write this off as needlessly pessimistic if we don't think we ourselves are vulnerable to this problem. In other words, we need to beware of the sin of presumption. If we find ourselves inclined to think that this sort of thing could never happen to us, that we would never be seduced by a false prophetess like this Jezebel, think again. Who was it that Jezebel deceived? Listen carefully! "Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel . . . to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed unto idols" (20).

Beware lest you think you are immune. We are susceptible because the devil is crafty: "But I fear," Paul writes, "lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. . . . For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:3, 13-15). He didn't come to these Christians in the form of a pagan priest, but in the form of a prophetess who claimed to speak for Jesus. I'm sure she claimed to love Jesus. I'm even sure she really thought that. She was so sincere! I'm sure she gave folks many reasons to think she was an authentic spokesperson for the Lord. Perhaps those who judged her were silenced with accusations of theological snobbery.

The problem at Thyatira, and perhaps at Pergamum as well, was the opposite problem than existed at Ephesus. There, the angel of the church was commended because, "thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). At Thyatira, they apparently failed to carefully examine the credentials of this so-called prophetess. Whereas the Ephesian church was too unloving, these two churches were too accepting. They weren't discerning. They were too eager to embrace people who claimed to love Jesus and to speak for Jesus. Just because we avoid one ditch doesn't mean we won't end up in the other.

Brothers and sisters, look, we need to be aware that the same thing can happen today. Just because people put on a big show for Jesus doesn't mean they speak for him. There have always been false prophets. They were present then, and they're here today. In churches, no less. Do you think the devil is less busy today than he was then?

But second, we will fail to take this seriously if we don't take seriously the warnings to these two churches. To the church at Pergamum, our Lord wields his sword, not to protect but to slay those who corrupt the church. Do you want Jesus to say about you, "I will come . . . and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (16)? I want the Lord to fight for me, not against me!

Or consider the terrible threats against the followers of Jezebel. He says, "I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not" (21). Our Lord is gracious. He calls us to repentance, even when grievous sin has been committed. He does not so easily write us off, like people are wont to do. But there is a limit to our Lord's longsuffering. He will not allow his church to be corrupted indefinitely. If the church does not discipline itself, the Lord will come and discipline the church himself.

He goes on: "Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works" (22-23). It has been argued that "those who commit adultery with her" is a reference to idolatry more than to actual immorality; the reason for this is that in the OT, idolatry is often spoken of in terms of adultery. This could be the case. But I do not think you have to pick here; for idolatry almost always and invariably involves sexual immorality.

However, I don't think "her children" is a reference to physical offspring; more likely, it is another way of referring to her disciples. If this is the case, "those who commit adultery with her" and "her children" are probably referring to the same group of people. Our Lord threatens

first to cast them into a sick bed (22), and if they persist in their sins, to kill them (23). If you don't think this is serious, think again!

And to really underscore just how serious the sin of false teachers like Jezebel is, remember the words of our Lord: "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven" (Mt. 18:6-10). To cause just one of Christ's servants to stumble into sin is a crime so heinous that a swim in the ocean with a cement block about the neck is too good for such folks.

Brothers and sisters, our Lord does not issue idle threats. Beware of falling into the trap of false teaching and false teachers. Evaluate them by the word of God, not by their claims to love Jesus and do things for him.

The encouragement given in the promises

I love these promises. They're here to encourage us to uncompromising faithfulness. It can be hard. And the promises don't say that if you just keep a positive attitude that you're going to have a better year than ever before. What they tell us is that for the Christian who endures to the end, the future so great and so sweet that any suffering we do while getting there will have been worth it. As the hymn puts it: "It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus."

What are the promises? To the church of Pergamum, our Lord writes, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (Rev. 2:17). It was a tradition among the Jews that before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the prophet Jeremiah took the ark of the covenant and the manna that was in it and hid it, and that it would stay hidden until the days of the Messiah and the kingdom. It is perhaps this tradition that is behind the term “hidden manna” of verse 17. It is, then, a reference to the blessings of participation in the future kingdom when it comes in all its fulness.

The “white stone,” on the other hand, is a bit more difficult to pin down in terms of its significance. At least a dozen different interpretations have been offered, and I’m not going to bore you with them all. Two of the most likely are the white stone as a ticket of admission to a banquet, or as a token of a not-guilty verdict in a court of law (white stones were used for both in the first century). The fact that a new name is written on it which is unknown to any except the Lord and the one who has it seems to indicate that this is a token of acceptance into the banquet supper of the marriage of the Lamb in the last day, and the new name given by the Lord is a pointer to the fact that each person who is invited has received a personal invitation from the Lord himself.

On the other hand, the promises to the church in Thyatira are not less significant. Our Lord promises: “But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star” (2:24-28).

This is the promise given to the Messiah in Psalm 2: “I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have

I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:7-9). This shows that our Lord plans to share his Messianic rule with his people. Truly, the meek shall inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5)!

The last promise is this: "And I will give him the morning star" (Rev. 2:28). Beasley-Murray writes: "The morning star is Venus. Lohmeyer has shown that from Babylonian times Venus was the symbol of sovereignty. In Roman times it was more specifically the symbol of victory and sovereignty, for which reason Roman generals owned their loyalty to Venus by erecting temples in her honour (e.g., Sulla, Pompey, Caesar), and Caesar's legions carried her sign on their standards. If then the morning star was the sign of conquest and rule over the nations, this element in the promise to the conqueror strengthens the statement that has gone before. It embodies in symbol the prophecy already cited from the psalmist. The conqueror is therefore doubly assured of his participation with Christ in the glory of his kingdom."⁵ Pagan generals cannot give the ultimate victory. Worldly powers cannot make one ultimately triumphant. Only Christ can do that, and he will do that for all who belong to him.

The question this puts before us is this: what banquet do we desire? What victory will we settle for? Will we prioritize the bread that perishes over the bread of life? Will we settle for earthly security that only lasts until we die at best over eternal security in Jesus?

Brothers and sisters, let us not compromise with the world. Let us steadfastly resist the love of the world, the standards of the world and the philosophies of the world. Let us stay faithful to Jesus. Let us take to hear the exhortation of our Lord and follow him in it: "But that which he have already host fast until I come" (25).

⁵G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, 1981), p. 93-94.

CHAPTER VII

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

(REV. 3:1-6)

DENNIS JOHNSON DESCRIBES SARDIS as “a city with a golden past and misplaced security.”¹ Long before the apostle John wrote this epistle to the church there, it had been the throne of Croesus, famous for his wealth, and before him legend has it that it had been ruled by King Midas with the golden touch. It had been the capitol of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and after that a center for Persian government.² But even though, after suffering an earthquake in A.D. 17, it had been rebuilt through the generosity of the emperor Tiberius, Sardis never regained the splendor of its golden past.³

Sardis was situated in such a way that it was surrounded on three sides by sheer cliffs, descending about 1500 feet to the valley below. The only side the city was accessible from was the south. This side was well guarded and protected and watched; because it was impossible for an

¹Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R: Phillipsburg, 2001), p. 82.

²G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1972), p. 55.

³G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Wipf & Stock: Eugene, 1981), p. 94.

army to climb the cliffs on the other sides of the city, the defenders didn't bother to place too many guards there.

That is, until it wasn't impossible. In 546 B.C., Sardis fell to the Persian army under Cyrus. According to Herodotus, on the fourteenth day of the siege, a few Persian troops were able to scale the heights and let the army in (and ending the reign of Croesus).⁴ But the city didn't learn its lesson, apparently, for it fell in almost exactly the same way to Antiochus the Great's army in 216 B.C.⁵ It was indeed a city with "misplaced security" resulting in a failure to watch and be on guard against the enemy.

The church in Sardis in many ways mimicked the history of the city. It too had a glorious past, probably established in connection with the ministry of the apostle Paul in that area. It had a great reputation that obscured its waning spirituality. In fact, according to our Lord, it was dead (1). It too had a problem with presumption. Like the army at Sardis, the church was asleep, in a state of spiritual unconsciousness. And our Lord warns them that unless they wake up, the church will meet a similar fate as the city did from the armies of Cyrus and Antiochus.

To understand how bad things had become, just compare how our Lord addresses this church with the other churches. He doesn't spend any time at the beginning commending the church, as he had done for Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira. Usually, when our Lord says, "I know your works," what follows are commendable things. What follows here is, "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead" (3:1). That's not commendable! In other words, there doesn't seem to be much to like about this church.

And though our Lord does mention in verse 4 that the church did have "a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments," the way he says this indicated they were definitely in the minority. Whereas the previous two churches were a mix of good and bad, it seems

⁴Johnson, p. 82-83.

⁵Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (revised), (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 94.

that in their case the good in both was predominant. No so in Sardis. Death is the norm, life the exception.

I think of all the warnings to the churches, this one is the most shocking. It's not just that the church was dead. That is bad enough, as bad or worse than being accused of having left your first love (cf. 2:4). I think that is even as bad as making the Lord want to vomit (3:16). But what is most shocking is the fact that despite they were in such a bad condition, they did not know it. We can infer that from the fact that our Lord says that "thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (3:1). They gloried in their reputation, a reputation of being a spiritually vibrant and active church. This was a church that everyone else wanted to be like. They were commended by others, applauded, and appreciated. Sardis was the model church in the eyes of men.

But therein was the problem. They took the approval of men as proof that they had the approval of God. However, the fact of the matter is that the latter does not always follow the former. In fact, it hardly ever does. As our Lord said to the Pharisees in his day, "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" (Lk. 16:15). It also doesn't necessarily matter if those who highly esteem something are believers. Paul wrote this to the Corinthian church, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:3-5). Not only did the apostle not put too much stock in the opinion of the Corinthians; he didn't even trust his own judgment! If that's the case, we shouldn't put too much confidence even in the approval of the most mature of Christians.

Their reliance upon the opinion of men was essentially the problem the Pharisees had: thinking that they could please God without cultivat-

ing their hearts before him. They relied upon a religion that consisted entirely upon what people could see. The Pharisees gave charity, prayed, and fasted in such a way that men could see it (Mt. 6:1-18), because that's what mattered to them. But they were like white-washed tombs, beautiful on the outside and full of dead men's bones on the inside (Mt. 23:27).

Because they were so congratulated on the vitality of their church, the Christians at Sardis had been lulled to sleep. Commentators variously describe their state in terms of "half-heartedness,"⁶ "a deep spiritual apathy,"⁷ and being "content with mediocrity."⁸ This does not mean, of course, that they weren't doing anything. Our Lord doesn't say that they have no works. He says that he knows their works (Rev. 3:1). The problem was not that they weren't doing anything. Rather, the problem was that "I have not found thy works perfect before God" (2) – or, as it could be translated, "I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God" (ESV). They certainly wouldn't have had the reputation for vitality if they were diminishing in number or if they weren't doing stuff for the Lord in the community or if their services weren't exciting at least on some level. The problem was that they were going through the motions of religious work for the Lord but doing so in a way that kept them from confronting the sin that was in their hearts and lives. As Ladd put it, "Here is a picture of nominal Christianity, outwardly prosperous, busy with the externals of religious activity, but devoid of spiritual life and power."⁹

I know they weren't confronting the sin in their hearts and lives because of the way our Lord describes the minority of the faithful in Sardis: "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy" (4). To have undefiled garments is to be holy. In 19:8, we are told of the

⁶Beasley-Murray, p. 95.

⁷Ladd, p. 55.

⁸G. B. Caird, qtd. in Morris, p. 75.

⁹Ladd, p. 56.

wife of the Lamb, which represents the people of God: “And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of the saints.” And though this does refer to the time in the future when the church is made perfect, we know that even now Christ is sanctifying his people. Those who have not defiled their garments are those who are walking in holiness and obedience to the Lord. On the other hand, those who have defiled their garments are those who are not walking in obedience to the commands of Christ. They are those who have, despite their religious appearance, have compromised in some way with the world. As the apostle James put it, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (Jam. 1:27).

So the question before each of us, then, is this: how do we prevent ourselves from getting into this state? Or, if we are there, how do we recover ourselves from it? Thankfully, we don’t have to wonder. Our Lord tells us. With five imperative verbs in verses 2-3, our Lord lays out a plan whereby spiritually moribund Christians and Christian churches can be revived.

Be watchful.

Though some translations have Jesus telling them, “Wake up!” the translation of the KJV in this case is superior: “Be watchful!” He is not just telling them to go from sleeping to being awake. He is telling them to be on their guard, like men who are stationed on the walls of an ancient city, on the lookout for the approach of any enemy. That is the idea here. It means to be in a position of readiness to meet the enemy should he come. It is of course the opposite of being asleep, but it is more than just being awake. You can be awake and not watchful. It’s not just staying awake, but being on guard and ready in case someone tries to break in (cf. Mt. 24:43-51).

The church at Sardis was not watchful, which I take to mean that they had become careless about their spiritual state, about the state of their hearts before God. It is the problem we have when we take our spiritual condition for granted. It is the assumption that I am spiritually invulnerable. Like the military leaders of Sardis who were not watching the cliffs because they assumed the city was impregnable there, we can stop watching over our hearts and leave them vulnerable to sin and Satan.

And Satan is a problem. You may not be watching, but he is: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). But it is not just that Satan is a problem. Our own sinful hearts are our chief source of concern. We not only have an enemy without; we have an enemy within. It is why our Lord told Peter, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41).

I wonder if there is any Christian here who has just slipped into spiritual neutral? Have you stopped pressing in? Are you striving to enter into the narrow gate and walk the narrow way? Are you working out your own salvation with fear and trembling? Maybe you don't pray with any regularity. Coming to church and participating in its life seems more and more to you as something that is not important. You rarely read your Bible. You are not trying to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Then, my friend, you might be dead, spiritually asleep and exposed to the machinations of your enemy and the flesh. Maybe you are like King David, who decided to rest on the laurels of past victories and decided to stay home when he should have gone to battle and ended up committing adultery and having one of his best friends killed. Shocking! But don't be surprised if you too find yourself in a terrible condition, with the enemy firmly entrenched in your hearts before you even know it. Certainly, you need to awaken from the misperception that all is well.

Strengthen the things that remain.

Though our Lord says in verse 1 that they are dead, the command to strengthen the things that remain indicates that there is still some life in them. But it is fading fast. The imagery here reminds me of a fire that is burning out. It was once a bright, roaring fire. It once gave off a lot of light and heat. But now it is mostly ashes, with a few coals here and there remaining. The exhortation here is to take those coals and fan them into flame once again before the fire goes completely out.

When we become spiritually barren and dead, one of the temptations is to think that there is nothing we can do about it. We can think that the state we are in is just the state we are in. It is inevitable, in some sense.

But this is not how the Lord teaches us to think. You do not have an excuse for the state you are in. You are to take yourself in hand; you are to strengthen the things that remain. You are to “stir up the gift of God which is in thee,” as the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 1:6).

You may argue back that you can't pull yourself up by your bootstraps. You are just waiting for God to do something. And you are using that as an excuse to do nothing and to stay on your spiritual backside. But let me say it plainly: that is no excuse. That attitude you have is a wrong attitude. It is based on a lie. And it is sinful. As long as you remain in that state, I say, you are in sin. I know this because of what Paul says to the Philippians: “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). You are to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. You are to do so with the utmost effort. You are to do so with the greatest intensity. You are to do so with the greatest care. We can do so because our efforts through faith in Christ are not efforts of self-righteousness; they are done in the power and strength and grace that God provides.

If you are a Christian, sin cannot have dominion over you (Rom. 6:14), so stop living like it. If you won't, then the problem may just be that you are not saved to begin with.

So Christian, get up; wake up; take yourself in hand and strengthen the things that remain. As the sailors scolded Jonah, these are words that you too need to hear: "What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not" (Jonah 1:6).

But this begs the question: exactly what should we do? And that is where the next three imperatives give us important guidance.

Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard.

Have you noticed as we've gone through these letters that the Lord does not come to these churches and say, "Hey, I appreciate what you've done, but you need to do more." He doesn't do that. He is not constantly adding to the list of duties he requires of us. He is not burdening us with more and more to do. You see that here. He doesn't call them to add to what they have already done. He tells them to go back and to do what they once did. He doesn't command them to pursue a greater level of spirituality than everyone else; he tells them to hold fast what they were taught in the beginning.

In other words, he is calling them back to their conversion to Christ. Notice the word *how*. It is not just that they are to remember what they received and heard (though that is certainly implied), but *how*. And what does that mean for us? Well, I think it means at least three things.

It means that we are to live in the sight of God and Christ. You cannot come to Christ and trust in him as your Lord and Savior and live a life focused on this world and on yourself. Coming to Christ involves repentance and faith; it involves a radical reformation of life so that we are no longer oriented in light of our own interests and desires but now we are oriented toward pleasing and serving Christ. And we walk and live before him. We live in the conscious reality that God is present and sees and knows everything we do. We don't chafe under that, either; we

love that, we want to have fellowship with him and to “walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing” (Col. 1:10).

This is one of the reasons why I think our Lord addresses himself to the church as he does: “These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars” (Rev. 3:1). The seven stars are, as we have seen, the seven angels, and the seven angels are the pastors of the churches who, though they are not priests who stand between the congregation and God, yet in a sense represent the churches as a whole. The thought, then, is that our Lord who walks among the lampstands (the churches) holds their life in his hands. We are meant to be aware of that; our Lord is calling our attention to this fact. The idea, I think, is to draw our attention away from men-pleasing to Christ-pleasing. He is the one who holds us in his hands. He is the one who determines our destiny, not men. He is the one we must please and live for, not men. Stop thinking that what people think is so important; all that matters in the end is what Christ thinks. Will he say, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” or not?

Brothers and sisters, before whom are you living?

It means that we are to live in light of the gospel. What is the gospel? It is the good news that God the Son became a man, lived a perfect life, suffered, and died for our sins on the cross, and then rose victorious over death so that all who trust in him can receive deliverance from sin and death. If you believe this, it will transform your life. Here is how the apostle Paul put it to Titus: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Tit. 2:11-14).

The grace of God and the gospel of God teaches us something. What does it teach us? That we should deny ungodliness and sinful desires, that we should live a life of self-control, and righteousness, and godliness.

It teaches us to eagerly wait for that blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself up for death for us so that he might redeem us from all iniquity and make us people who perform good works for his glory.

The gospel is not a license to sin. There is not pretext in the good news to defile your garments. Those who do so have forgotten the gospel. On the contrary, the gospel both motivates us and demands of us holiness and good works. Not to merit God's favor, but because in Christ we already have God's favor.

Brothers and sisters, are you living in light of the gospel?

It means that we are to live in the might of the Spirit. Again, see how Christ comes to this church. This is a dead church. It is a church which is devoid of a true, vibrant spirituality. What do they need? They need the Spirit. So how does our Lord come to them? He comes as the one "that hath the seven Spirits of God" (1). We noted earlier in our study of this letter, that this is figurative language for the one Spirit of God who brings us the fullness of God's blessing. It could be that the number seven not only ties in with the use of this number in Revelation; it might also be an allusion to Isaiah 11:2, which says of the Messiah: "And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."

When we receive Christ, we receive the Spirit of Christ. He communicates to us his grace and blessing and strength. We are to walk in the Spirit so that we do not fulfill the desires of the sinful nature (Gal. 5:16). How do we do this? By faith and by walking according to his Word, for the sword of the Spirit, as the apostle Paul reminds us, is the word of God (Eph. 6:17).

Brothers and sisters, are you living in the strength and in the way of the Spirit of God?

So in calling us to remember how we received and heard, we are being called to live in sight of God (instead of men), in light of the gospel (instead of the idolatries of the age), and in the might of the

Spirit (instead of our own strength). In doing so we are strengthening the things that remain.

Hold fast.

Then we are to hold fast (3). We are to go back to where we began. But we are also to hold on to that. We are to persevere in that, to endure in faithfulness. It is essential, because the promises are to those that overcome: “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels” (Rev. 3:5).

What does it mean that our Lord will not blot the names of such out of the book of life? We know from Rev. 20:12, 15; 21:27, that the book of life is the record of those who will be saved eternally and will not perish in hell. We also know from Rev. 13:8; 17:8, that these names are not put in as history progresses, but that every name that is in there was put there before the foundation of the world. I believe it is what our Lord is talking about when he tells his disciples, “Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven” (Lk. 10:20). In other words, the book of life is simply the record of those chosen by God to be saved before the foundation of the world, the elect.

The elect cannot be lost, and this text does not undermine that reality. What’s the point then in talking about blotting out a name? It is no indication that it can happen; it is, in fact, a promise that it won’t. This is something that saints in the first century needed to hear, because those days, one of the prayers that was offered in the synagogue every Sabbath (and one they would almost certainly have been aware of) went like this: “For the renegades let there be no hope, and may the arrogant kingdom soon be rooted out in our days, and [may] the Nazarenes . . . perish . . . and be blotted out from the book of life and with the righteous may

they not be inscribed.”¹⁰ Our Lord is saying that no matter what the enemies of the church say, the only one who can blot the names out will not blot the names out! They are secure in Christ.

This reminds me of a scene from the movie *The Longest Day* (which my wife calls, “*The Longest Movie*”). There is a British commander of paratroops whose orders are to take a vital bridge and hold it. The orders ring in his ears: “Hold until relieved.” He is still hearing those words when the first tanks from the landings on D-Day finally come to their support and relieve them. Those words supported and sustained him; not only because they reminded him of his duty, but also because they reminded him that help and relief was coming. Even so here. We are to hold fast but relief is coming! Those who hold fast and overcome will walk with the Lord in white. What an encouragement and a promise!

Repent.

Why put this at the end? Because we need to be reminded of it! If there is sin in the life, it must be turned from. That is what repentance is. It is not being sorry for sin merely. It is not merely crying and weeping about the brokenness of your life. It is not regret only. It is actively turning away from those patterns of behavior that are displeasing to God and turning to a life that pleases him.

I think we must also remind ourselves that our entire lives should be lives of repentance. It is not just something you do when you first turn to the Lord; it is a daily pattern of behavior. We sin every day and we need to repent every day. Do you? Have you?

It can be depressing sometimes to think about how bad these churches got, and so soon after they were founded. They had such great promise and beginnings and look where they ended up! Well, it ought to stand as a warning to us. But we must not presume to think that our Lord’s words went unheeded. We know from church history that

¹⁰Qtd. in Johnson, fn. 30, p. 85.

Revelation

one of the great Christians at the end of the second century was a man who is known to history as Melito of Sardis. He was a godly man of deep spirituality, evidence that the church at Sardis didn't die, and that it heeded the Lord's warning. Let us do so also. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (3:6).

CHAPTER VIII

THE FAITHFUL CHURCH

(REV. 3:7-13)

IN THE VERSES BEFORE US we have a message to a church in the ancient city of Philadelphia, located in the Roman province of Asia, about thirty miles southeast of Sardis. It was the next town after Sardis that the postman would have encountered along this ancient postal route. The earthquake that crippled Sardis in AD 17 did even more damage to Philadelphia, because this city was nearer the epicenter. In fact, the entire region was apparently located in an area that had experienced a lot of volcanic and seismic activity. The aftershocks that plagued Philadelphia lasted for several years, and this caused the population to scatter, despite help from the emperor for rebuilding. Nevertheless, there were still people here, and a church that had probably been planted during the ministry of the apostle Paul was thriving. In fact, of all the churches in Asia that are addressed in Rev. 2-3, only Smyrna and Philadelphia received no censure, only commendation.

The thing that stands out about this church is its faithfulness. This is something you can't miss when reading these verses. When our Lord speaks to the angel of the church, he commends him with these words: "thou . . . hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" (8). Then,

in verse 10: “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation.” So this church was known for keeping and holding fast to the word and name of Christ; that is, it was known for its faithfulness. And this is what our Lord commends and commands for them going forward: “Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown” (11). It’s interesting to me that there is only one imperative verb here, only one command: the command to remain faithful.

However, this doesn’t mean that everything was going great for these believers. This church was faithful, but what especially makes them stand out in this respect is the fact that they were being faithful despite every earthly reason to give up. Two things in particular made faithfulness difficult for them.

The first thing that made faithfulness difficult was the fact that this was a persecuted church. And just as it was with Smyrna (2:9), it appears that the local synagogue had allied itself with the magistrates of the city to make life hard for the Christians. The fact that our Lord calls the synagogue there “the synagogue of Satan” in 3:9, indicates that they were being used by the devil to persecute the people of God.

It is important to remember that at first, Christianity was seen as a sect within Judaism. But by the end of the first century, when Revelation was written, this was no longer the case. What made this a problem for Christians is that they were no longer protected by the legal permission the Roman authorities gave to the Jews to practice their monotheistic religion (which meant they were not punished for refusing to sacrifice to the emperor and to the gods). But Christianity was not a legally recognized religion, now that it was seen as distinct from Judaism. And because it was not legal, Christians could get in hot water for refusing to offer sacrifice to the pagan deities. And this is apparently exactly what was happening.

We also see indications of persecution in the language used to describe their faithfulness. “Thou . . . hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name” (8) is the same language used of the church in Perga-

mum, which is followed up by “in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you” (2:13). This was a persecuted church.

But what made this perhaps even more difficult was the fact that persecution was accompanied by “little strength.” It was a powerless church. We see that in 3:8 that the church is described in this way: “thou hast a little strength.” Now, it is true that it was not a powerless church in the strictest sense. It doesn’t say they had no power, but that they had little power. But relatively speaking it was powerless. Commentators speculate as to exactly how this church was powerless. They say that this could either mean that the church was made up of the lower classes (such as slaves) or that the church was economically impoverished or that the church was small in number (or a combination of some or all of these things). So perhaps this was a church with little to no political, economic, and numerical power in that community.

What does this mean? Well, it means that there was little they could do about the situation they were in. And that must have made the trials they were passing through even harder. It’s one thing to be going through a difficult time. It’s one thing to be marginalized by others. It’s one thing to experience injustice at the hands of others. But to go through all that with little to no hope of being able to change your circumstances is even more disheartening. The feeling of powerlessness before your persecutors, adding vulnerability to victimhood, is a frightening combination.

But this is not just a letter to the church of ancient Philadelphia. All these letters end with the admonition, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (13). The Spirit still speaks to the churches today. He is speaking to our church. He is speaking to each of us, and we need to be willing to listen to what he has to say. We are not meant to read this for the purpose of merely learning about what went wrong and what was right with the church at the end of the first century. Rather, each of these letters are meant, I believe, to cause each

of us to examine ourselves in light of the rebukes and to be exhorted in light of the commands and to be encouraged in light of the promises.

The call to faithfulness was not just a call for the saints in Philadelphia; it is a call to everyone who names the name of Christ. And the fact that Christ calls a church to faithfulness in the midst of persecution and powerlessness is a reminder that the call to endure through hardness is not something merely theoretical, but something actually experienced by believers from the very beginning. It is a reminder that those of us who are suffering cannot use our suffering as an excuse to clock out or walk away from holding fast to the name of Christ. Christ calls us to take our crosses and follow him. The path of the cross is not easy, but it is the path that Christians have taken from the very beginning. We are not walking a new path or a road less taken when we take the narrow way. This is the way believers have taken from the very beginning.

The Call to Faithfulness

But what does this look like? What are we called to be faithful to? Well, in terms of verses 8 and 10, it is clear, isn't it? We are called to be faithful to the name of Christ and to the word of Christ.

What does faithfulness to the name of Christ look like? Notice the particular way this is put in verse 8, "hast not denied my name." I think it is helpful to compare this with something our Lord said to his disciples in Matthew 10. There he said, "Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" (31-33). To deny the name of Christ is to deny Christ; this is the opposite of acknowledging him or confessing him before men. So to not deny the name of Christ means that you don't hide the fact that you are a Christian, even when it is to your

disadvantage to do so, or when it might bring down upon you the wrath of others.

You will notice in our Lord's words what it is that might keep us from confessing him. It is fear (31). He tells us to "fear not" because he knows that the fear of men is the thing that so often kills faithfulness to Jesus. The Philadelphian Christians had many genuine reasons to fear in light of the persecution they were experiencing. But they did not deny the name of Christ; they did not give in to fear. Instead, they boldly owned the name of their Lord even when it cost them dearly.

Why would they do that? I will tell you why. It is because Christ was more precious to them than anything they could lose in this world. That is what is ultimately behind the faithfulness that Jesus calls us to. It is why the call to discipleship is the call to die to every other allegiance and to give our hearts entirely to him. Are you willing to do that? Have you counted the cost? Listen to the words of the Lord: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt. 10:37-39).

The Christians at Philadelphia were examples of men and women who loved the Lord more than their own lives. They openly and unashamedly took their cross and followed Jesus. Will you not do the same? Listen, young men and young women, Christ is calling you to follow him. Will you? Are you willing to take the cross, to die to yourself? If your answer to that is yes, then you must openly acknowledge him. That means, at least partly, being baptized and publicly identifying with the church, and then to live a life consistent with that confession of faith.

The apostle Paul was like this. He endured a lot for the sake of the Lord. But he never complained. Even as he languished in prison, he wrote this to the church in Philippi: "According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all

boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:20-21). He was genuinely willing to die for Christ. His “earnest expectation” was not so much to be delivered from prison but to give an unashamed and bold witness for Christ, even if it meant the taking of his life. How and why could he do this? It was because he cherished Christ above all things. To die didn’t mean the loss of anything ultimately precious to him; instead it meant to be with Christ (23), and that made death gain for Paul. The question is: are we like that?

Then, let us consider what it means to be faithful to the word of Christ. You cannot really separate the word of Christ from the name of Christ. To hold fast to his name is to hold fast to his word. But it is worthwhile, I think, to consider them separately so we can fully understand what is involved in the call to be faithful to him.

To be faithful to the word of Christ means that we believe his teaching and obey his commandments. And of course we find his teaching and his words in the whole of the New Testament. Not just the Gospels, but in the Acts and the epistles as well. The apostles were commissioned by Christ to give us his words. Those who are unwilling to hear the apostles do not hear Christ.

In most of the other churches (with the exception of Smyrna), there were problems with false teaching and/or immorality and worldliness. There is no hint of this in the letter to the Philadelphian church. They were faithful in embracing all the word of God for all their lives. Do we? Are we? This doesn’t mean we must be perfect but that the trajectory of our lives is conformity to the word of Christ in our hearts, minds, and lives.

That is the call to faithfulness. We are not called to be faithful to ourselves or to the traditions of men. We are called to remain firm in our commitment to the Lord, to his name and his word. But how do you do this? How do you do it so that you don’t become worn down and bitter and hopeless? Especially if, like the Philadelphian Christians, faithfulness requires so much of us, how do we remain faithful? What

resources can we draw upon, especially when all we can see in ourselves is weakness and blindness? How can we, as the apostle Paul prayed for the Colossians, have “longsuffering with joyfulness” (Col. 1:11)?

The rest of verses 7-13 of our text show us where our resources are. They are in Christ, “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3), in whom “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (9) so that we “are complete in him” (10). Again, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that there is only one imperative in the message to this church. For every precept there are ten promises. Everything else is meant to encourage them and to strengthen them and to give them hope. Everything else here is meant to direct their attention away from themselves and to Christ. Which is what we need to do above all else. In particular, we see four things to which we are meant to look. I want to put them to you in four realities that ground our faithfulness in joyful hope: acceptance, acknowledgement, acquittal, and award.

Four realities that ground our faithfulness in joyful hope.

Acceptance with God (7-8)

In contrast to the taunts of those who belonged to the “synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 3:9), who had cast the Christians out and excommunicated them, our Lord comes to the church and affirms his acceptance of them. He reminds them that however they may be despised and rejected by men, they have been embraced in the love and grace of God through Christ. He does this through the two images of a key and a door.

We read: “These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it” (7-8). In the Bible, a key was a symbol of authority. In fact, we encounter this exact expression in the book of Isaiah, when God takes “the key of David” from a man by

the name of Shebna and gives it to Eliakim. Neither man was the king, but having “the key of David” meant having authority in the Davidic kingdom to aid in administering the rule of the king: “And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiah: and I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (Isa. 22:20-22). When our Lord commits the authority of apostleship to the twelve, he does this in the language of a key (cf. Mt. 16:19). The fact that Christ has the key of David means that he has authority in the Messianic kingdom. It is similar to what our Lord said in the opening chapter of Revelation: “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death” (1:18).

The point is that no one can open the door to the kingdom again any man when Christ has opened it to them. Keys open doors, and the door here is the door by which we enter into salvation and acceptance with God. Nor can any man open the door of the kingdom to any man when Christ has shut it. The point here is access to the kingdom, and the fact that Jesus alone determines who enters the kingdom of heaven and who does not. He alone is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 14:6). There is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). He had opened the door to the Philadelphian believers, and it didn't matter whether or not they were acknowledged by the Jews or not. It didn't matter whether or not the civil authorities accepted them or not. Christ had, and because Christ had accepted them, there was nothing anyone could do to change that. He doesn't receive us into his fellowship and then change his mind. He keeps us by his grace.

The need for acceptance and affirmation can be tremendous. When we don't receive it, we can become bitter. The lack of acceptance can paralyze a person by casting them into deep depression. But, my friend,

if you have trusted in Christ as your Savior and Lord, on the authority of his word I can say that you are accepted by him. He receives you; you are forgiven by his blood and justified by his righteousness. Think about it: God loves you! The love of those we hold dearest to our hearts is but a faint expression of the love of God in Christ. Oh, may we lay hold on this reality: “That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19).

Acknowledgment by Christ (9)

Remember what our Lord told his disciples: “Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven” (Mt. 10:32-33). On the Day of Judgment, it won’t matter how popular or successful or comfortable a person was in this life. All that will matter for eternity is whether or not the Lord Jesus Christ will stand up for you on that day.

But our Lord does one better than that for these believers. He tells them: “Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee” (Rev. 3:9). In other words, he is telling them that the Jews which had rejected them and who believed quite sincerely that they were heretics bound for hell will one day see very clearly that they were wrong, and not only will they see that but that they will themselves acknowledge that fact to these very believers by coming and bowing down before their feet. Not only will Jesus acknowledge them before men; he will force their enemies to acknowledge the fact that Christ loves them.

To understand just how remarkable this is, consider the following prophecies in Isaiah:

Revelation

The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet; and they shall call thee; The city of the Lord, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel. (Isa. 60:14)

Thus saith the Lord, The labour of Egypt, and merchandise of Ethiopia and of the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over unto thee, and they shall be thine: they shall come after thee; in chains they shall come over, and they shall fall down unto thee, they shall make supplication unto thee, saying, Surely God is in thee; and there is none else, there is no God. (Isa. 45:14)

And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers: they shall bow down to thee with their face toward the earth, and lick up the dust of thy feet; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: for they shall not be ashamed that wait for me. (Isa. 49:23)

In each of these passages, Isaiah envisions the enemies of Israel (Gentiles!) coming and bowing down before the feet of the children of Israel as acts of submission to them. What our Lord does here is to reverse the image: now it is Jews who are bowing down before the Christians, many of whom would have been Gentiles. That doesn't mean that these prophecies were wrong: what it shows is that the church is the true Israel; it is the church which now inherits the saving promises of Abraham. We are all sons and daughters of Abraham by faith (Rom. 4:11-13). On the other hand, anyone – even someone who belongs to the physical race of Abraham – who rejects Christ, will be cast out of the kingdom forever.

Brothers and sisters, when you are misunderstood, isolated, and ostracized by others, on account of your faith in Christ, remember this:

if God is for you, who can successfully be against you (cf. Rom. 8:31)? Christ will stand up for you, and not only will he stand up for you, but he will also cause all those who stood against you for your faithfulness to him to come and bow down before your feet.

Acquittal before the Judge (10)

In verse 10, we read, “Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” I believe that this verse is a reference to the Final Judgment and is a promise to all believers that they will be rescued from it.

However, I need to pause here and to address another popular interpretation of this verse. It is often read to refer to what is called the rapture, when Jesus comes back to earth secretly and raptures (takes to heaven) all believers and rescues them from the final tribulation by which God will judge his enemies upon the earth before Jesus comes visibly and gloriously to establish his earthly kingdom. And they argue that because our Lord promises to “keep thee from the hour of temptation” it really does mean that believers will not have to go through the final tribulation but will be kept from it altogether.

I don’t believe that this is a reference to a secret rapture; in fact, I don’t think the Scriptures teach this at all. It is based upon a mistaken interpretation of 1 Thess. 4:17, where the apostle tells us that “we which are alive and remain [at the coming of Jesus, ver. 15] shall be caught up together with them [those believers who had already died] in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” The mistake here is to see meeting the Lord in the air as meaning that we will be raptured up to heaven away from the earth.

But that is almost certainly not what the text means. The word for “meet” here is used two other times in the NT, in Mt. 25:6 and Acts 28:15. In both places, they refer to people who meet someone as they are coming to a place and then joining them as they complete their journey

to that place. In Mt. 25:6 it is used of the virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom. This doesn't mean the bridegroom turned around and went back when the virgins met him; it means that they joined him on the last part of his journey to meet his bride. In Acts 28:15, it is used to describe how Christians from nearby cities met Paul and joined him on the final leg of his journey to Rome. It stands to reason, then, that meeting Christ in 1 Thess. 4:17 does not mean meeting him only to find him turn around and go back into heaven. It means to join him on the final part of his journey back to earth. 1 Thess. 4:17 is not referring to a secret rapture but to the visible, glorious Second Coming of Christ when he returns to earth to raise the dead and establish his kingdom.

I don't believe in a rapture of believers into heaven before the end; I believe in the rapture of believers at the end. I do believe that we will be raptured up to meet Christ, for 1 Thess. 4 teaches that, but not to be taken into heaven. We are raptured to meet Christ as he returns to establish his kingdom upon the earth at the end and to join him in that kingdom. There is no pre-tribulation rapture; there is no promise that we will be saved from earthly trials this side of the Second Coming. What we are promised is grace to endure through them. Our Lord doesn't pray that his disciples be taken out of the world, but to be kept from the evil and the evil one (Jn. 17:15).

What then is meant by Rev. 3:10? Some interpret this as a localized, temporal judgement (like the destruction of Jerusalem). However, this can't be the case; the worldwide language here precludes that. I also have a problem viewing this as a promise to be saved from or through the final tribulation at the end of the age. It is true that this is a promise to all believers, but it was first of all a promise to this church in Philadelphia at the end of the first century. That being the case, our Lord knew they would not encounter that particular trial. So why promise them deliverance from it? I don't see why. Rather, as I said, I believe this is a reference to the Final Judgment and the promise that God's people will be rescued from it.

This language is consistent with the final judgment for two reasons. First, the use of the word “hour” is used in other instances in Revelation to refer to God’s final judgment. For example, in 14:6-7, we read, “And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters” (see also 14:15; 18:10, 17, 19).

Second, the “earth-dwellers” is almost uniformly a reference to unbelievers in the book of Revelation (see 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8). This is not so much a reference to the place where the tribulation will take place, but rather a reference to the type of person who will be placed in the furnace of this trial. The believer will be rescued from, not from earthly trials, but from the final judgment by which the wicked will be eternally condemned and the righteous shine in the kingdom as the sun in its glory.

Brothers and sisters, it is no mark of God’s displeasure that you are going through trials now. Nor is it evidence that God either doesn’t care or can’t help. God has promised that we will go through trials and tribulations. It is role of faith to carry us through it, not to keep us from it. But what God has promised is this: that the sins which might have weighed our souls down into eternal punishment on the Day of Final Judgment will not stand against us in that day. We will be acquitted and enter eternal glory. It is true that the verdict “not guilty!” is already ours through faith in Christ. But the verdict will one day be read aloud for all to hear. It is in this sense that we will be kept from the hour of tribulation.

The Award of heaven (11-12)

I hope you don’t hear that wrong. I’m not saying that heaven is awarded to us on the basis of our own merit. It is not. Salvation is en-

tirely of grace. But heaven and its glories are nevertheless spoken of in terms of reward (Mt. 16:27; Lk. 6:23; Col. 3:24; Heb. 11:26; Rev. 22:12). An award is usually thought of in terms of something good. In fact, here, it is spoken of in terms of a crown (11). And it is in this sense that I speak of heaven.

We see heaven and the eternal glory spoken of here in verses 11-12. "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name." We of course should not read this over-literally. No one wants to be turned into a pillar! Rather, this is simply a way of talking about participation in the future eternal kingdom of God. To be in the temple of God is to enjoy the closest possible fellowship with God. That is the place of real joy and peace. And the fact that his name is written on you means that this is the place to which you belong. It reminds me of what the apostle Paul said to the Philippian believers: "For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:20-21).

So think about all these things: the fact of your acceptance with God through Christ, the fact that Christ will acknowledge you before your Father and will cause your enemies to bow before you, the fact that you will be acquitted in the Final Judgment because of what Christ has done, and the fact that you belong to and will eternally enjoy everlasting joy and peace in the presence of God in the New Jerusalem. Now put your present trials, as terrible as they are and which are pressing in upon your faith and choking your hope, put them in comparison to these realities. Can we not say that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18)?

Do we not have reason to persevere in faithfulness to the Lord? Can we not agree with the apostle James, “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him” (Jam. 1:12)? Brothers and sisters, let us remain faithful, that no one take our crown; let us be overcomers!

CHAPTER IX

HOW TO RECOVER FROM GOSPEL AMNESIA (REV. 3:14-22)

THE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH in Laodicea inhabited a city in the Lycus valley that in Roman times was the wealthiest city in Phrygia.¹ In fact, the wealth of this city was so great that when it was struck by a terrible earthquake in AD 60, the city was able to rebuild itself without any help from Rome, a fact attested to by Tacitus. Its wealth was in part due to the fact that it was located at the juncture of several important trade routes. In addition, it was known for making garments like the trimita, a tunic woven from the “soft, glossy black wool” from local sheep that made the region famous. There was a medical school also that was famous for an eye-salve made from “Phrygian powder’ mixed with oil.”

But despite all these impressive advantages, it had one great disadvantage: the water supply. The fact of the matter was that it had no clean

¹Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation (Revised)*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 107. The historical information in the following paragraphs come from Mounce’s commentary; see esp. p. 106-110.

water nearby, and so water had to be piped in from a spring six miles away, coming through “a system of stone pipes approximately three feet in diameter.” By the time it got to Laodicea, the water was nasty. To help understand the symbolism our Lord uses for the church, however, there is something else we need to know about water near the city. Mounce explains:

Six miles north across the Lycus was the city of Hierapolis, famous for its hot springs that, rising within the city, flowed across a wide plateau and spilled over a broad escarpment directly opposite Laodicea. The cliff was some 300 feet high and about a mile wide. Covered with a white encrustation of calcium carbonate, it formed a spectacular natural phenomenon. As the hot, mineral-laden water traveled across the plateau, it gradually became lukewarm before cascading over the edge.²

On the other hand, Colossae – which was a few miles south-east of Laodicea – was known for its cold and pure water supply. The cold, refreshing waters of Colossae and the hot-spring waters of Hierapolis stood in sharp contrast to the lukewarm, nasty waters in and around Laodicea.

With this background, let us now consider the words of our Lord to the church in Laodicea. This was a church that is described as “lukewarm” in verse 16, a spiritual condition that led the Lord to threaten to vomit them out of his mouth (“I will spue thee out of my mouth”). Given how serious this condition obviously is, we need to understand what is going on here, and what it is they are counseled to do in response to it. Of course, we should be asking ourselves if and how this applies to us. As we look at the words of our Lord, we will see that in them our Lord tells them where they are (diagnosis), what they are to do (prescription), and why they are to do it (hope).

²Ibid, p. 109.

Where they are (diagnosis)

It is often said that the “hot” and “cold” states of verses 15-16 are meant to refer to spiritual zeal and love for the Lord on the one hand (hot), and spiritual callousness on the other (cold). To be lukewarm, then, is to be neither on fire for the Lord nor to be hardened against him. It is just a state of spiritual carelessness

Now I think that is true, as respects the lukewarmness – I think it does refer in part to spiritual carelessness, but I think the contrast that some make between hot and cold is often a bit mistaken, as if hot is good and cold is bad but lukewarm is worse. Our Lord is not saying, as is often said, that he prefers an atheist to a spiritually barren Christian (as if that is what is meant by “I would thou wert cold or hot”). It may be true that some atheists are easier to reach for the Lord than hypocritical Christians. But that’s not the point here. The point is that there is nothing good about their state – it is neither refreshing like the cold, pure water from Colossae, nor is it healing like the mineral laden hot springs of Hierapolis. Instead, what they are to the Lord is so bad that they are like lukewarm water in his mouth, which is disgusting and nasty, and worthy only to be spit out onto the ground. He can’t stand them as they are. Something has to change.

What then was it about their condition that caused the Lord to want to vomit? Notice the word “because” at the beginning of verse 17. This describes the reason why our Lord thought their condition was so terrible. It tells us what it was about them that made our Lord compare them to lukewarm, disgusting, and nasty water. It was for this reason: “Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (17). It is this description that fills out the content of their lukewarm condition.

This is a description of a self-satisfied church, a church that thought it had it all, that didn’t think it needed anything – anything from other believers, anything from Christ. Ladd tells us, “The Greek of this verse

literally rendered is, ‘I am rich, and I have gotten riches.’”³ In other words, they not only thought they had it all, but that what they had was due to their own effort. Their church, so they thought, was a mighty church, a rich church, a powerful church, an influential church, a trend-setting church – all because of the things they had done. This attitude is summarized in the words: “and have need of nothing.”

This is the attitude of pride, of which God says, “These six things doth the Lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him,” the first of which is “a proud look” (Prov. 6:16-17). We are told that, “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). On the other hand, “The fear of the Lord is to hate evil: pride, and arrogancy, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate” (Prov. 8:13). We are also told that “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (Jam. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). “Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off” (Ps. 138:6). As the Lord speaks through the prophet, “to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word” (Isa. 66:2).

Fundamentally, God hates pride because pride is a denial of the gospel. Let me remind you what the gospel is. It is predicated on the fact that we have not just sinned against our fellow man, but that we have sinned against our Creator. Pride is a big part of that. Pride says to God, “I know better, thank you very much. I will go my own way; I refuse to let you have any say. My will be done!” But we cannot sin against God and expect to get away with it. To sin against a Being of infinite greatness is to amass a debt of infinite proportions and to be worthy of an infinite punishment. We cannot of course pay such a debt.

But God in his mercy intervened; not by demanding that we pay a debt we could never repay, but by taking the debt upon himself. He did this in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. For Christ came to take the punishment of our sins upon himself by dying on the

³G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 66.

cross. He then gives the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of God and eternal life to all who believe on him: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:14-16).

What this means is that salvation from sin, its guilt and all its consequences, does not come to us because we are good enough but solely and entirely because of the grace of God. The fact that “by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9) means that we don’t merit God’s favor and God’s salvation in any sense of the word. We don’t work for it. Christ did the work for us, and we embrace it as a gift in the open hand of faith. We don’t purchase the gift of salvation; it was purchased by Christ when he died on the cross and suffered for the sins of others. As the apostle Paul puts it to the Corinthians, “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:18-21).

So if you say that you believe the gospel, what are you saying? You are saying that you were a helpless, lost, sinner dead in your sins and without hope and that God in sovereign grace because of what Christ had done came and rescued you. In Christ you have been given “all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3): adoption into the family of God, eternal inheritance, the forgiveness of sins, and the fellowship of God through the Holy Spirit. You have not only been

given hope for a future after death, but you are given present power, the same kind of power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

In other words, you are making two very important claims when you say that you believe the gospel. First, you are claiming that you have been given salvation by grace and grace alone on the basis of what Christ has done – his righteousness, his atoning death. But second, you are also saying that every spiritual blessing – not just some or most but all of them – are gifts of grace to you. There is nothing for which we can boast.

Maybe by this point you can see why the attitude of the Laodiceans was so noxious to Christ. Their attitude that they were rich and increased with goods was a denial of the gospel. It was a denial of their dependence upon Christ and his righteousness and his riches. Though I doubt very seriously that they stopped claiming to believe in Jesus and his grace, for all practical purposes they had become works-based atheists.

How can a church get to this point? Well, I think to understand this we need to realize that there are two kinds of people that are being dealt with here. One is the nominal Christian. What is a nominal Christian? It is a Christian in name only, a CHRINO if you will! It is someone who professes that they know God but in works deny him (Tit. 1:16), who have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5). They are those who are described by our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Mt. 7:21-23). We must recognize that not everyone who claims to be a Christian is one. Not everyone who claims to be saved is saved. Not everyone who claims to be elect is so.

Why do I say this? Well, because a nominal Christian is someone who is truly bereft of the riches of Christ, who is naked before God, who is spiritually blind (Rev. 3:17-18). They are people who have Christ on the outside of their hearts (20). Now, I know that Jesus tells them that he loves them (19). But we must remember that there is a general love that God has for his creation (cf. Mt. 5:43-48) which is of course distinct from his electing, saving love, but it is a genuine love, nonetheless. It is the love behind Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem; it is the love behind God's protestation, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that he should repent and live" (Ezek. 18:23).

But this also addresses those who are genuine Christians (who are loved by Christ with electing, saving love) and yet who over time have descended into this lukewarm state, what I will call here the backslidden Christian. This is the person I want to focus on. How can a Christian get into this state? And what are the signs that we are there? We should want to know this because we don't want to get there. To get there is to get into a state where we are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). To get there is to get into a state where Christ is ready to vomit us out of his mouth.

Now just think about that image for a moment. This is not a condition that you want to remain in. You don't keep something in your mouth that is making you nauseous. The Lord is not going to let a person in this state go on like this indefinitely. Something has to be done, and it has to be done now. But we need to know if we are there. What are the signs that we are either there or are in danger of getting there?

One of the first steps down this path is to get what one writer has called gospel amnesia. It is forgetting the gospel. It is doing what the apostle Peter described in his second letter when he wrote, "But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins" (2 Pet. 1:9). Now maybe you haven't forgotten the details of the gospel. Maybe you can recite the facts of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as good as any. But you can still forget the gospel in the sense that you no longer feel a need

for the gospel like you once did. The conviction that you once had of your need of God's grace is diminished. The weight of the glory of God has faded in your heart and mind. Eternal things just don't have the reality and relevance to you that they once had. The person and work of Jesus are just theological details rather than the lifeline of your soul.

This is where the Laodiceans were at. They didn't see their need of the gospel; they didn't see their need of Christ. They had need of nothing. And Christ was outside looking in.

And what that leads to is a diminished sense of God's love. You can't separate the gospel of God from the love of God, for God's love is most clearly revealed in the cross of Christ and the redemption he accomplished there. Again, a person may extol the virtues of God's love in such a lukewarm state. But it is either just an intellectual thing or it is misunderstood as a convenient excuse to ignore their sin. But a person who truly understands the love of God for them will be changed by it. Such a knowledge of God's love is inconsistent with lukewarmness. How can the two coexist? When the apostle prays that the believers might "be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge," he understand that the outcome is "that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:18-19). That is about as far from a lukewarm state as you can get. People who are gripped by the love of God are not lukewarm; they are filled with all God's fulness. Such people are rejoicing with joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8).

As a result, the love of other things enter in (cf. Mk. 4:19). You love what you value. But when you become self-sufficient and self-righteous you are going to stop valuing God's gospel and God's Son and God's love. However, that doesn't mean you stop loving – your heart cannot endure a vacuum. You will love something, and if it is not Christ it will be the world.

I want you to notice this very tragic thing. They Laodiceans were not enjoying God. They were not enjoying fellowship with Jesus Christ,

clearly! He was on the outside, knocking for admittance! They were spiritually poor and blind and naked. And yet they thought they were just fine. How can that happen? Well, it's because they were filling their hearts up on the world. They were being satisfied, but not with God. And that is a tragedy, when we glut ourselves at the banquet of the world so that we become desensitized to hungering and thirsting for righteousness and no longer see our need for the bread of life.

What they are to do about it (prescription)

What then should they do? What should we do when we find ourselves in this kind of condition? Well, we should listen to the Lord: "I counsel thee..." (18). How do you hear the counsel of the Lord? You hear it in his word, the Scriptures. Here he has spoken. Here he counsels us. He is speaking to us right now in these words. "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (22). Will we listen? Do we have ears to hear, or will the word be to us like the seed sown on the wayside that was picked up by the birds and left no enduring effect?

What is his counsel? It is given in verse 18: "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see." What is striking about this is that it tells us that the church in Laodicea had taken on the attributes of the society in which it lived. Laodicea was famously wealthy, and the church thought it too was rich. The city was known for the garments made there from the black wool produced by the local sheep, and the church considered itself well arrayed. The city was known for its medical school and ointments, especially the eye salve produced there. The church thought it had spiritual sight and light. But our Lord's rebuke and his counsel show that they are not what they think they are. They think they are rich, but they are poor.

They think they are well-clothed, but they are naked. They think they can see, but they are blind (17).

I think this is especially relevant for the church today, for we too inhabit a very wealthy society, a society that considers itself with all its wealth and technology to be self-sufficient. Modern men and women don't think they need God. They don't need religion. We're fooling ourselves if we think we are immune to the secular mindset. And even though we may not live in the Middle Ages, the fact of the matter is that self-righteousness abounds, even in the most secular parts of our society – just consider the whole cancel culture as a case in point. So we need to examine ourselves. Have we too imbibed this Laodicean spirit?

And so our Lord counsels them and us to come to him for what is missing. Are you poor? Then “buy of me gold tried in the fire.” Are you naked? Then “be clothed” by Christ so “that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear.” Are you blind? Then “anoint thine eyes” with the “eyesalve” of Christ, “that thou mayest see.”

You see, their problem (and ours) was that they stopped seeing their need for Christ. And so the solution is to come back to Christ and to treasure him and value him above everything else. We need to be men and women who really believe what the apostle Paul said of himself: “what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (Phil. 3:7-11). In other words, the gospel is not something you believe and then move on from there: we are to live with a gospel mindset day in and day out.

Why they were to do it (hope)

Then there is the motivation. Our Lord doesn't just tell us what to do; he gives us motivation to obey by faith in the promises of Scripture. He give us hope. And what we will see is that the primary motivation here is fellowship with Christ. You see, our Lord will not have fellowship with gospel deniers. He will not bless us when we live as though we can make it on our own. And so when we get into this mindset of prideful self-sufficiency and self-righteousness we will inevitably lose the fellowship we once had with the Lord. This is what had happened to the Laodiceans.

Has it happened to you? Then listen to the words of the Lord: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:19-20). Can you hear this rebuke as a rebuke of love? That is the first question. If you are in a place where you really don't want to hear anyone rebuke you or to point out things that are wrong in your life and way of living, then that is a bad thing because that kind of attitude insulates you from any kind of meaningful and necessary change. We need to be willing to be rebuked. We need to be willing to be open to being challenged in our thinking and living. At the same time, we should gladly receive rebuke from the Lord because he gives us hope even as he chastises us.

The source of our hope is of course Christ himself: his faithfulness, his love, his victory.

Hope in the faithfulness of Christ

All along the Laodiceans were to remember the one who was speaking to them. These are not the words of John; they are the words of Christ, who comes to them as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God" (14). "Amen" is the Hebrew word

which is an affirmation about the truth of something. In the gospels, when our Lord said, “Verily, verily,” or “truly, truly,” he was literally saying, “Amen, amen.” To say that Christ is “the Amen” is another way of telling us that he is the one who fulfills God’s promises to us, as the apostle Paul said: “For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us” (2 Cor. 1:20). This is filled out by the expression “the faithful and true witness.” Jesus always tells the truth to us. He always keeps his promises.

And that is significant because it tells us that he will always tell us the truth about ourselves. He will never lie about our condition. His word is true, we need to believe it, even when it is painful to do so. But it also means that he not only tells the truth about us; he also tells the truth about himself- that is, he keeps his promises and his commitments to us. He will never go back on his word. If he tells us that he loves us, that is true. If he tells us that we need to repent, that is true. If he promises to have fellowship with us, we can bank on it; that too is true.

There is one more thing that is significant here. In Isa. 65:16, God is called twice, “the God of truth.” In Hebrew, this is literally “God the Amen.” Hence, when Jesus addresses himself to the church of Laodicea as “the Amen,” this is not only a pointer to his faithfulness but also to his deity, and to the fact that he fully shares the nature of God along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is God.

And as such, he is “the beginning of the creation of God,” not in the silly sense of being the first created thing. The word here translated “beginning” means “ruler.” He is the one through whom the Father has created all things, and as such he stands preeminent over all creation. The fact that Colossae was so close to Laodicea and the fact that apparently letters from the apostle Paul had been shared by both churches (cf. Col. 4:16), indicates that they would have heard this language before, in Paul’s letter to Colossae: “Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all

things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell” (Col. 1:15-19).

Hope in the love of Christ.

It is the love of Christ that chastens us. He does not rebuke us because he hates us; to fail to rebuke us, to leave us in our lukewarmness, that would be hate. Christ chastens those he loves. Which means that if we truly take heed to his warning, it will be for our good. Sin, remember, is deceitful. As one Puritan put it, Satan presents the bait and hides the hook. But not so the Lord. He takes away the bait and exposes the hook. This is for our good; it comes from the love of our Lord.

The counsel is simple: “Be zealous, therefore, and repent.” To be zealous means that we are through the Holy Spirit seeking to recover our zeal and passion and love for the Lord. We no longer love the world in the place of Christ. We are seeking the kingdom of God first. He is our priority, not the world and its values and its trifles. If you think you can’t do that, the reality is that you can, if you are a Christian. It doesn’t matter how far you have fallen; you can recover from the deadness and the coldness and the distance you have put between yourself and the Lord. For if you walk in the light, as he is in the light, God will have fellowship with you and the blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse you from every sin (1 Jn. 1:7).

And then we are to repent. This is a radical break with sin. You cannot walk away from fellowship with Christ and away from the love of Christ without loving something else. And whatever you have put in the place of Christ is an idol and therefore sinful. You need to repent of that. You are to turn away from it completely. Is it the love of the praise of man? Is it the love of the comforts of this world? Is it the love of forbidden

pleasures? Is it the love of money and wealth and prestige and status? Then repent! Turn from these trinkets and baubles and turn to Christ.

What happens when we repent? What happens when we hear the voice of Christ, when we hear his knock at the door of our hearts? This is truly amazing – remember, this is spoken to people that our Lord describes as making him nauseous! Here is the promise: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (20). In other words, we are promised fellowship and communion with the living Lord, with our Savior and King. It is what Paul prays for the Ephesians, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith,” that he would make his home in our hearts. My friend, there is no earthly honor, no worldly pleasure that can even come close to the peace and glory of knowing the Lord.

Hope in the victory of Christ

“To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne” (Rev. 3:21). To overcome is to overcome all the things that prevent us from living faithfully and obediently in faith. To overcome is to not apostatize. It is to continue to the end, to endure, to persevere in the faith.

It is also to overcome as Christ overcame – “even as I also overcame.” Christ did not overcome on beds of ease. He did not overcome through worldly victory and conquest. He did not overcome by taking an earthly crown but by submitting to an excruciating cross. He overcame through defeat, through death! (We will see this illustrated again and again in the book of Revelation.). In the same way, Christ bids us come and die so that we too may overcome. Your dying to your earthly hopes and dreams is sometimes necessary to being a Christian. Will you do it? Is Christ worth it to you? Some of us may need to rethink what

it means to be a follower of Jesus. Have you come to him for loaves of bread, or have you come to him who is the bread of life?

But he does not just ask us to give. We gain infinitely more in Christ than we could ever give up. We give for a little time that we may inherit far greater riches forever. The gain promised here (remember who says this – the Amen!) is to sit with Christ in his throne, to share in his glorious kingdom reign. There is nothing like that. You can have this world's temporary pleasures and power and peace; give me a place in his kingdom. Even the most menial place in the kingdom of God would be a place of privilege, but what our Lord promises here is truly amazing, to share with him in his glorious rule.

What do you need this morning? I can tell you what every person in the room, and indeed, what every person out of this room needs – we need Christ. We need the riches and the clothing and the medicine that he provides. We obtain them from him, but not by money or price, but simply by receiving them freely by trusting in him as our Lord and Savior. Oh, may we heed the word of God through the prophet: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David” (Isa. 55:1-3).

Let the one who has ears to hear, let him hear!

CHAPTER X

REFLECTIONS ON THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA (REV. 2-3)

WHAT DOES A LETTER WRITTEN in the first century to churches in the Roman province of Asia have to do with churches in the twenty-first century? It is clear that each church is addressed with respect to particular issues with which that local congregation was facing. Each church is also addressed in terms of the features and history of its own locality (e.g., the call to watch for the church of Sardis; the description of lukewarm water in contrast to hot and cold for the church of Laodicea). So do they have any application beyond their own time and setting? Well, hopefully by this point you can see that they have. But if you are still wondering this, let me give you two reasons that we should keep in mind and which should give us confidence that these letters are still meant to speak to the church in our day and place.

First, the fact that God in his providence placed Revelation in the canon of Scripture is a testament to this. In fact, the Scriptural status of the book of Revelation was affirmed very early by the church.¹ Irenaeus, the second century pastor in Lyon, quoted it as Scripture in his writings. The earliest canonical list of the NT, the second century Muratorian Fragment, also lists Revelation as Scripture. Other second century authors who held to the canonical status of Revelation include such luminaries as Clement of Alexandria and Theophilus of Antioch. This shows, by the way, that the canonical status of Revelation wasn't created in later centuries by the church; it was recognized as the Word of God from the very beginning.

Now this has tremendous implications for us. The fact that God has preserved this letter as authoritative Scripture for the church is an indication that it is meant for all the church at all times. So though these letters should be read in the context of their original setting, we shouldn't read them as if they aren't meant also to speak to us.

And that brings us to the second reason we should apply these letters to our own place and time: the letters themselves tell us to do so. Every single letter includes the admonition, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This is not just to the members of these particular churches; it is to anyone who has an ear to hear what the Spirit is saying in them. And that means that it is intended for everyone whose ears have been opened by the Spirit of God to hear. It means that it is intended for you and me. R.C. Trench has written that "the practical interest of these Epistles is extreme . . . they are full of teaching, of the most solemn warning, of the strongest encouragement. . . I know of almost nothing in Scripture so searching, no threatenings so alarming, no promises so comfortable, as are some

¹Michael J. Kruger, *Christianity at the Crossroads: How the Second Century Shaped the Future of the Church* (IVP: Downers Grove, 2018), p. 211-215.

which these Epistles contain.”²² Let us therefore hear what they have to say!

What I want to do now is to consider these letters as a whole from the perspective of the relationship of Christ and the church. One of the things that I want to encourage us to get a vision for is the vital importance of the church, not only for the world but for each of us in particular. And surely one way to encourage such an attitude is by seeing how Christ himself is dedicated to the spiritual health and prosperity of the church for which he died. As we step back and look at these letters from this perspective, there are four things I want us to consider in terms of Christ’s relationship with the church: Christ loves, knows, speaks to, and protects the church.

Christ loves the church.

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore and repent” (Rev. 3:19). Though this is said to the church of Laodicea, we can see that it really stands behind every rebuke delivered to these churches. Why does he speak so severely to the churches? It is not because he hates the church but because he loves the church. He can’t stand to see loveless churches, compromising churches, dead churches, and lukewarm churches. When someone you love is making choices that you know are going to bring harm to them, it tears at your very soul. And if you love them, you are going to tell them, warn them, and rebuke them. That is what our Lord is doing here. He will not allow these churches to go on in sinful patterns of behavior. He will not allow them to continue to fall for false doctrines and wrong thinking. He loves them, and therefore he comes to each of them and confronts them and rebukes them.

And of course Jesus has every right to confront us and rebuke us when we go wrong, for he has died for the church in the first place. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church several years before, “Hus-

²²R. C. Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches of Asia*. See <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/t/trench/7churches/cache/7churches.pdf>, p. 3-4.

bands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27). We are “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:20). As our Lord himself put it, “I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:14-15). The apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to “feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

Now consider this: the Bible says very clearly that Christ died for the church. And he didn’t just die as an example to the church, but he died in order to redeem the church. The blood of the incarnate Son of God was shed for the salvation of the church. You can tell how valuable something is by the price paid for it, but how can you put a value on the church? Its price is the blood of the Son of God! As the apostle Peter puts it, “Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Brothers and sisters, Christ the eternal Son of God, loves the church so much that he laid down his life for it. How can we then despise the church without despising the Lord? Now you might say, “Well, when it says that Christ died for the church, it isn’t referring to any institution, but to the people who make up the church.” I agree that the main concern is the people who make up the church. However, you simply cannot separate church from the congregation of the saints, who are organized under proper spiritual leadership, and who together submit to the preached word, the observance of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and church discipline. It means that our Lord values these things; his blood went to purchase these things. We should value them too.

I think this should also inform how we ought to love the church. It's not simply by having a warm, fuzzy feeling in your stomach, or wonderful memories of past services. It means that we ought to be willing to lay down our lives for the church, not of course in any sort of redemptive way, but because we also care about what Christ cares about. Do we love the church in this way? Think again about how Paul addresses the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. He is motivating them to love the church because Christ shed his blood for it. This is meant clearly not only to be a motivation but also in some way to help them to live sacrificially and devotedly for the good of the church. Are we motivated in the same way? I am afraid that for many Christians the church has become nothing more than an extracurricular activity. Is this the way the early church looked at itself? Is this the way the earliest Christians operated? Clearly not, and I think one of the reasons they didn't is because they truly felt the reality that Christ loves the church and gave himself for it.

Timothy Dwight (a grandson of Jonathan Edward) wrote this about the church:

I love thy kingdom, Lord,
the house of thine abode,
the church our blest Redeemer saved
with his own precious blood.

I love thy church, O God:
her walls before thee stand,
dear as the apple of thine eye
and graven on thy hand.

For her my tears shall fall,
for her my prayers ascend;
to her my cares and toils be giv'n,
'til toils and cares shall end.

Beyond my highest joy
I prize her heav'nly ways,

her sweet communion, solemn vows,
her hymns of love and praise.

Do we think that way? Shouldn't the love of Christ compel us to think and feel that way?

Christ knows the church.

In every letter, our Lord declares, "I know thy works" (Rev. 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). He then goes on to list specific ways they are doing well or ways in which they are sinning. We've also noted that when our Lord speaks to each church, he speaks to them in terms of their own specific setting, often referencing or assuming historical events and geographic features that would have been well known to the people in that church.

This is a needed reminder that our Lord is not just up in heaven busy doing his own thing and ignoring the concerns of his people on the earth. He knows what we have done and are doing. He knows not just general details, but he knows specifics. He knows the things that are well known, and he knows the things that we hide. He knows the truth about us. He knows the truth about our churches.

This is good news for several reasons. First of all, it means that the church is not finally dependent upon our own knowledge and wisdom for its protection and preservation. It means that the church is not finally dependent upon "earthen vessels" for its Master is in heaven beholding all things. We will see that this is underlined throughout this epistle. One of the great things about Revelation is that it parts the curtain that separates heaven and earth, and we see that heaven has far more to do with the affairs of men than can be seen by mere mortal eyes.

It is also good news because it is another reminder of how much the Lord cares for the church. "The LORD knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish" (Ps. 1:6). "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things" (Mt. 6:32). He knows and cares. And he will therefore provide for the church all that it needs so that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

It is also good news because it means that all that we do in the church and for the church, though it may go unnoticed or unappreciated by men, will never go unnoticed and unappreciated by the Lord. “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister” (Heb. 6:10). It can be very hard to be taken for granted. It can be very hard to do difficult work for difficult people and then to be treated like a doormat. But that’s okay. And you know why it’s okay? Because God knows, has not forgotten, and is never in danger of forgetting. The good works of the saints will not be finally hidden. I love the way the prophet puts it: “Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not” (Mal. 3:16-18). You may not get your reward from men. But trust me; you don’t want that anyway. You want the reward that comes from God only. That which is done in secret, he will reward openly (cf. Mt. 6:1-18).

This is a reminder that we should not be operating as a church with an eye to the approval of men. God is watching; Christ knows the details of this church. Let us therefore strive with all our might to please him and him alone.

Christ speaks to the church.

We should not miss the obvious here – Christ speaks to the church in what has been passed down through the ages in Scripture. He does not leave the church to figure things out for itself. The church is to be guided by the voice of its Master and Lord. The sheep of Christ hear his voice and follow him. For us that means listening to the words of

the apostles and prophets in the pages of the Bible. God has spoken to us here and he continues to speak to us here. What is normative for the church is Scripture and Scripture alone.

Nor are we to replace the words of Christ with the words of some kind of churchly hierarchy, like you have in Roman Catholicism. That doesn't mean that we don't need teachers. After all, Christ gives the church pastors and teachers for the growth and health of the church (Eph. 4:11, ff.). But the final authority for the Christian is not the Pope or some bishop somewhere or even some theological academic. The final authority for our faith and life is always the Bible.

And the individual Christian is expected to be able to hear the Spirit-inspired words of Christ to the church: "Let the one who has ears to hear," is not directed only to the spiritual leadership of the church but to all Christians. We are all accountable for the way we hear the word of God. We can't hide behind any protestation of ignorance. The Bible assumes the clarity of the word of God as it respects our accountability to obey. And though that doesn't mean we will always understand everything it says, or that everything in the Bible is equally clear, the fact of the matter is that enough is clear enough to leave us without excuse when we choose to neglect it or disobey it or refuse to believe it.

And that means that a healthy church is a Berean sort of church, the kind of church where the people search the Scriptures to see if what they are being taught is so (Acts 17:11). And it means that the kind of church that we should aspire to be is the kind of church which consistently hears the voice of Christ as the Scriptures are opened and preached faithfully and consistently, with truth and grace and love.

When we consider the ways that Christ speaks to the churches in these two epistles, one thing especially ought to stand out: the emphasis on faithfulness to the end. Every letter ends with a promise to those who overcome (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). These are not just promises of earthly blessing, or even spiritual blessings this side of heaven. It is very clear that these are promises of participation with Christ in the future kingdom in the age to come. I have said it before, and I will say

it again: there simply are no promises to those who will not persevere. One of the evidences of the new birth, according to the apostle John, is perseverance in the faith: “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 Jn. 5:4-5). In respect to false teachers and those who were led away by them the apostle said this: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us” (1 Jn. 2:19).

Though that doesn’t mean that believers will be sinlessly perfect (much of the counsel of these letters wouldn’t have been needed if that were the case!) it does mean that the faith granted in the new birth can never be finally overthrown. How could it? Christ is praying for his elect that their faith fail not! (Lk. 22:32) This being the case, it means that faith in Christ will continue to flavor the life of the believer to the very end. And though at times the fruit of faith may become diminished through sin, it will never be completely obscured. Christ, not sin, reigns in the hearts of believers through the Spirit of God.

You also see this in the repeated emphasis on faithfulness throughout the epistles. For the Ephesians to have left their first love was a departure from faithfulness (2:4). The church at Smyrna was exhorted to be faithful unto death (2:10). The church at Pergamum was commended for holding fast to the name of Christ (2:13). The remnant in the church at Thyatira was encouraged to “hold fast till I come” (2:25). Part of the direction to the church at Sardis was to “hold fast, and repent” (3:3). We’ve already seen the emphasis on faithfulness in the church of Philadelphia, which had kept the word of Christ and had not denied his name (3:8). Finally, the great problem with the church of Laodicea is that it had not been faithful to the Lord through lukewarmness and was being called back to a faithful walk of obedient faith. This faithfulness is not just faithfulness to sound doctrine but faithfulness to Christ himself – to love and serve him above all other allegiances.

This ought to be reflected in the priorities of the church as a whole, but it also ought to be reflected in the lives of individual believers. Do our lives show that? Do we live as those whose entire lives are devoted to knowing Christ and making him known? Do we live as people who love Jesus Christ above all things? Are we people who seek first the kingdom of God, or are we people who are more devoted to laying up treasure upon the earth? Let us be faithful to our Lord!

Christ protects his church.

Our Lord protects the church that he loves. He defends from enemies that arise from within and he also stands for the church against its enemies who threaten it from without.

You see the second aspect of this (protecting the church from external threats) most clearly when it comes to the two faithful churches: Smyrna and Philadelphia. These are the only two churches which are not condemned for doctrinal or ethical aberration. But they are also the two churches which were then experiencing persecution. To these believers, our Lord promises protection.

Not in the sense of the removal of the persecution. He protects them in the same way the apostle Paul understood protection in the midst of persecution: “Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim. 4:17-18). Here the apostle does not see deliverance in terms of release from prison or the death sentence, for he knows that he is about to die (see verses 6-8). Rather, for him deliverance means staying faithful even in the face of death. And that is what our Lord was enabling the believers in the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia to do. By encouraging them through promises and strengthening them

by grace, he would enable them to persevere and remain faithful to the very end.

We also see Christ's protection of the church in the vision of the risen Christ in chapter 1, in his holding the seven stars in his hands, which are interpreted to be the seven angels of the seven churches (Rev. 1:16, 20; cf. 2:1). Whatever these angels are (I believe they represent the senior pastors of each respective church), they are inseparable from the churches themselves, because it is through the angels of the churches that Christ addresses each church (note how each letter begins, "And unto the angel of the church of ..."). The fact that the seven stars are in his hands is indicative, not only of his sovereignty over each church, but of his protection of them as well. It reminds us of our Lord's words in John 10, where he says, "But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (Jn. 10:26-29).

And I am so thankful for this reality. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we are all weak and frail. Apart from the grace of God, we will never make it to the end. But, thanks be to God, he is the one who "is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24).

However, there is another aspect to our Lord's protection. He not only defends it from external enemies; he also defends it from internal threats as well. Our Lord is not satisfied to merely point out the problems in the churches. He is moved to do something about it. If they will not repent, there will be consequences. The church at Ephesus will lose its lampstand (2:5). He will come to the church at Pergamos sword in hand to fight against those who are corrupting the church (2:16). He will kill the followers of Jezebel in the church of Thyatira (2:22-23). He will come like a thief against the church of Sardis if it does not wake up

from its spiritual slumbers (3:3). He will vomit the church of Laodicea out of his mouth if it will not turn from its lukewarmness (3:16).

You might say, “Well, if that’s the case, then better to not even be in the church!” Oh, no, my friend! To be out of the church is to be handed over to the devil (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5). Paul clearly views the church as a place of protection against the devil; that is removed when you are placed outside of the church. Moreover, as Paul puts it to the Corinthian church those who are without God judges (12). We cannot escape God.

But we need to see this, not as something bad for us but as something good. As the epistle to the Hebrews puts it, “For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (Heb. 12:6-7). He disciplines those he loves so that they will be more holy and happy. He chastens us “for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness” (10). And although it is true that no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (11).

To be in a Biblical church, therefore, is to put yourself in a place where God is dealing with you through the church for your good. He disciplines the church so that the church will be pure, so that those who belong to the church will grow and become more Christlike. Now that doesn’t mean that God can’t get a hold of a person if they are outside of the church. But it does mean that those who are outside of the church cut themselves off from one of the important means of grace which Christ has provided for us.

One of the implications of this is that we need to care about what we believe and how we live. We need to guard against doctrinal drift and ethical drift. It’s one of the reasons I think teaching a series on systematic theology and Biblical ethics is important. We need to be constantly examining our thinking by the standard of God’s word. It is so easy to just adopt the ways of thinking from the culture around us and to

start compromising with the world before we even realize it. We have therefore to be consciously Biblical about what we believe.

But it doesn't just stop there. We need to care about how we live. It's not enough to be orthodox; the church at Ephesus proves that. We need to live as the elect of God, holy and beloved, with humility and kindness and gentleness and longsuffering and patience, putting off the sins of the flesh and putting on Christ-likeness. We need to seek those things which are above; we need to set our affections on things above where Christ sits at the right hand of the Father (cf. Col. 3).

One of the things that these letters show us is that Christ cares more for the holiness of his church than he does about the longevity of any particular church. It is true of course that Christ will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. But that does not mean that any one particular congregation is guaranteed that its lampstand will not be removed. We need to take seriously therefore not only the promise of the Lord to bless his churches, but also the threat of discipline.

Conclusion: How do we relate to the church?

What are our priorities when it comes to the church? Surely they ought to be the priorities of the Lord. He loves the church: we should love it too. He knows the church: how well do we know each other? How well are we ministering to one another? Are we strangers to each other? He speaks to the church through Scripture: we ought to value the Bible in our daily life and as we hear the preached word. He protects the church; we ought to be careful to maintain the purity of the church in life and doctrine.

I pray often for the following things. For unity (loving the church), for community (knowing the church), for purity of life and doctrine (which comes about through Christ speaking to and protecting his church). I also pray for visibility in the community – not for the glory of our name but for the glory of Christ. But we don't want visibility

in the community for visibility's sake: we want to be visible as a unified community of believers who are living out their faith in Christ together. And that takes doing. It doesn't happen automatically. And we shouldn't think that it will happen by just meeting once a week.

Back in August 2021, I mentioned my hope that one day we will be able to have functioning small groups in our church which will not only provide gospel outposts for our church but will also provide mid-week opportunities for spiritual encouragement and growth, an outworking of the principle of Heb. 3:12-13. I don't want you to think that I haven't been doing anything about it, though we are almost 2 years later. I've been doing a lot of thinking and reading and praying about this. And I'm ready to do something about it. So I want to make an announcement of sorts: later this summer, I plan to begin a study group for anyone who is interested in helping to lead and facilitate a small group. This group will be a sort of test group as well, and a model for the groups that I hope will form out of that. If you are interested in doing this, please let me know and I will be happy to share with you a bit more information. I will be providing training, so that you don't have to feel like you are going to be launched into this on your own.

My vision for these small groups comes out of my conviction of the absolute need that each one of us has for the church. The church shouldn't be something that we just tack on to the end of the week (or beginning, however you want to look at it!), but something that is part and parcel, of the warp and woof, of our lives. Not for us to become burdened with lots of things to do. The fellowship of the saints is not meant to be a burden hanging around our necks; it is meant to be a life-line which keeps us afloat with hope and joy and peace in Christ. It is not meant to be something that weighs us down but to help us run the race of faith with joy as we surround ourselves with fellow witnesses to the faithfulness of the Lord.

Groups like this also provide opportunities for people to exercise a larger range of spiritual gifts. If all we do is come to church on Sunday, the opportunities for us to exercise our spiritual gifts for the good of

the church is limited. I want to help to equip you so that you too can do the work of building up the church for the glory of God.

Surely, if Jesus our Lord cares so much for the church, we should too. These letters demonstrate just how committed he is to the church. Let us be also!

CHAPTER XI

GOD'S SOVEREIGN PURPOSE IN HISTORY (REV. 4:1-11)

DO YOU KNOW WHY the book of Revelation was written? It wasn't written to give you a road map for the future. It wasn't given to satisfy people's idle curiosity about the End Times. To help us see why it was written, we need to remind ourselves to whom this book was first given. The book of Revelation was written to encourage embattled and beleaguered Christians at the end of the first century in the Roman Empire. It was written to people who were persecuted and harassed and who were suffering and in some cases being killed. It was written to people who had little to no political power to wield against their persecutors, and very little material wealth to buy them off or to pad their lives on this earth with comforts and ease.

Now I'm a futurist overall in my approach to Revelation, so I'm not saying it doesn't have anything to say about the future. But I don't think that Revelation was meant primarily – or even secondarily – to enlighten people about the future by giving them a blow-by-blow, linear program of the events preceding the Second Coming of our Lord to

the earth. It was, beginning in the first century and then in every age after that until the Lord comes, given to help Christians be faithful in the midst of very difficult circumstances.

How does the Lord provide that help? How does the book of Revelation function to encourage and give hope to embattled believers? In some sense it does it the way all the Bible does it. It does it by pointing our eyes away from a merely earthly perspective to a heavenly one. It helps us to look at all of life and history through the reality of the sovereignty of God over all things.

You see, one of our problems is that we tend to think of God as “up there” in heaven, and we’re “down here” on the earth, and never the twain shall meet. Heaven and God’s throne is in some other realm, and we’re stuck down here just trying to make it to heaven. We may not say it, but practically speaking sometimes God doesn’t have a lot to do with our lives on a day-to-day basis.

Do you know how you can tell that? Just look at your prayer life. Do you pray about things or do you just try to take care of the difficulties of life on your own? Do you lift them to God in prayer? Do you regularly come to the throne of grace? Do you in every circumstance with prayer and supplication make your requests known to God? And then add this consideration: do you pray with expectation that God is hearing you? Do you really believe that? Or are you just praying because you know you’re supposed to?

Another question to ask is this: where is my hope? Is my hope in God or in something else? Or have I become so discouraged that I’ve given up on God?

There are a million ways we can become disconnected from the reality that we live every day and every hour and every moment under the universal Lordship of Christ over all the universe, and that as his people he takes particular interest and concern over us. We can become hopeless, paralyzed by fear – fear of man, fear of the unknown – and embittered by the suffering of this life. And it is at least partly due to

the fact that we have lost sight of the twin facts that God is good and great, that he is loving and Lord, that he is sufficient and sovereign.

The book of Revelation helps us to understand God and history in a Biblical way. It helps us to understand that God is sovereign over history – past, present, and future – and that he is moving history for his own glory and the good of his people. And that is why the Lord gives John this vision that begins here in chapter 4. John (and all of us) needs to understand that the future depends ultimately on God. And so instead of jumping to the events of the future (the “things which must be hereafter,” verse 1), he first brings John into the throne-room of God.

This chapter unfolds roughly in three parts. First of all, we have God’s appearance in verses 1-3. Second, we have God’s attendants in verses 4-8a. Third, we have God’s adoration in verses 8b-11. All three parts together join in underlining the fact celebrated in verse 11: “Thou art worthy, O Lord.” In this chapter, we not only meet God, but in meeting him, his audience, and his worship, we see again and again that he alone is worthy of worship and honor and praise.

John sets the stage for this vision of God in verses 1-2: “After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne.” This begins the next great vision in the book of Revelation, the vision in heaven (chapters 4-16) which will center around three cycles of judgment (seals, 6:1-8:1; trumpets, 8:2-11:19; vials, 16:1-21). John is “in the Spirit” indicating that this is a vision given to him by God. In this vision, he is invited by the Lord Jesus Christ (who was “the first voice I heard,” see 1:10, ff) to come into the very throne room of heaven.

The purpose of this vision is to “shew thee things which must be hereafter” (4:1). Now that doesn’t mean that everything that Jesus is going to show John pertains only to the future. But it does mean that

burden of the following visions pertain to the future, a future which, as we will see, culminates in the final destruction of evil on the earth and the final victory of God in a new heaven and new earth.

What I want you to notice, though, is the word *must* and who is speaking it. Jesus is saying, “I’m going to show you the future; it’s a future that *must* come to pass because it’s a future that I will bring to pass.” In other words, our Lord is reminding John and us that he is sovereign over history. What we’re going to see in chapters 6 and following is what that history will look like. But in chapters 4-5, we are going to see why history takes the shape it does. It takes the shape it does because of the wisdom and power and goodness and justice and holiness of God. God is in control; that is the point. The events of the following chapters don’t just happen; they happen because they emanate from the throne of God.

Chapter 4 is about the throne of God. Chapter 5 is about the Lamb of God. Chapter 4 tells us that God has a sovereign purpose in history. Chapter 5 tells us that God has a saving purpose in history. Today, we want to look at God’s sovereign purpose in history.

That God’s sovereignty is highlighted here is obvious. This whole chapter takes place in one room – God’s throne room. The word *throne* is used 14 times in just 11 verses (about a third of its use in all the book of Revelation). Most of these are a reference to God’s throne. It’s true that there are other thrones here as well, but these other thrones, as exalted as they are, are still subservient to God’s throne. Those who sit upon these thrones wear crowns, but in verse 10 these crowns are cast before the throne of God, showing that God’s rule is the ultimate rule in the universe.

Let me remind you what it means for God to be sovereign. It means that God rules over all and exercises ultimate and final authority and power in the universe. It means that God’s will is supreme. A sovereign is a king. But God is not just a king; he is King of kings and Lord of lords. Or, as the Psalms put it, “But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased” (Ps. 115:3). Or, “For I know that the Lord is

great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places” (Ps. 135:5-6). Or, as Nebuchadnezzar put it, “And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” (Dan. 4:35). It means that from grubs to galaxies, God’s purpose and power is what finally matters. When we say that God is sovereign, we are not just saying that he has the right to rule: we are saying that he does in fact exercise this rule from top to bottom, from the past to the present to the future.

How is God’s sovereignty displayed? Well, it is displayed in these three movements of the chapter: God’s appearance, God’s attendants, and God’s adoration.

God’s appearance

Note first God’s appearance. Now this is the language (that of appearance) that John himself uses here. It is important to realize that John does not actually describe God’s essence for that is impossible. Instead, he says that what he saw was “like” something. Here is what he actually says: “. . . behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald” (Rev. 4:2b-3). It would be blasphemous to say that this is a description of God’s essence. No one can see God, who dwells in light inaccessible (1 Tim. 6:16). But that is not what John is doing. Rather, he is describing the effulgence of God’s glory as it appeared in the throne room of heaven.

It’s hard to really visualize what John saw here. John describes the glory of God in terms of precious stones, and he mentions three here: jasper, sardius, and an emerald. According to Leon Morris, we can’t be sure exactly what these stones were because of the inexactness of ancient descriptions for the terms used for these stones (TNTC, p. 85).

However, what we can be sure about is that the function these precious stones have in this vision is to emphasize the beauty and the brilliance of the glory of God that John saw. All three stones appear again as part of the foundation of the New Jerusalem (21:10-20). It's clear that John was blown away by this amazing display of light shining as it were through these precious stones. It is meant to help us feel just how awesome and glorious and full of majesty God is.

John's vision is very much like the vision of God's glory that Ezekiel had. Here is the way the prophet described his vision of God:

And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone: and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it. And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake (Ezek. 1:26-28).

Note again, Ezekiel saw "the likeness of the glory of the Lord." But even that was enough to send the prophet collapsing to the ground in awe and terror!

In addition to the description of God's glory manifested as he sits upon his throne, there are a couple of other additional details about the throne room itself. One is the rainbow about the throne. Again, it is hard to know exactly what John saw here. However, as in Ezekiel's vision it seems to be, like the precious stones, a medium through which God's glory shines in the area around the throne.

One other detail that is mentioned is in verse 5: “And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God.” We’ve already noted that “the seven Spirits of God” is a reference to the fullness of power and glory that belongs to the Holy Spirit. But what I want to notice here is the lightening and the thunder and the voices that proceed from the throne. You see these again at the conclusion of each series of judgments (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). In other words, this is another reminder that the judgments which take place upon the earth originate in heaven and proceed ultimately from God’s throne. They are acts of God in the truest sense of the word.

Finally, “before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal” (6). There are a number of speculations as to what this was meant to signify, but I think it is just another detail that enhances the beauty and brilliance, the glory and greatness, of the throne room of God.

So we have the throne of God and the God who sits upon his throne. It seems to me that what is prominent in the descriptions throughout this passage is light. This is the point, I think, of the precious stones that John thinks of when he sees God seated on his throne.. The glory of God is displayed as light refracted through precious stones. Note how it is put in chapter 21. Speaking of the New Jerusalem, John writes that it came down out of heaven “having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal” (11). Furthermore, light is shown in the rainbow around the throne and in the sea before the throne.

In Scripture, one of the primary ways that God’s glory is manifested is through light. When Moses came down off Mount Sinai his face shown because he had been in God’s presence. When our Lord was transfigured, even his garments shone. Now John is in heaven, and it is in heaven where God most fully manifests his presence to bless. And so it should not surprise us to find the throne room full of light, brilliant and beautiful, revealing the glory of God in heaven.

Light is incorruptible, and this tells us something about God's sovereign rule. It tells us that God's rule is holy (we will see this declared in verse 8) and it tells us that God's rule is without defect. There is no chance that God's will is going to fall to the ground because there is nothing corruptible in God. There is no defect in his knowledge, or his wisdom, or his power, or his holiness, or his goodness, or his justice, or his immutability, or his faithfulness, or his eternity. He is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

So as we work our way through the book of Revelation and the judgments upon God's enemies and the salvation of God's people, we need to remind ourselves that the plan of God which is being revealed here will never be in danger of falling to the ground. No, for it is founded in the eternal decree of the Sovereign Lord, the God who is light and who dwells in unapproachable light.

God's attendants

It is interesting how much space John devotes to describing God's attendants, who minister before him. There is a parallel here to both Isaiah's vision in Isa. 6 and Ezekiel's vision in Ezek. 1. Here, John sees two different types of attendants in the throne room of God.

The first are the twenty-four elders (4, 10). Who are these guys and what is the significance of the number twenty-four? One of the questions relating to their identity is whether these are angelic beings or human beings. Well, I don't think we can say for sure. Some might point to 5:9 and argue that they are redeemed ("hast redeemed us to God"), and therefore are human. But they are joined in this praise with the living beasts, who are certainly not human. In any case, although Jesus did not die for angels as an atonement for their sins, his death does have universal implications for angels as well as men (cf. Col. 1:20; 2:10).

I think the best way to look at these elders is that, whether they are human or angelic beings, either way they function as representatives of God's people with priestly functions (for example, they present the

prayers of the saints to God in 5:8). That they are twenty-four in number may then point to the 24 orders of the priests and Levites who ministered in the earthly temple of God and represented God's people to God. Even so, these elders minister in the presence of God on behalf of the people of God.

The four elders sit on thrones (called seats in the KJV, but the Greek word is throne), which are arranged around God's throne. Though the fact that they sit on thrones and wear crowns of gold and are clothed in white robes is an indication of their importance and authority, the position of their thrones with God's at the center shows that their power and glory is delegated and derived. They themselves show this by casting their crowns before God's throne (10).

The next of God's attendants are the four beasts (6-8). They seem to be immediately round the throne ("in the midst of the throne and round about the throne"). We can think in concentric circles, with God at the center, immediately surrounded by these living creatures, and surrounding them are the twenty-four elders.

These are like the living creatures of Ezekiel 1 (who are later called cherubim in Ezek. 10). As in Ezekiel, these creatures are full of eyes. But there are differences. First, each beast here only has one face (lion, calf – or ox, man, flying eagle), whereas in Ezekiel each cherub had four faces. Also, in Ezekiel the cherubim have four wings; here they have six (like the seraphim in Isa. 6). We must not make too much of these differences. Some speculate that John is borrowing from these other visions and piecing them together to create his own vision. I think that's the wrong way to look at it. Though I doubt we should be overly literalistic here, there is no doubt in my mind that there are real creatures like this in heaven.

Why the different faces though? Well, around AD 300, the Jewish Rabbi Abahu taught, "There are four mighty creatures. The mightiest among the birds is the eagle, the mightiest among domestic animals is the ox, the mightiest among wild animals is the lion, the mightiest of them all is man; and God has taken all these and secured them to his

throne.”¹ It’s doubtful that he is commenting on a Christian text here; so this is most likely an independent tradition that very likely goes back much earlier. If that is the case, it could be that the function of each face and each creature is to represent a part of God’s creation – from the birds, to the domestic animals, to the wild animals, to man. As they praise the living God, they show that the purpose of all creation is to bring honor and glory to God.

One can tell a lot about the power of a king by looking at those who surround him. These who surround the throne of God are clearly powerful beings, vested with authority and glory and majesty. But they are not there to serve themselves. They are there to serve the living God. They are not there to receive worship but to give it. These attendants are powerful, but God is supremely powerful. They are glorious but God is infinitely more glorious. Theirs is a derived glory; God’s is underived, eternal, and unchanging. There is no sovereign in the universe that can compare with God. Satan may have his minions, but they are nothing compared to those who serve God.

God’s adoration

What are the attendants to God doing around his throne? We are told in verses 8-II. They are worshiping and adoring and honoring the one who sits on the throne.

First, God is worshiped for his holiness: “And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come” (8). Like the seraphim in Isa. 6, they proclaim a thrice holy God. Do you remember what it means to say that God is holy? Of course it means that he is without sin. But it means much more than that. Fundamentally, it means that God is utterly distinct and separate from all his creation. It means that there

¹Quoted in G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Wipf & Stock: Eugene, 1981), p. 117.

is nothing and no one like God. Though it is true that we can be like God in some ways, yet there are ways in which God cannot be imitated in any way.

For example, we cannot be eternal or immortal like God is (“who only hath immortality,” 1 Tim. 6:16). We may never stop existing, but it is only because God holds us up in continual existence. But God necessarily exists. He never began to exist. He will never cease to exist because it is impossible for him to cease to exist. Thus the living creatures go on to say, “which was, and is, and is to come.” God is the only being in the universe for whom this can be said. There is no one like God!

This aspect of God’s glory and holiness is repeated several times in this chapter alone. He is called the one “who liveth for ever and ever” (9-10; cf. 5:14; 10:6; 15:7). God’s life is an undying life. His life is a necessary life. This is mind-blowing if you stop and think about it. We just have no categories for a being that never began to exist. But that is who God is.

As such, he is truly the “Lord God Almighty.” He is not just mighty, he is Almighty. This not only means he is more powerful than anyone else; it also means that his power and dominion extend to the farthest reaches of the earth, and indeed, the universe. The earth is full of his glory (Isa. 6:3). He is sovereign over all. He is not just the God over the Christians. He is the God over the pagans and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and every other person on the face of the planet. All will have to give an account to him. He is their Lord and God. If you are not serving him today, you are living in rebellion against the one who lives forever and ever, who is holy, who is the Lord God Almighty. There is therefore no escaping his Lordship. There is no running from him. The only logical and right thing to do is to run to him in repentance and faith, asking for his mercy and receiving it by faith in Jesus Christ.

We are told that the living creatures “rest not day or night” in giving praise to God. I saw a nature documentary the other day that said that the Mayfly literally dances in the air until it dies of exhaustion. I don’t know what it is in the Mayfly that makes them do that. But I do know

what it is that makes these living creatures continue day and night in praise to God. It is not some mechanical impulse that makes them do it. It is not instinct. Rather, it is the immediate awareness of the glory of God that awakens in them this unbroken worship. Like the Mayfly, I don't think they can help it. But unlike the Mayfly, this is rational, willing praise to their Creator. They aren't forced to do it in an unwilling sense; but in another sense I don't think they can keep from doing it either.

I think we need to reckon with this picture of worship in heaven. Worship is not forced on those who are in heaven. Worship is the genuine expression of delight in and reverence for the Lord God Almighty. I think it's like when you stand before some natural wonder and your breath is taken away – no one made you do that, it just happened; it was your response to the beauty and wonder of the natural world. But God is the creator of this world. He made the Grand Canyon and the Rocky Mountains and the Redwood forests and the oceans. To be in his presence is going to be more wonderful, more breathtaking, more awesome than anything you've ever seen or experienced here on this fallen and sin-cursed planet. That is what these creatures and these elders were experiencing.

You see this in verses 10-11, "The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." Do you see what they are saying? "You are worthy, O Lord." You should not think they are saying this because they are supposed to say it! They are saying it because they feel the reality of it – they see and feel that God and God alone is worthy of worship. Do you feel that? Have you tasted and seen that the Lord is good? Or is worship something that has to be pried out of your heart because you're really in love with other things rather than God?

Brothers and sisters, God and God alone ought to be seen as worthy of glory and honor and power. Nothing else in the world is more glorious or worthy of honor and power than God. Everything else either has a borrowed glory or a stolen glory. To replace God as the supreme object of our affection and therefore of our worship is the essence of idolatry and it is wicked. We ought therefore to pray with all our might that God would more and more increase our love to him, and that we would all of us be keepers of the Great Commandment, to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds.

The elders and living creatures end by extolling God as creator and sustainer of all things. It is according to God's will (KJV "pleasure") that all things exist ("they are") and were created to begin with ("and were created"). This is the God who reigns. He is holy and immortal and incomparably glorious. He is the creator of all things. It is by his will that they were brought into existence and are kept in existence.

Now the question is, What shall we do with this? God has given us, with John, a glimpse into the glory of heaven, not to have our idle curiosity tickled but to have our perspective changed. It is meant to change our perspective from one in which God has little to do with this world to one in which we see and know that God rules not only in the armies of heaven but also among the inhabitants of the earth.

And we are to see that this sovereign God is worthy of worship. Our worship! To turn away from this God to find something else that we think is more worthy is blindness. But it is not a blindness for which we are not culpable. This is a blameworthy blindness. It is wicked. It is idolatry, and we are to repent of such idols and turn with faith and repentance to the living God.

However, none of us have loved and worshiped God the way we should. Calvin said that our hearts are like idol-factories, and that is true for the most mature and godly Christian. Idolatry is something we will struggle with until the day we die. But it is still sin. So what do we do with this sin? We don't ignore it. Instead, we confess it to God, agree with God about that sin, and then ask to be cleansed by the blood of

Jesus Christ from our sin. And the Bible tells us that if we do so, God is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all iniquity.

CHAPTER XII

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSE IN HISTORY (REV. 5:1-14)

WHAT IS YOUR FUNDAMENTAL ATTITUDE toward your circumstances? Are you stuck with a sense of despair and hopelessness? Have you been going through life with a weight of cynicism hanging upon your heart and mind? Do you interpret everything or most everything through the lens of bitterness on account of losses and crosses? Are you in a place where you feel like you can never be happy again?

If you feel like this, I don't want you to think that this means that God doesn't love you. The fact of the matter is that many godly men and women throughout history have felt just this way at times. The Psalms are interspersed with laments. So for example one psalmist puts it this way: "Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me. I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God" (Ps. 69:1-3). He goes on to say, "Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none" (20).

There are even some Psalms that don't end on a note of hope, like Psalm 88, which opens with, "O lord God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before thee" (1), and ends with, "Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness" (18). Why do you think God put psalms like that into the Bible? I think one reason is that this is actually the experience of God's people at times. They are sometimes led to walk in darkness with no light (Isa. 50:10).

Nevertheless, there is a difference – or there ought to be – between a Christian who is passing through the dark waters of spiritual depression and one who is not a Christian. The difference is not in the amount or length of the suffering! The difference is in the fundamental disposition of the soul towards God. For the Christian, the fundamental disposition of the soul ought to be one of hope, even in the midst of sadness and joylessness and deep, deep grief. You see this even in Psalm 88, because it is a prayer to God which is in itself an act of hope. You see this in psalms like Psalm 42, where King David argues with himself in this way: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance" (Ps. 42:5). For those who belong to Christ, there is always that yet. "Yet I shall praise him." That is the hope. It doesn't mean you have to pretend your suffering isn't real. It doesn't mean you have to say that relief is around the corner. But it does mean that the bedrock of your soul rests upon God's promise that he loves you, has a purpose for you in the suffering through which you are passing, and will in his good time grant you deliverance from it. As the apostle Peter put it to suffering Christians in his day: "But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you" (1 Pet. 5:10).

But what is the basis for these hopes? It is just about having a positive attitude and hoping the positive attitude itself is what will change our circumstances? Is it about believing in ourselves? Or is it all just so much pie-in-the-sky?

The basis for the Christian hope does not lie in ourselves. If it did, we would be fully justified in maintaining a sense of hopelessness. We can have hope because the future does not lie in our hands or in the grip of cold, chaotic cosmic forces, but in the purpose of a sovereign and saving God. What we saw in chapter 4 is that this sovereign God rules in heaven and on earth. He has created all things and holds all things in existence. What happens on this planet is not outside the plan and purpose of a holy God. But what we will see in this chapter (5) is that God is not only the sovereign Creator and Sustainer; but that he is also the sovereign Savior through Jesus Christ. And what we will see is that if we really believe that, the fundamental attitude of our lives ought not to be one of weeping but of worship. So the question that we are faced with is this: will we weep or will we worship? I'm not saying that we should never weep. Of course we should. There are times when it would be inappropriate not to weep. I'm talking instead of our fundamental and basic attitude towards the future. Is it one of despair and hopelessness or is it one of hope?

The fifth chapter of Revelation helps us out here. It helps us to see that the future for those who belong to Christ is one that ought to inspire worship instead of weeping, hope instead of hopelessness. In these verses, the apostle John describes four scenes in heaven which he sees. First of all, he sees the book which tells us that God has a saving purpose in history (1). Second, he sees the challenge to open the book and shows us that only God can achieve this saving purpose (2-5). Third, he sees the Lamb who is Jesus Christ, the one through whom God achieves this saving purpose (6-10). Finally, he sees the praise, the universal worship which is the only proper response to God's saving purpose (11-14).

The Book (1)

“And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals.” What John

sees in God's hand is probably not a book per se, but a scroll. Scrolls were often used for legal documents like contracts and wills. In many cases, the terms of the contract or will would have been written on the scroll and then sealed with seven seals. The seals would have to be broken in order for the terms of the legal document to be executed.

But what is this scroll? What is its purpose? What does it contain? Remember that our Lord promised John in 4:1 that he was going to show him things which must come to pass. The scroll then is about the unveiling of the future. Ostensibly the contents of the scroll are unveiled in chapters 6-22. It is then, God's plan for history, a history that includes both the judgment of his enemies (and the enemies of the church) as well as the salvation of his people.

This scroll is written on both sides, an uncommon practice because of the way scrolls were made. For papyrus scrolls, the fibers on the side normally written on were laid horizontally, but on the reverse side they were laid vertically, making it much more difficult to write on. The fact that this scroll is written on both sides indicates the fullness of God's plan for history. But it is a future that God has a lot to say about!

What is interesting is that we are never told that the scroll is read; what seems to be of utmost importance is not so much its contents but the fact that it is sealed. As we've already pointed out, this is significant because this means that the purpose of God for the future will not be put into effect unless the seals are broken. Which means that the breaking of the seals is of the greatest importance.

The scroll is in God's hand; let us not miss that. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, God holds history in his hand, and this in itself should help us to move from despair to hope, from weeping to worship.

The Challenge (2-5)

The next thing that John sees is "a strong angel." He writes, "And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to

open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon” (2-3). To ask who is worthy to open the book and to loose the seals of it is to ask who is worthy to carry out God’s plan for his glory in the destruction of his enemies and the salvation of his people? If no one is able to do this, it will mean that there will be no justice to God’s people who have suffered so much injustice at the hands of their enemies. It will mean that there is nothing better than what this world has to offer – and so no bright hope, no glorious future. It will mean that Satan wins and God loses!

And at first, this appears to be the case. As the angel surveys the universe, calling out for anyone “worthy” to break the seals, his challenge is only met by silence. No one was able – not angelic beings (those in heaven), no living man or woman (those on the earth), nor the dead (those under the earth) were able to rise to the challenge of breaking the seals. Note that the challenge is not merely in terms of power but in terms of worthiness: “who is worthy?” is the question. This is as much a matter of moral and ethical fitness as it is one of ability and power.

The silence to the angel’s challenge underscores the fact that we cannot save ourselves. We cannot bring about God’s plan for justice and redemption for the world. “With men it is impossible,” as our Lord put it, and if we try to take this burden upon ourselves, if we try to be our own saviors or the saviors of others, it will just be a burden around our necks that we cannot bear. No mere mortal can break the seals. The whole of human history is strewn with the wrecked hopes of people who have placed misguided trust in The Next Best Thing. But we must not put our trust in men or in institutions made by men.

At this point, I want you to put yourself in John’s shoes. What would be your response to this? You see, the scroll is not just about the future in the sense of a better tomorrow. This scroll is not just about having a better future in terms of a better life than I’ve had in the past. John is not thinking here about the problems of poverty or addiction. I’m not saying those things are not problems or that we shouldn’t care about

them. We should because we should love our neighbors as ourselves. If we don't, there is something wrong with us as Christians. But the tragedy is that so many people can't think beyond these sorts of problems. What does it matter if you can put food on the table and drive your own car from point A to point B and hold a good job and so on, if you are alienated from God? What does earth matter when heaven is lost?

And that is what is at stake here. John knows that. Eternity is at stake. The glory of God is at stake. The future happiness of God's people in his presence forever is at stake. If the seals cannot be unloosed, all that is lost. Would you weep over that? In other words, I'm asking you: are you more concerned about cycles of poverty that people are trapped in than you are about their eternity in the presence of God? Are you more moved about your next pay raise than you are about heaven? Are you more anxious over your physical condition this side of the grave than you are about your body and soul in the age to come?

Would you weep like John weeps? Are you moved by the things that John is moved by? "And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon" (4). The Greek here indicates not only the amount of weeping ("much") but also the volume of weeping ("loudly," ESV). This deeply moved John. He was at this moment a living illustration of something the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable" (1 Cor. 15:19). John was miserable because for a moment it looked like the only kind of hope he could have was hope in this life. And that made him weep – it made him miserable.

Now you might be thinking, "But I thought this was about moving from weeping to worship. Why are you saying that we should weep like John weeps?" Well, I'm saying that if it were the case that God's plan for salvation could not be put into effect, then there would be grounds for weeping. If we just have the hope that the world gives, then all that would be left would be weeping.

But this is not the end of the story. At this point, “one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” (5). John is told to, “Weep not.” There is good reason for this. This is not about just keeping your chin up. This is not about being bold in the face of despair. This is not about thinking positively when you really have no reason to do so. That is not what the Christian faith tells you to do. No! There is a wonderful and true reason not to weep.

It is because there has been found someone to break the seals. It is Jesus. He has prevailed. A better word would be conquered. He is not only able, but he has also conquered. He has won the victory. He can do this because he is not just another human, though he is fully human. He is not some angel. He is not some departed spirit in the realm of the dead. No, he is in a category all by himself, the God-Man, described here as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah.” This goes back to a prophesy that the patriarch Jacob made concerning Judah: “Judah is a lion’s whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be” (Gen. 49:9-10). This is a prophesy about the Christ, who is described both in terms of a lion and then as a king with universal dominion. What John is seeing in heaven is the fulfillment of that prophesy. The Lion has come and he has conquered!

He is also described as “the Root of David,” which shows that our Lord fulfills another prophesy, this one by Isaiah. Our Lord descends from Judah, and he descends from David. He is the Davidic king foretold by the prophet: “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots” (11:1). Because of Israel’s sins, and the deportation to Babylon, it looked like the Davidic monarchy was finished. It looked as if the tree of David was cut down. But Isaiah is saying that though it is cut down, it will begin to grow

again. A Branch will grow out of his roots. He then goes on to write that “with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth: with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked” (4). The verses that follow are clearly a description of a new heaven and new earth (6-9). This is a king who will wield universal power and will usher in an age of unprecedented peace and justice. John is seeing the fulfillment of that prophesy before his very eyes.

We can, like John, move from weeping to worship because someone is able to break the seals of the scroll. The Lion has come and won the victory. But that is not all the apostle sees.

The Lamb (6-10)

The Lion has been announced. John turns to see this Lion, but instead he sees a Lamb! “And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth” (Rev. 5:6). This must have been unexpected. Was the elder who told John about the Lion of the tribe of Judah wrong? Did he get the description of the Seal-Breaker wrong?

No, of course not. Jesus is both a Lion and a Lamb.¹ Of course, this is not just any kind of Lamb. This is a Lamb with seven horns, which indicates strength. And since the number is seven, this is the perfection of strength. He also has seven eyes, which is identified with “the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth,” a reference to the one Spirit

¹This shows us something about the imagery of Revelation. Some people take the position that unless John interprets something for us, we should take it literally. But this just doesn't work. Here, for example, our Lord is described as a Lion and a Lamb. This is what he saw of course in his vision, but that doesn't mean that Jesus is actually a Lamb in heaven with his throat cut. Rather, the imagery is meant to convey important spiritual truths.

of God in the perfection of all his power, sent into the earth to mediate the presence of the risen Christ.

We are told that what John sees next is that “he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne” (7). God the Father gives the scroll to his Son because he is worthy and able to break the seals and to set God’s plan for his glory and the good of his people into action.

Why and how he is able to do this as the Lion-Lamb who was slain is now revealed to us in the praises of the four beasts and twenty-four elders who fall down before the Lamb and worship him. This is one of those great proofs for the divinity of Jesus. God is the only one who is worshiped. Not angels, who are fellow servants of God (cf. 22:9). Since Jesus is worshiped here – right before the throne of God! – we can take it for certain that the Father is God and the Son is God, both worthy of the same worship. The Father is worthy (4:11) and now we will see Jesus proclaimed as worthy (5:9, 12) in the same way.

Here is what happens next: “And when he had taken the book, the four beasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth” (8-10). Here we see how the Lamb has conquered and the significance of his sacrifice. We are told that his sacrifice and blood-letting and resurrection (for he has not only been slain but stands risen in the presence of the Father) led to people being redeemed to God, a people from every people group, and that the result of this redemption was the making of the redeemed kings and priest who will reign with Christ in his kingdom.

A kingdom of priests

To understand what the Lamb has accomplished and how he did it and why he did it this way, let's work our way backward here, starting with the end result. The redeemed are made a kingdom of priests who will reign with Christ in the age to come (note the future tense). This is the hope, a hope which is held out to the churches for those who overcome. This is the blessed hope of the Christian. Despite the fact that they are persecuted now, despised now, suffering now, the time will come when they will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. There is no suffering now whose shadow will forever darken the hearts of the saints. The night will end and the morning will come. Their kingdom is coming and they will reign. They will enjoy perfect and unencumbered access to God and to Jesus forever. What was promised to Israel on Mount Sinai is fulfilled perfectly in the congregation of the redeemed in the age to come.

We need to stop here and ask ourselves: do we really believe this? Is this just a theological truth to say we believe? Brothers and sisters, if this is true, can we not hold on? Can we not endure to the end? I don't know what kind of suffering you are enduring right now. But I know this, that if this is true, then there is no reason to walk away from Jesus out of bitterness. There is no sorrow that heaven will not heal, and heaven is what God has promised you. Be faithful to the end, and he will give you the crown of life.

Redeemed to God

Those who are made a kingdom of priests are precisely those who are redeemed. To be redeemed means to be ransomed, to be bought back. It points to the debt we are under because of our sins. Unfortunately, a lot of us live under the impression that God owes us a good life and we get mad at him because he doesn't deliver it. But this is mistaken. God is God and we are not. He is your King and Sovereign. He is your Creator. He is your Lawgiver. And you know what? We have all rebelled against our King. We have lived as if there is not Creator, as if we get to define

our own reality. We have lived as if we get to make our own laws. We have lived as if we were self-sovereign. And so we have not loved God with all our hearts and minds and strength. We have not been thankful to him for his gifts. We have lived in ways that are obnoxious to him: in sexual immorality, in deceitfulness, in slander, in hatred and anger and abuse. We have lived in pride instead of humility, in selfishness instead of worship, in worldliness instead of godliness. And we think that God owes us something? He doesn't owe us anything except judgment. That is the debt we owe to God: a debt of judgment because of our sins.

But the amazing thing is that the gospel of the kingdom of God is not first and foremost news of future judgment. It is news of redemption from sins to those who receive it by faith and repentance. To say that a person is redeemed in the sense here means that their debt of sin before God has been erased. It means that their sins, all of them, have been forgiven. However, it doesn't just mean that our debts are not cancelled and that's it, but that in releasing men and women from their debt of sin against him, God at the same time draws them to himself. To be redeemed is amazing. To be redeemed to God is mind-blowing. It means that God is our God. It means that God is eternally for us for our good. It means that God is our refuge and strength forever. It means that he loves us and cares for us. It means that as a father pities his children, so he pities those who are his.

By his blood

Now the question is, how in the world can God do this? He has been declared as three times holy in 4:8. How can a holy God overlook sins and release us from our debts? Must not the Judge of all the earth do right? But it would not be right for God to not punish sins!

This is where the sacrificial nature of our Lord's work becomes absolutely critical for understanding how God can save sinners. Their sins must be punished if God is to remain just and holy. But we cannot purge our own sins. Sins against God are infinitely heinous. We are like a gam-

bler on minimum wage who has gambled his way into a trillion-dollar debt. We are responsible to pay it, but we cannot.

How then can redemption happen? The Biblical answer to this question is the death of Jesus Christ. He didn't just die as an example of righteous suffering. He didn't just die as a martyr for the truth. The gospels tell us that he died as a substitutionary sacrifice for sins. He paid the price that we couldn't pay. He absorbed the sin debt by taking the punishment due to our sins. This is the point of the Lamb imagery. John the Baptist understood this. He proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The lamb in the sacrifices appointed by the Law of Moses functioned in this way. They were substituted for the sinner and their death was meant to take away the sin of the offeror.

This of course goes back to the Passover, when every Israelite family had to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the doorpost in order to avert the death of the firstborn. It also points us to another prophesy in Isaiah. He prophesied of the Servant of the Lord who would shed his blood for Israel:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows:
yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities:
the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. . . .
Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief:
when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed,
he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.
He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be sat-

ified: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. (Isa. 53:4-7,10-11)

We all understand what it means for someone to step in and pay a debt we cannot. Now some people say that this can't apply to moral debts – that it can't apply to sins. But in God's moral government of this world, he has made it so that it does apply. And so by his death on the cross, Jesus paid the sin debt for all who believe in him: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16).

In redeeming a people to God, Jesus has overcome the reversal that sin brought into the world. Sin brought brokenness and death. Sin brought alienation from God. By redeeming a people for himself, Jesus Christ God's Son has reversed all this. Thus, as the Lamb of God, Jesus has died for his people and by doing so he has won the victory and is creating a new people with new hearts who will one day be raised in new bodies in a new heavens and new earth – and hence the appropriateness of singing a "new song" (9).

Who are these people for whom the Lamb died? They are described as those "out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (9). This excludes universalism for they are out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation. However, though the atonement does not bring salvation for all without exception, it does bring salvation for all without distinction. God's people will be found in every corner of the globe, in every people group. This should encourage the church in its mission to obey the Great Commission, to go into all the world. It should encourage us to be willing to go or to support those who go into all the world to reach those who have never heard the gospel. The Lamb will have the price of his blood. Our efforts therefore to bring the gospel to all the ends of the world are therefore not futile. It doesn't matter how enraged the devil is, or how opposed the world is to the church. We need to have a commitment to gospel proclamation, not because we think God can't get it done without us, but because we have absolute

confidence that because God is sovereign and the atonement is effective, the Lord Jesus will get it done in his way and in his time through us.

Why can we move from weeping to worship? We can do so because Christ didn't just conquer his enemies, but as the Lamb of God he died for sinners so that their sins might be forgiven and brought them to God as a kingdom of priests who will share in his reign in the age to come. God who was once our enemy because of our unrighteousness is now our Father and friend because of Christ's righteousness. Our prayers are brought into the very presence of the Father (8). He doesn't despise our prayers, but they rise as incense in the very throne room of God.

You may ask, "But how does a person know they are redeemed? How do they know they are one of those among every people group and language?" The answer is not that you are good enough. You don't look inside yourself for reasons to have this hope. You look to Christ. You trust in him. You receive him as Lord and Savior, and the Bible says that those who do will never be ashamed. He rose from the dead so that those who believe in him will also rise from the dead. Do you believe that? Then you too can go from weeping to worship. You too can join the living creatures and the elders as they worship the Lamb.

The Praise (11-14)

But the praise doesn't stop in verse 10. It continues in the following verses and swells to include the whole of God's universe: "And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the

throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth for ever and ever.”

There are a number of things about this worship scene in heaven that ought to grab our attention. First, the same worship which was given to the Father in chapter 4 is now given to the Lamb in verses 11-12, and then to the Father and the Lamb together in verses 13-14. The fact that they are praised together with the same blessings is another pointer to the true divinity of Jesus Christ. It is unthinkable to imagine that this kind of worship would be given to a creature, or that God would share his glory with one of his creatures (cf. Isa. 42:8).

Second, one of the emphases of these verses is the number of those who are praising God the Father and God the Son. The point of “ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands” is not to get a precise figure of the heavenly host through multiplication. The point is that this number of angelic beings is simply innumerable. This would have been an encouraging reminder to believers who live in the first century Roman world. In that world, they were definitely outnumbered. In that world, they were marginalized and persecuted. But John is reminding them that they are surrounded by an innumerable host of angels (Heb. 12:22) who praise God with them. This is another reminder that despite their present circumstances, they are on the winning side. It is a reminder that it is of the utmost folly to abandon the faith for a paganism that cannot persist past the grave. The God of the Bible alone lives for ever and ever. The gods of the heathen are dead, and their followers will die with them. And in our day, when a new paganism is rising again and the faith is again being surrounded and besieged, we need to keep the reality of the heavenly hosts in our minds and hearts as well.

Third, in verse 13 the angelic hosts are joined by “every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them.” As the psalmist put it, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). The God who created all things is the God who will bring

in the new creation through Jesus Christ. The redemption purchased by Christ does not just save the soul; it renovates the universe. And therefore it is just that the whole creation joins in the praise of God and of the Lamb in verse 13.

Now what is your response to this? God and the Lamb are alone the only ones in the universe who are truly worthy to receive riches and power and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing (12-13). This is not saying that we are giving these things to God in the sense that God needs them from us. What we offer to God we first receive from him (cf. Rom. 11:35; 1 Chron. 29:10-14). No, the point is that God alone is the fountain of everything good. All power and riches and wisdom ultimately derive from him. And so all honor and glory and blessing ultimately belong to him.

What this means is that God did not create us or anything else out of lack. He didn't make the world because he needed the world to fulfill some need in him. The point of worship is not to meet some need that God has. No! God created, not out of lack, but out of abundance. The world and everything in it is the overflow of the fulness of God's abundance and delight in himself. The point of creation is to share this. And the point of salvation is to share this. God doesn't need to, and he doesn't have to. But he does out of his grace and generosity and mercy and love. Which means that there is nothing and no one in the universe who can meet the needs of your soul at the deepest level and in a lasting way, other than God through Jesus Christ. To substitute earthly power and privilege for the power of God is a cheap substitute. The same goes with earthly riches and wisdom. To substitute earthly blessings for God is not only idolatry and sinful, but it is also spiritual suicide. We need God, which is why the promise of the gospel to not only cancel our debt through the atonement of Jesus, but also it bring us to God who is the fountain of all blessing, is the very best of news. It also means that to turn from it is wicked and foolish.

My friend, the gospel call to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is a call to embrace a redemption that brings us to God. The only ap-

appropriate response to that call is worship. Will you come to Jesus Christ in this way? If you do not, if you reject the worship of the Lamb, I can tell you on the authority of God's word that you will end up some day weeping. For these are, at the end of the day, the only two options. You may be oblivious now, but at the judgment seat of the One who sits on the throne, there will only be two possible responses: one of weeping and gnashing of teeth for those who rejected the gospel and the other of worship for those who through the Spirit embraced the gospel by faith in Jesus. My prayer is that you will see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and that seeing you will embrace him with a worshiping faith.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SEALS OF THE SCROLL (REV. 6)

MOST OF US HAVE EXPERIENCED disillusionment as the result of false promises of help. Perhaps this is one reason why the whole Charlie Brown and Lucy scenario strikes such a cord with audiences: you know, the one where she promises to hold the football this time but then snatches it away at the last moment? Perhaps you are the Lucy in the scenario, but I think a lot of us have found ourselves laying on the ground mad that we fell for that ploy yet again.

Perhaps one of our greatest temptations is to grab hold of premature promises of deliverance from suffering, whether that suffering is physical suffering, or suffering from injustice, or whatever the tragedy might be. This is the perennial allure of political parties. Now I'm not against political parties or political affiliations – they are necessary in our system of government. But if history has shown us anything, it is that our political leaders will always end up disappointing us. And yet so many people stake their hopes on the next election, as if that will change everything for the better. Well, sometimes political change is necessary, and sometimes things do change for the better. But politics will never usher in utopia and those who promise that will always end

up with something that does not and cannot last. Even worse, the 20th century has shown us (via Nazism and Communism) that such efforts often end up with a lot of the population in prison camps in order to achieve the utopia promised.

Or there is the hope that people are given with the latest medical innovation. Again, medical innovation is real and can lead to real breakthroughs that cure serious diseases. We're thankful for whatever help can be gotten for cancer and other types of diseases. But if your hope is in the next pill to be approved by the FDA, then your hopes are falsely placed. Because even if your heart disease is cured, you are going to end up dying eventually, one way or another. No one gets to escape death. Everyone's body will break down sooner or later.

Or there is the hope that the next self-help guru will help us to finally get a grip on the worries and the failures that seem to beset us. Once again, I'm not saying that we shouldn't try to improve our lot in this world. But at the end of the day, we all know that some of the saddest people in the world are some of the most successful. The idea that success can buy happiness is another false hope. I remember watching the movie, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, about the millionaire Chris Gardner (played by Will Smith). In it we watch a man go from being homeless to becoming very rich. At the very end of the movie, when he describes the moment he broke out of poverty, he says something along the lines of, "In that moment, I was happy." Well, I don't doubt that money and wealth and success can bring you happiness. But it won't last if that's all you've got. You might have it for a moment, but you won't have it forever. It's a false hope.

And yet we keep believing them. Richard Dawkins the atheist likes to define religious faith as believing something to be true even though there isn't any evidence for it. Now that's a bogus definition. But the irony is that lots of irreligious and religious people alike have this kind of faith, because we believe – apart from any real evidence – that the next political leader or the next pill or the next self-help book will bring

us true and lasting happiness. But it won't. It's a form of gullibility and we are all susceptible to it.

If you are a Christian, this is especially dangerous. Because it is easy to wed our faith in Christ to these other hopes and to baptize them in the name of Jesus. This is what the entire edifice of the health-wealth-prosperity gospel is built upon. They say that if you just have enough faith in Jesus, your life can get better in terms of health and in terms of wealth. But the Lord has not promised us anything like this and those who believe these lies are vulnerable to disillusionment with the gospel.

The Meaning of the Seals

Why am I saying all this? I'm saying it because I think in a real sense Revelation chapter 6 is here to warn us against this kind of disillusionment. It is meant, I think at least partly, to function as a warning against expecting too much of this world. It is meant to keep us from placing our hopes in people or programs that promise heaven on earth. It is meant, to put it a bit more bluntly, to keep us from following the multitude of false prophets and false apostles who promise you something right now when the Bible tells us to wait for it.

This is what our Lord was doing in the Olivet Discourse. Many Biblical scholars have noted the strong similarities between Revelation 6 and the Olivet Discourse, which is related in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt. 24-25; Mk. 13; Luke 21). For example, here is what our Lord says, as it is recorded for us in Matthew 24:

And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up

to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. (Mt. 24:6-9)

Notice the things our Lord warns his disciples about: conquest, war, famine, pestilence, and persecution, "the beginning of sorrows." Guess what we see in the seals as they are unloosed in Revelation 6? You see conquest (seal 1), war (seal 2), famine (seal 3), pestilence (seal 4), and persecution (seal 5).

Now why was our Lord telling his disciples about that? He was telling them that because they expected the end to come very soon. They were in expectation that Jesus was going to bring the kingdom in during his earthly ministry. They still didn't think he was going to die; they didn't understand the necessity of his sacrifice on the cross. They were still thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom that would demolish all Israel's enemies. That is why his prediction about the destruction of Jerusalem was so shocking to them. Here is what had just happened:

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? (Mt. 24:1-3).

Do you see how the minds of the disciples were working? The questions they are asking come out of this expectation of the immediate coming of Christ's earthly kingdom, and they couldn't square that with the destruction of the temple. For them, the temple was the earthly expression of God's rule on the earth, and for it to be destroyed by God's enemies didn't make sense when the Messiah who was supposed to conquer all God's enemies was there present on earth! And so our Lord responds to this mistaken notion that the kingdom was going to come immediately. Instead, he is telling them to expect all these things to happen (like wars and rumours of wars, etc.), and that these will be just

the beginning of sorrows. His coming to set up his kingdom on earth wasn't going to happen right away.

It is important to understand that our Lord's teaching here is not meant merely to correct a misunderstanding of eschatology; he is doing so to prevent this misunderstanding from causing them to abandon the faith for false Christs. Hear how he frames his teaching: "And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many" (Mt. 24:4-5). This concern is what is driving everything that follows. Our Lord is concerned that, hoping in an immediate manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth, but experiencing a delay in its realization, his disciples will abandon him for false Christs. And so one of the things he does is to teach them that the kingdom will not come before these other things happen, and that the occurrence of wars and pestilence and famine is not a proof that the promise of the kingdom is an empty promise. He has in fact promised both and that far from being an argument against the coming kingdom, the sorrows of war and famine and so on are like birth pangs that in God's plan will give birth to God's kingdom in God's good time.

And so I think the banner that is waved over Revelation 6 is the same banner that is waved over Matthew 24: "Take heed that no man deceive you." He is saying to us: Be careful so that you don't become disillusioned by the presence of sorrows and end up as a result of that disillusionment abandoning Biblical hope for cheap substitutes that give you fleeting pleasures and temporary success in the place of "solid joys and lasting treasure."

Revelation 6, like Matthew 24 and Mark 13 and Luke 21, helps us to keep the presence of sorrow and the absence of the kingdom from causing us to abandon the faith. It does it by teaching us things: that present sufferings have an origin, a purpose, and an end. First, an origin: it shows us that the sorrows we experience in the absence of the kingdom come from God. They are not random, purposeless events. They come as Jesus breaks the seals.

Second, the purpose they serve is to remind the world that it stands under the judgment of God. The seals are all judgments, just like the trumpets and the bowls later on. Famine, pestilence, and war do have their “innocent victims.” But the reality is that we live in a broken world that is broken precisely because of sin. That doesn’t mean that if we are suffering it is because of a particular sin. But it does mean that all human suffering comes from sin in some ultimate sense. You cannot live in a fallen world without experiencing suffering. And I think one of the reasons it is this way is because if God were to take away all suffering before taking away sin (which will happen in the kingdom to come), people wouldn’t have any reason to think that sin was such a bad thing. But it is a bad thing, and sorrow and suffering reminds us that it is.

Third, the seals remind us that there will be an end to suffering. Suffering will not be ended by the universe itself when it dies from heat death in some distant future. Rather, it will come to an end by God and Christ, who will end the sorrows by bringing in his kingdom. We need to remember this. However bad things are now, they will not last forever. And it is not just that we die and that’s it. It is that those who belong to Christ will be raised to reign with him as a kingdom of priests forever.

The Place of the Seals in the Narrative of Revelation

Before we go further, I want to help us to understand how the narrative of “the things which must be hereafter” (4:1) is unfolding in the pages of the Revelation and where chapter 6 fits into this. We argued that the scroll represents God’s plan for the judgment of his enemies and the salvation of his people. Now I think that the burden of this plan rests in the coming of Jesus to make all things new. And so the writing of the scroll, I think, is primarily concerned with the events that lead to a new heavens and a new earth and the destruction of death and of all evil. And remember that in order for the contents of a scroll to be enacted, the seals had to be broken. So how does the breaking of the seals fit into the narrative of events being related for us in Revelation?

There is a lot of disagreement here, and I'm not going to pretend that I think I know all the answers. Some of us probably know folks who really think they have all this figured out. Listen, you should be really suspicious of those who have this kind of attitude. So if you disagree with me on this, that's okay. And in any case even if you do disagree with me, I hope that there are principles here upon which we can all agree. So I will give you my reasons for the positions I am taking and let you take it from there.

As far as the seals go, I think that the breaking of them represents all of history between the first and second comings of Jesus, just as in the Olivet Discourse our Lord is telling his disciples what will happen before he returns. There are certain things that must happen before the Lord returns, just as the seals of a scroll must be broken before the terms of the scroll can be enacted. The things mentioned in the first five seals are all things that are common to human history, not just to the end of history as we know it. But when you get to the sixth seal, you are at the end of history, and the seventh seal, which comes at the beginning of chapter 8, is silence, which I think represents the rest which follows the end of history and the judgment of all God's enemies.

Thus, I think when all the seals are broken, the book of Revelation begins to give us what really are the events of the last days. Once the seals are broken, God's plan for the end of history can be enacted. Now that doesn't mean that these events come at us in a linear fashion. In fact, it appears that the next two cycles of judgment (trumpets and bowls) really do recapitulate the same basic events but from different perspectives.

So, to sum up, I think the breaking of the seals (Rev. 6-8:5) give us human history between the first and second comings of Jesus, and after 8:5 the apostle is going to go into more detail about the end of history and the culmination of all things in the judgment of God's enemies and the renewal of all things as the kingdoms of the earth become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

The Breaking of the First Six Seals

Now let's look at the seals more closely. Chapter 6 gives us the breaking of the first six seals on the scroll which is God's plan for the end of history. The breaking of the seventh seal doesn't happen until chapter 8, and in between (chapter 7) we have an intermission of sorts in which John tells us more about how God is going to take care of his people in the time between the first and second comings of Jesus.

Again, let's remember the reason for these seals. They are here to remind us that though Jesus is enthroned and exalted and worthy, this does not mean that history would immediately come to an end once he rose from the dead. Rather, God has a plan for history in which he will gather in his elect over a long period of time. But during that time, the world is still fallen and under judgment and this judgment is being described here in terms of these seals.

The First Seal

“And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer” (Rev. 6:1-2). Notice who is opening the seal: the Lamb is. That was the point of chapter 5. So these judgments come from the throne of God because the Lamb has conquered and is setting in motion God's plan for the future

The first four seals are identified by a horse and a rider, which is very similar to a vision that the prophet Zechariah relates in Zech. 1:8-11 and 6:1-8. In Zechariah's prophesy, the four horsemen represented “they whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.” (1:10, ESV). Now the thought in Revelation is a bit different, but the four horsemen part of the vision does seem to point the universality of the judgments. The color of the horses corresponds to the nature of the various judgments.

In the first seal, the horse is white, and the rider is equipped with a bow who goes out conquering. The first seal thus represents conquest. In the first century, victorious generals were often given white horses to ride in victory parades. The reference to the bow would probably have reminded the original readers of Revelation of the Parthian armies. The Parthian empire was an empire on the eastern border of the Roman empire and which was a constant menace to the security of Romans there. They were well known for their use of the bow and arrow, and they had defeated the Roman army in AD 62. And so the possibility of conquest by this eastern foe was always in the minds of the inhabitants of the eastern part of the Roman empire (which the churches in Roman Asia would have been).

Nevertheless, we need not make a precise identification of the conqueror here: Beasley-Murray rightly warns that the “commentators’ lust for identification must be resisted.”¹ The point is that throughout history the conquest of one nation by another is a feature of a world under the judgment of God. Empire-building is not seen here as a blessing but as a curse. One of the reasons for this surely is that many of the things that follow in the breaking of the next few seals is often a result of conquest.

The Second Seal

“And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see. And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword” (3-4). Red is the color of blood, and this therefore has to do with the shedding of blood. This follows the first seal as conquest and killing go together. It is rare that one nation capitulates to another without war. However, this is more general than war. Violence plagues

¹G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Wipf & Stock: Eugene, 1981), p. 132, fn. 1.

even the most peaceful of countries. Hatred stirs up strife and anger often leads to murder. It is another feature of a fallen world under the judgment of God.

The Third Seal

“And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine” (5-6). If the first seal represents conquest and the second violence, the third represents famine, and the horse is appropriately colored black. The penny in verse 6 is the denarius which was the wages for one day’s work. A measure of wheat is a quart (ESV), which was considered the amount of food necessary for one man for one day. Barley was cheaper, but this would still have been exorbitantly expensive. One commentary says that the price here “reflects 800 percent inflation in grain prices.”² How would a man feed his family if the entire income was enough only to feed one person? You can see how this would lead to hunger and famine.

On the other hand, we are told “see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.” This probably means either that the famine is limited, or that it doesn’t affect everyone the same way. (Wine and oil were the commodities of the wealthy who were less likely to be affected by famine than the poor.) In any case, it does underline that God sets limits to the judgments which he sends.

The Fourth Seal

“And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see. And I looked, and behold a pale horse:

²Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R: Phillipsburg, 2001), p. 121.

and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth” (7-8). The word death here in this context almost certainly means pestilence which kills. The Greek word for death translates the Hebrew word for death in the Septuagint, for example, in Ezek. 14:21 (“For thus saith the Lord God; How much more when I send my four sore judgments upon Jerusalem, the sword, and the famine, and the noisome beast, and the pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast?”). This is especially illustrative because Ezekiel mentioned the same things John does, except that instead of the word pestilence John substitutes the word for death, showing they are surely synonymous words in this context. John himself uses the word death this way in Rev. 2:23 and 18:8.

“Pale” is the color of the horse, which is appropriate because this is “the color of a person in sickness as contrasted with his appearance in health,” a “pale greenish gray.”³

Hell, or Hades, follows pestilence. I think Beasley-Murray is right to imagine Death on the pale horse and Hades following after on foot to collect its victims. Hades was thought of as the world of the dead; in the Bible it is often synonymous with the grave. So the idea here is that pestilence kills and Hades collects the dead.

The fact that pestilence kills a fourth part of the earth is frightening but at the same time it again shows that there are limits that God has set to these judgments. This kind of mortality rate was in fact experienced by people in the Roman Empire in the mid-second century during the reign of Marcus Aurelius in what some medical experts think was the first outbreak of smallpox in the West.⁴ By the way, all these are often the very kinds of things that follow in the wake of war. War brings with it violence and famine and pestilence in its aftermath, as well as an increase

³BAGD, and Loew and Nida’s Greek-English Lexicon, qtd. by Johnson, p. 123, fn. II.

⁴Ibid., p. 122, fn. 10.

in wild animals whose numbers are unchecked because of the chaos of war.

None of these things are peculiar to any part of human history; we have seen them take place in our world in our day. We can read about wars and rumours of wars in every age; about diseases and plagues two years ago or two hundred years ago. The believers in the first century and believers in the twenty-first century need to be reminded that the presence of conquest, war, famine, and pestilence are not signs that God has abandoned our planet but that this world will continue under the judgment of God as long as men continue in their rebellion against him. These are also the kinds of things that bring down human kingdoms and which would eventually spell the end of the Roman Empire. But though the nations of men may crumble, the Lamb who breaks the seals and sends these judgments is creating a kingdom which will never end.

The Fifth Seal

At this point, there are no more mention of horses and riders. Commentators have noted a 4-2-1 pattern in all three cycles of judgments, and we see that here. Here the focus is no longer on the earth, but we are taken into heaven: “And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled” (Rev. 6:9-11).

This seal is a reminder that it is not just the unbelievers who experience suffering; believers suffer, and one of the ways they suffer is martyrdom. Here are people who “were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.” Jim Hamilton points out that the parallel

between the Olivet Discourse and Revelation 6 indicates that the spread of the gospel happens at least in part through the death of martyrs. In the Olivet Discourse it is the spread of the gospel in all the world that presages the end (Mt. 24:14). In Rev. 6, it is the cry of the martyrs (fifth seal) that comes right before the return of Christ in judgment (sixth seal). So Hamilton writes, “I take this to mean that the gospel will go to the ends of the earth through the sacrifices of the martyrs, and the fact that there is an appointed number of martyrs in Revelation 6:11 means that their deaths are not accidental.”⁵

There is indeed a number to the martyrs. This means that, as Hamilton points out, their deaths are not accidental or purposeless. Their sacrifice for the cause of God and truth is one of the means that God uses to advance his kingdom. As Jesus told his disciples, “But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness” (Luke 21:12-13, ESV). We must not miss this: one of the themes of Revelation is that just as Jesus gained his victory through death, even so his followers will gain their victory through death.

Of course this doesn’t mean that the only way the believer gains the victory is through martyrdom. There are other ways to die. God doesn’t call all of us to be martyrs. But he does call all of us to die to ourselves and to seek first the kingdom of God. It means that in every sphere of life, we live as a witness to the gospel. Our lives are to be flavored by the gospel, and our deaths are to be a sort of final amen to the truth about Christ. It means that the sacrifices God calls us to endure are an opportunity to bear witness to the robustness of the Christian faith. And surely we are all called to live that way and to die that way.

The martyrs are pictured here as “under the altar.” I think the reality this is meant to picture is that they are in the very presence of God. The altar of incense in the tabernacle and temple stood right in front of the

⁵James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2012), p. 166.

Most Holy Place. They have sealed their testimony by their blood. The world has rejected them, but God has received them. He has given them white robes and rest from their labors.

In God's presence they cry with a loud voice, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" Of course, the previous seals are symbols of God's judgment. It's not as if the world is not under the judgment of God. But what they are asking for is justice for the particular crimes committed against them in their deaths at the hand of wicked men. God does answer them, but it is interesting to note how he answers them: "and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled." This means, first, that retribution for the crimes committed against them would not happen right away. In fact, it would not happen "until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled." I take this to mean that not until the full number of the martyrs is fulfilled will God render justice. This takes us to the end of the world as we know it, and is another reminder that though we are to work for justice in this world, our ultimate hope is not in getting justice for ourselves or for others in this world, but to wait for it at the Final Judgment.

Second, it means that justice, though delayed, will happen. God doesn't tell them that he won't do it, just that they have to wait a little longer for it. God will repay (cf. Rom. 12:19). We don't have to settle for imperfect justice or the failure of justice in this world, because we know that God will render in his good time perfect and complete and universal justice.

The Sixth Seal

"And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood; and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even

as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and island were moved out of their places. And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" (Rev. 6:12-17).

We've noted several times the similarity between Rev. 6 and the Olivet Discourse. One of the things the disciples asked Jesus was what would indicate the time of the end. Here is how our Lord describes it in Mt. 24:29-31:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: and then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

These are clearly parallel passages and describe in slightly different ways the same event. I take this to be a description of the Second Coming of our Lord. I know that some take this to mean the destruction of Jerusalem, because of the word "immediately" in verse 29 and what our Lord says about all these things happening to that generation then present in verse 34. But these are not insuperable difficulties, and they can be explained in a way that is consistent with taking this to refer to

the visible, personal, glorious coming of our Lord to judge the wicked and resurrect the righteous.

Another reason people give for taking our Lord's words in Mt. 24 to be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem is that the cosmic language he uses is OT stock language for God's judgments on the nations, whether Babylon (Isa. 13:9, ff.), or Egypt (Ezek. 32:7, ff), or Israel (Joel 2:10, 30, ff.). However, I wonder why it hasn't occurred to some of these folks why God would use this type of language? They argue that we should look in retrospect to the OT passages to interpret Rev. 6 and Mt. 24, but that surely is taking it backwards. The OT passages should be interpreted in light of the NT ones. The reason for this type of language that portrays the destruction of nations and empires through the symbolism of cosmic disordering is because at the end of history this is precisely what will happen. All those events in the OT were simply prefiguring the final coming of the Lord, just like those were "days of the Lord" which pointed forward to the Day of the Lord in the Second Coming and Final Judgment.⁶

Both the sixth seal and Mt. 24:29-31 describe what happens when Jesus comes back, although our Lord in Mt. 24 focuses more on its redemptive aspects and Rev. 6 more in terms of judgment. The prayers of the martyrs are being answered. There will be a day when the wicked will be judged. There will be a day when all the prayers of the righteous for justice will be answered. There will be an end to all the suffering of the saints. Again, these seals tell us that present suffering has an origin

⁶Luke's account of the Olivet Discourse in chapter 21 of his gospel helps us to see that the time period begun by the destruction of Jerusalem doesn't end with the city's overthrow by the Roman armies in AD 70 but continues "until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (ver. 24), which actually extends to the present day. So the time period described by the phrase, "Immediately after the tribulation of those days" in Mt. 24:29, doesn't refer to AD 70 at all, but to the entire time period between the first and second comings of Jesus. Also, the problem that verse 34 poses really is not a difficulty either for "all these things" does not refer to the coming of Jesus himself but to the types of sufferings which precede his coming, all of which were to happen in that generation.

for they come from God's throne, a purpose for God has designed them to bring about his judgments upon a world in rebellion, and an end, for there will be an end. The world will not go on like this forever. It had its beginning in God's will and it will come to an end according to God's will.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by reminding you why we have this in our Bibles: it is to remind us that it is folly to abandon faith in Christ and to settle for premature promises of deliverance from present suffering by false Christs, whether they come to you in the form of religious authorities or political leaders or scientists or self-help gurus. Our Lord has told us to expect suffering in this world. He is telling us here to expect war and famine and pestilence in this world. But he is also telling us that it will come to an end, and that it will end in the Second Coming of Christ who will come to judge his enemies and rescue his people.

And that means that we are to order our lives now in light of the end. It will not matter how much power and influence and wealth you have in this world if you are not right with God. When Jesus returns, everyone who have refused to repent of their rebellion against him will be trying to hide from the wrath of the Lamb. They will recognize too late that they cannot hide and they cannot stand before him.

Where are you at? Are you one of those who are awaiting eagerly for the coming of Jesus? Or are you one of those who will be ashamed at his coming? Will you welcome him or hide from him?

It is a part of our humanness to long for justice and to hope for peace. But apart from the gospel, the world can at the end of the day guarantee neither justice nor peace. They can't guarantee justice because evil men can and do escape justice. They can't guarantee peace either: has not history demonstrated this over and over again? The grave ends all our hopes for peace and justice. Only someone who can reach beyond the grave could possibly give us either. And that is who Jesus is. He con-

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quered death in his death and resurrection. And in conquering death for those who believe in him he guarantees that they will receive justice and eternal peace – peace with God and peace with a redeemed humanity in a new heaven and new earth. Don't fall for false Christs: put your trust in Jesus Christ the only one who is worthy to break the seals and to open the scroll of God's saving plan for this world.

CHAPTER XIV

SEALED AND STANDING

(REV. 7)

AT THE END OF THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, when John sees the breaking of the sixth seal of the scroll, we see Christ coming again in judgment upon the enemies of his people. As he comes, his enemies go running for cover, crying out that “the great day of his [Jesus] wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?” (Rev. 6:17). They are asking this question because they themselves feel – maybe for the first time – the reality that they cannot hide from or stand before the Lamb of God who is coming now in wrath to judge his enemies and rescue his people.

It is interesting to note the categories of people that are mentioned in verse 15. These are the people who are exposed to the Final Judgment and running from the wrath of the Lamb: “the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man.” These describe people from every category and walk of life, from the rich and powerful to the poor and powerless. Listen, our society might tell you that oppression is the great sin and that those in power are those who oppress and therefore the powerful are the sinners in our society. Of course oppression is

evil, and the church should always agree with the testimony of Scripture about it, but the Biblical vision of reality fits what we actually see much better than what is currently being advocated by the gatekeepers of our society. For the Bible reminds us that the mighty and the marginalized are all quite capable of injustice and wickedness. In other words, our society has created very convenient definitions of sin, whereas the Bible is much more broad and realistic.

Moreover, we are told that power means oppression. But how do you correct that? If you remove people from power you are only going to create a brand-new set of power-brokers and therefore oppressors. However, though the Bible does not say that we should ignore injustice when it comes from places of power, at the same time it provides a surer ground for pursuing justice when it reminds us that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We need to hold the powerful to account and we need to hold everyone else to account as well. All men and women, regardless of their place in society, are quite capable of selfish acts and criminal behavior. We see that here in Rev. 6:15. It is not just the rich and the politicians that are running for cover here. Even the slaves are running for cover. Even the marginalized are running for cover and trying to hide from the coming wrath of God.

And at the end of the day, what we are reminded of here is that it won't matter how much power or money or influence you had in this world. Nor will poverty or being a political outcast put you in a position of favor with God. Our value doesn't depend upon our status among men, whether measured by wealth or influence. Our value lies in the fact that we are made by God in the image of God. But the problem is that we have defaced this image of God through sin. We have sinned against our neighbor, and above all we have sinned against God. This means that the question of whether or not we can stand is not an automatic yes. In fact, according to the Bible, for many people the answer will be no. What will matter is whether or not you can stand before God. What will matter is whether or not God will look upon you in the Final Judgment with mercy and grace or with anger and wrath.

The question they ask is therefore a question we should all ask ourselves: Who can stand? Who can stand before a holy God?

This is relevant not only on its own merits, but also in light of the seventh chapter of Revelation. For the purpose and function of this chapter is at least partly to answer the question posed in 6:17. The seventh chapter of Revelation tells us who will be able to stand. It gives us the answer. And so that's what we want to do this morning: we want to consider the answer to the question, "Who can stand?" by looking at Rev. 7. First of all, we want to consider how the people of God stand – or their stability. Then we want to end on a consideration of who will stand – or their identity.

In what way do God's people stand? The Stability of the people of God.

God's protection

Chapter 7 unfolds for us in two parts. In verses 1-8, John hears the number of those who are sealed and kept safe from the four winds which will bring hurt upon the earth, and sea, and trees. In verses 9-17, John sees an innumerable multitude who have come out of tribulation and have entered into rest in the very presence of God. I'm going to argue that these two descriptions really are pointing to the same group of people, namely, the church. In two scenes, the Lord is showing John that he will protect the church from the wrath of God, even though that doesn't mean they will be protected from the tribulation of men. And then the Lord is showing John that he will provide for the church that he protects.

The chapter begins with John seeing four angels standing on the four corners of the earth (not meant to be taken literally, of course – this is just meant to symbolize the universal nature of their mission), "holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from

the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of God in their foreheads” (1-3). The winds are God’s instruments of judgment upon a wicked humanity. This has precedent in the OT prophecies. For example, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied about the nation of Elam: “Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Behold, I will break the bow of Elam, the chief of their might. And upon Elam will I bring the four winds from the four quarters of heaven, and will scatter them toward all those winds; and there shall be no nation whither the outcasts of Elam shall not come” (Jer. 49:35-36). That these winds bring judgment is shown in the fact that they are clearly intended to hurt the earth, sea, and trees. Also, this is precisely what we see happen in the judgments of the trumpets and the bowls later on. But like the plagues of Egypt, the hurt done to the earth will impact the people who are served by them.

But before this can happen, another angel tells them to hold back until God’s servants are sealed. We learn later that this seal upon their foreheads is the name of God the Father and the Lamb (cf. 14:1, ESV). It is a seal of ownership and a seal of protection. Those who belong to God will be protected by him. Though the earth will bow under the judgments of God, his people will be protected. Again, we are made to think of the plagues in Egypt. For the first three plagues, Israel suffered along with Egypt. But from the fourth plague on, there was a difference (Exod. 8:22-23). This also is very similar to a vision which the prophet Ezekiel had, in which God commanded his angels to slay the wicked in Jerusalem. However, before God’s command was executed, “the Lord said unto him [the executioner], Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity” (Ezek. 9:4-5). The servants of God are

protected; the wicked are not spared.

What kind of protection is this?

But what kind of protection is proposed here? Is this protection from God's judgments throughout history, or is the protection from God's judgments at the end of history before Christ comes to establish his kingdom? I think it is the latter, because the judgments which are anticipated here are the kinds of judgments that we see unfold in the later cycles of the trumpet and bowl judgments. And as I've argued before, I think those cycles are meant to point us to the kinds of things that are going to happen to the enemies of God and of his people before our Lord returns. Also, we've argued that the sixth seal rings us to the end of history. The question, "Who can stand?" at the end of chapter six is the question being answered here in chapter seven. In other words, the question is, "Who will be able to abide these great judgments upon the wicked when Christ returns?" And the answer is: the servants of God, they will be able to stand.

However, that being said, I don't think that makes it irrelevant to the first century church or the tenth or the twenty-first century church. Here's why: the fact that God will protect his people then, means that he will protect his people now. If he will protect his people at the end of history from these severe judgments, we can be sure that he will protect them from less severe judgments.

In fact, I think the point here is that God's people will never suffer his wrath. These judgments are expressions of God's wrath upon and against human wickedness. But God is never against his people. We need to constantly remember what the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Romans, "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is

risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us” (Rom. 8:32-34). Right now, if you belong to Jesus, God is not against you and will never be against you. In fact, it is better than that, because he isn’t neutral, either. He is for you! And that has to be the most amazing news in the universe. If God is with us, if he is for us, it doesn’t matter what can happen to me in this world for I know that God will make it right. All things will work for the good of those who love him (Rom. 8:28).

I think this is an important distinction to be kept in mind. If I belong to Christ, I can expect tribulation, for the simple reason that he has promised that (cf. John 16:33)! But though we may experience tribulation, if we belong to Christ, we can never experience God’s wrath. Even the trials the Lord leads us through are for our good. They will not cut us off from God’s good purpose for us. They will not separate us from his love, and they will not keep us from heaven.

You see this distinction in this chapter. I will argue in a bit that the two groups of people in Rev. 7 are actually two different descriptions of the same group, namely, the church. The church is heard to be sealed in verses 1-8. Then in verses 9 and following, the church is seen to come out of “the great tribulation” (14). So the sealing is not a sealing from tribulation. But it is a sealing from God’s wrath.

Now I hope you are not so short-sighted that you only care about avoiding earthly tribulation and discomforts and you don’t care about God’s wrath. I hope you are not someone who is more concerned about how to make your life in this world as comfortable as possible with little to no thought about what will happen to you when you die. Listen, it is much better to go through tribulation now and to escape the wrath to come. The tribulations of the present time are temporary. They are “light afflictions which are but for a moment” (2 Cor. 4:17). The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed (Rom. 8:18). But those who are cut off from God’s grace and exposed to his wrath will never in the end think that the comforts of this world were worth it. So I hope you listen to the

warning today and take it seriously. I hope you will flee from the wrath to come and run to Jesus Christ.

The protection God gives is the protection of salvation. It is why in verses 10-12 they are praising God for it: “And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.” Who are they praising for salvation? Are they slapping their own backs? Are they congratulating themselves? Do they think they were holier or smarter than those who didn’t escape judgment? No! They praise God, and God alone. Those who make it to heaven will not make it there because they were good enough. They will not make it there because they were better than everyone else. They will make it there because God sealed them, preserved them, enabled them to persevere and overcome. As the hymn puts it:

When I fear my faith will fail
Christ will hold me fast
When the tempter would prevail
He will hold me fast
I could never keep my hold
Through life’s fearful path
For my love is often cold
He must hold me fast
God must hold us fast! And he will hold us fast!

God’s provision

What is God’s provision? What has God laid up for them who belong to him? We see it beautifully recorded for us in verses 15-17. Here are people who went through incredible difficulties. “These are they,” as the angel reports to John, “which came out of great tribulation, and have

washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (14). But on the other side of that tribulation – how sweet!

The sum of it is that they enjoy access to the immediate presence of God. They are with him “before the throne.” They “serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them” (15). God is the source of all true blessing and happiness. To be in his immediate presence is to be perfectly blessed and happy.

Not only do they enjoy the provision of God’s presence, but they enjoy it forever. They serve God day and night” (15) and “they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more” (16), indicating that there will never be a time when that will be true. Not in a negative sort of way, as we might speak of the dead. Someone might argue that the dead don’t hunger or thirst anymore either. But the perspective of this vision is the perspective of heaven, the perspective of eternity. As John will see later in 21:4, “and there shall be no more death.”

The point that is being made in verse 16, in the absence of hunger and thirst and exposure to the sun, is the point that the godly will never be in want again. There will never again be anything to make them anxious. There will never be anything again to make them afraid. Nothing to bring hurt, neither physical or mental or spiritual.

Why is this? Because “the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (17). In heaven, the blessings of the 23rd Psalm will find their perfect fulfillment, as the saints dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Who will stand? The identity of the people of God.

The 144,000 Sealed

In verses 4-8, John hears the number of those who were sealed. “And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children

of Israel” (4). What follows is a list of twelve tribes of Israel. However, there are some anomalies. In fact, this list doesn’t match up with any list of the tribes of Israel in the OT. First of all, there is the fact that Judah, not Reuben, is mentioned first, even though Reuben was the firstborn. Then there is the interesting omission of the tribe of Dan. Finally, alongside the tribe of Joseph is also Manasseh, even though Manasseh was a son of Joseph, so that this tribe ends up being mentioned twice.

What does all this mean? Some folks seem to think that this is a reference to Jewish believers in the last days, who will bear witness to God’s truth after the church has been raptured to heaven. However, there are numerous and serious objections to this. Above all, there is the problem that there is no rapture in the Bible, at least not in the sense that the church is raptured out of the tribulation of the last days. The church comes through the tribulation (see verse 14); it isn’t raptured out of it.

Rather, this is almost certainly a way of describing the church. Physical Israel and the church have traded places. The church is the true Israel. As the apostle Paul will say, “He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:28-29). Those who believe the gospel become sons and daughters of Abraham (Rom. 4:11-12). In the same way, the list of the tribes of Israel is not meant to communicate that God is going to seal physical Israel in the last days but that he is going to seal and protect his church.

What follows are my arguments for this position.

First, this is parallel to John’s own experience in Rev. 5:5-6, where he hears about the Lion of the tribe of Judah, but then turns and sees the Lamb of God (cf. Schreiner’s commentary on Rev.). The Lion and the Lamb are the same person: Jesus Christ, described in two different ways. In the same way, John hears the number of those sealed, and then sees the innumerable multitude victorious and redeemed, praising God for

his salvation. These are just two different ways of describing the same thing.

Second, they are called “the servants of our God” in 7:3, surely a description of all God’s people, no matter what their race is. Third, in 14:3, where we meet the 144,000 again, they are described as those “which were redeemed from the earth.” This is not a description of Jewish believers, but of all believers. Moreover, in the next verse (14:4), they are called “virgins” who had not defiled themselves with women.” We are not meant to take that literally; the Bible doesn’t teach that the celibate state is more holy than the married one (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1,ff.). Rather, this is meant to function as a picture of holy people who have stood fast against idolatry. We have seen in the Bible that idolatry is often compared and likened to sexual immorality. Hence, when the 144,000 are viewed as celibate, we are meant to understand that they had not bowed the knee to idols of their times. But again, this is a picture of the church in every age.

Finally, the very fact that this list is not matched by any other in the OT is surely meant to alert us to the fact that it is not meant to be taken literally but as another picture of the people of God. This would explain some of the variations we mentioned before. The fact that Judah is mentioned first is probably because our Lord came from Judah. The tribe of the Head of the church goes first, and rightly so. The fact that Dan is omitted is probably due to the fact that in the OT Dan was often linked with idolatry. It was the northernmost tribe and therefore perhaps more exposed to the corrupting influences of the nations. It was one of the two northern tribes where the idolatrous images erected by Jeroboam were set up (1 Kings 12:29-30). There were even later (intertestamental) Jewish rabbinical traditions that linked Dan with the Antichrist. The fact that Revelation is a book that persistently attacks idolatry and the Antichrist would be reason enough for omitting Dan from a list which was meant to depict the church.

But what is the significance of the number 144,000? It is the number of the tribes of Israel (12), squared, and then multiplied by 1000, “a

twofold way of indicating completeness” (Mounce, p. 158). I think it is just another way of saying that all the elect, every believer, will be saved, and none shall be lost. God’s people will be preserved and protected and provided for. No one gets left behind. No one falls between the cracks.

The Innumerable Multitude Worshipping

Then in verses 9, and following, the scene changes. John now sees “a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands” (9). What John heard he now sees. I think Dennis Johnson is correct when he observes that the real difference between these two groups of people is not their ethnicity or their number but rather their location (Johnson, p. 134). The 144,000 are on earth, sealed against the judgments which come against the earth. The countless multitude is in heaven praising God around his throne. In the first scene we observe the church militant, and in the second scene the church triumphant.

But who are they? Who gets counted in this number? Am I in this number? Are you? How do you know?

First, they are the servants of God (3). In the Ezekiel passage which is similar to what we see in Rev. 7, the ones who are sealed are those who “sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof” (Ezek. 9:4). What God’s people do perfectly and eternally in heaven (“serve him day and night,” 15) they begin do, however imperfectly, on earth. God seals us, the apostle tells us, by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13). We should not expect to be sealed by the Holy Spirit and yet remain unholy. Do you serve him? Don’t expect to receive the protection or the provision given to the saints if you are unwilling to lay aside your claims to self-sovereignty in order to surrender your life to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, they are those who have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb (14). This is a strange image, but it points us to the reality that the only way we can become worthy to enter into the presence of God is through the redemption from the stain and guilt and power of sin purchased by the blood of Christ, shed upon the cross. God's people are holy, but it is not their holiness – which is at best imperfect this side of heaven – that makes them worthy. It is the grace of God given to us in Christ that makes anyone worthy.

At the end of the first century, the church was a tiny outpost of truth and godliness in a world awash in idolatry and immorality. And the world was not going to let the church be; it vigorously and violently and ruthlessly attacked and persecuted it. In that milieu, it is easy to become discouraged. They must have felt very exposed. But Revelation 6-7 reminds us that the present order will not persist. There is coming a day when no longer will the saints be judged by the world but the world will be judged by the wrath of the Lamb. In that day, the wicked will be exposed and the righteous will be sealed. Revelation 7 is a wonderful and beautiful description and promise of God's protection and provision when his wrath comes against the world.

But the reality is not much different today. We do not and will not inhabit a world that is friendly to the church this side of the Second Coming. If we live out our faith we will inevitably experience persecution. We will experience tribulation. And when we do the temptation will be to ask the question: "Is it worth it to remain faithful to Jesus?" But that is the wrong question. Rather, the correct question to ask is, "Who will be able to stand when Jesus returns and pours out his wrath on those who rejected him?"

My friend, where will you be? If Christ were to show up today, would you be glad or sad? Would you weep or worship? Would you run from Christ or run to him? You should run to him today for he welcomes all who come to him, and he will turn no one away.

And dear Saint, don't give up. Don't become discouraged. If you belong to Christ, his name and the name of his Father is on you. He

Jeremiah Bass

will never give you up. He will protect you now and bring you to heaven when you die. He will give grace and glory.

CHAPTER XV

THE ROLE OF PRAYER AND THE PLAN OF GOD (REV. 8:1-5)

TO SAY THAT PEOPLE DISAGREE on how the book of Revelation unfolds is surely one of the understatements of the year. However, you can't preach through it without taking a position. So I have had to do this, obviously. As we go through this book together, you may find that you do not agree with my particular take on everything, but what I hope we can agree on are the principles that shine through no matter what position you take. We must always remember that the original audience for this book were congregations in the first century Roman province of Asia. This was not meant merely to give them information about the far distant future but was meant to impact their lives in the day and times in which they lived. One of my goals is that the message of Revelation will impact our lives in similar ways. And surely that is something we can all agree on.

Nevertheless, that doesn't mean it's not necessary for me to give you some indication of where I stand on these issues. So before we go further, I need to begin here by sketching out for you my basic understand-

ing of the flow of the narrative so far and in the coming chapters. What we've seen so far is this: in the first three chapters we have the vision of the risen Christ who comes to John and gives him specific messages to seven churches in Roman proconsular Asia. Then beginning in chapter 4, we have John's vision from heaven, a vision which will extend to the end of chapter 16, and which will include three cycles of judgment.

One of the main areas of disagreement among Biblical scholars is how to understand the relationship between these three cycles. Are they to be taken in a temporally linear way? That is, are we to understand the seals as representing one cycle of judgment which is then followed in history by the judgments represented by the trumpets which is then followed in history by the judgments represented by the bowls? Or do these cycles of judgments recapitulate the same basic events from different perspectives, much as we might see the same sports play revisited in multiple ways from different angles? And are they judgments that characterize all of history or are these judgments that will characterize the end of history right before our Lord returns to the earth?

The position I have adopted is that these three cycles are not linearly related but involve some measure of recapitulation. One way to see this is that all three cycles bring us to the end of history. The sixth seal brings us to the coming of Christ in wrath to judge his enemies (6:12-17). After the seventh trumpet is sounded, we read this: "And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). And then at the end of the pouring out of seventh bowl, we are told that "the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found" (Rev. 16:19-20). These are surely all depictions of the end of things and of this age.

However, I think there is a difference between the first cycle and the next two. As I explained in the message on chapter 6, I believe the seals

represent God's judgments which are common to all history between the first and second comings of Jesus to earth. But I think the next two cycles are more focused on the end of history. Let me give you two reasons why I think this is so.

The first reason has to do with how seals on a scroll functioned for first century legal documents. Scholars are generally agreed that the scroll represents God's plan for the consummation of history in the final destruction of his enemies and the final salvation of his people. However, this scroll is sealed with seven seals. In John's time, for legal documents, the seals on a scroll had to be broken for the contents of the scroll to be enacted. So I take that to mean that the end can't happen until Jesus – who is depicted for us as the Lion and the Lamb – breaks the seals, which he does in chapters 6 and 8. That means a couple of things. The judgments which accompany the breaking of the seals don't themselves represent the end, but events which precede the end. Of course, when we get to the sixth seal, we are practically at the end. Once the seventh seal is broken (8:1), the scroll is now ready to be enacted and the unfolding of the end begins to be narrated in more detail. This is now done in the trumpets (chapters 8-9, 11) and then later in the bowls of wrath (chapter 16).

Secondly, there doesn't appear to be any distinction between believers and non-believers in the seal judgments, until you get to the breaking of the sixth seal. These are judgments which are experienced by Christian and non-Christian alike. However, in the trumpet and bowl judgments, there is a clear distinction. In chapter 7, the church on earth is sealed. Why? In chapter 9, you see why: "And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads" (4). Unlike the seal judgments, the people of God are kept safe from the trumpet and bowl judgments. This is certainly not the case in the trials and tribulations of the world as we now experience them, which afflict believer and non-believer alike. Of course, one can argue that there are judgments which even now are only experienced

by unbelievers and that this is what is being referred to by the trumpet and bowl judgments. I can only say that I just don't find that point of view persuasive, if for no other reason that these judgments seem too unusually catastrophic to be referring to present-day temporal calamities which are experienced only by the wicked.

So I think once we get to the seventh seal, we are now going to see the unfolding of God's plan for the end of history, although this is still not described in a temporally linear narrative but from different vantage points and perspectives.

Nevertheless, we shouldn't read this as if it is only about giving us information about the end. The conflict that we see unfold in Revelation 8-22 between the triune God and the unholy trinity of dragon, beast, and false prophet, or between the people of God and Babylon, is mirrored in the conflict between the church and the world today. So even though the point of this book is that the final victory is sure and will be accomplished at the end of history when our Lord returns, we shouldn't read Revelation as if it doesn't have anything to do with us today. The spirit of Antichrist exists as a present reality. And the question is, in light of the sure and final defeat of all evil, will you stand fast against it, or will you give in to it?

And this is where we come to the verses we want to consider this morning, Rev. 8:1-5. Surely one of the ways we maintain a steadfast witness for Christ as lights in a world of darkness is through a life of prayer. And what we will see in these verses is a preeminent focus on the importance and value and efficacy of prayer. I think that one of the reasons this was revealed to John is to encourage all of us to have an ongoing and meaningful life of prayer.

The place and power of prayer

Now we have already seen prayer and its importance and place in the unfolding narrative of Revelation. In 5:8, as we are given access with John into the very throne room of God, we are told that the el-

ders around God's throne have "golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints." We are not yet told the significance of this, but the fact that the prayers of the saints are pictured as incense before God is surely encouraging. Then in 6:10 the martyrs cry out in prayer to God, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" This prayer is answered in the judgments depicted throughout the book of Revelation, culminating in the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet are thrown to endure God's wrath forever.

But in the verses before us (8:1-5), the power and place of prayer in the purpose of God is on full display. It begins in 8:1, with the breaking of the seventh seal: "And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour." There is a lot of speculation about the significance of the silence in heaven here. I've mentioned several times that Revelation is a "loud" book. When someone speaks, it always seems to be in a very loud voice. The worship of chapters 4 and 5 is tumultuous to say the least. In fact, in 8:5, we read, "And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake." This is the way it is throughout most of this book. And yet as chapter 8 opens and the seventh seal is broken, when you would expect a cataclysm, you get silence.

Some say that the seventh seal has no content, but this is not quite right. The silence in heaven is the seventh seal. Also, each of the cycles of judgment end with the cacophony of a thunderstorm, as we see here in 8:5 (cf. 11:19; 16:18). The silence of heaven is therefore significant.

But why is there silence? Well, some have pointed to several OT Scriptures in which silence precedes God's judgments. So, for example, in Habakkuk 2:20, we read, "But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him." Then in Zechariah 2:13, "Be silent, O all flesh, before the Lord: for he is raised up out of his holy habitation."

NT scholar Thomas Schreiner suggests that this “is the kind of eerie silence we feel in the natural world before a tornado suddenly strikes.”¹

This is surely part of the reason for the silence. But I think Beasley-Murray is also right when he suggests that the reason for the silence is to let the prayers of the saints be heard.² That they are heard is denoted in a number of ways in the vision that John sees here. Though the seven angels who will blow the seven trumpets that herald the corresponding judgments receive their trumpets in verse 2, they do not begin to blow until after the prayers of the saints have been presented before God. The prayers must first ascend before the throne of God. The point here is the role that the prayers of God’s people play in the outworking of God’s plan. The breaking of the seals of the scroll is bookended by the prayers of God’s people (5:8; 8:1-5). This is meant to show us that God’s purpose to bring about the final destruction of his enemies and the final salvation of his people is accomplished through the prayers of his people. Of course God is sovereign, and the book of Revelation affords ample evidence of this fact, but it also shows us that this Sovereign God has chosen the prayers of the saints as one of the means by which he accomplishes his purposes. The contents of the scroll are acted upon by the Sovereign God who sits upon his throne and the Lamb of God who has redeemed men and women from every kindred, nation, and language. But one of the ways they do this is through the prayers of the saints.

That in itself ought to be a great encouragement to all of us. But more is going on here than a simple declaration of the power of prayer. This is full of reasons for us to devote ourselves to prayer. In particular, I see in these verses three things that should encourage us to see the necessity, as our Lord himself put it, that “men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Lk. 18:1). They are three facts, which are that (1) God delights in our prayers, (2) God sees (and hears) our prayers, and (3)

¹ESV Expository Commentary, Revelation

²G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Wipf & Stock: Eugene, 1981), p. 150.

God responds to our prayers.

God delights in our prayers.

In the text, the prayers of the saints are offered to God with incense. You see that in verses 3-4: “And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand.” There is some question as to whether or not these prayers are to be identified with the incense or whether they are distinguished from the incense. In 5:8, we see “golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of the saints.” There the prayers are the incense, but in our text they seem to be distinguished. Of course, this points us again to the nature of apocalyptic literature. We are not meant to make too much of these details; the point is the bigger picture. To focus too much on a particular detail would be like focusing on a single brush stroke in a painting. I think the point here is that prayer is like incense that ascends before God.

In fact, the connection between incense and prayer was made already in the Psalms. David writes in Psalm 141, “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (2). Incense is sweet smelling and aromatic in a good way; in the same way prayer is pictured as a sweet smell before the Lord. The point is that God delights in prayer much as sweet aromas are pleasing to the senses.

Now why is it that you think God delights in the prayers of the saints? Is it because they are saints? No. I don’t think it is for no reason that the first mention of the prayers of God’s people in Revelation is in the context of the Lamb taking the scroll in chapter 5. The prayers are like incense from the altar, but just as the altar of incense would have been meaningless apart from the altar of sacrifice, even so our prayers can

only be pleasing to God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God delights in our prayers, not because we are better than other people. God delights in our prayers because he delights in his Son – “in whom I am well-pleased” (Mt. 3:17) – and if we belong to him, then the Father delights in us as well. In other words, we must not look inward to understand why God delights in the prayers of his people. Nor must we look necessarily at how good we are at praying. We have the Father’s good will because of what Jesus has done for us, received by faith. It is a matter of grace in Christ, not good works apart from Christ, that makes our prayers acceptable to God.

That God delights in prayer means that we shouldn’t imagine him swatting our prayers away. He is not difficult with us. We shouldn’t ask, “Does God want to hear us?” The answer to that question is now and has always been, “Yes!” for those who belong to Jesus Christ. It is important for us to grasp this. One of the reasons we do not pray is that we don’t think God is interested in our prayers. But he is not only interested in them, but he also delights in them. In another Psalm, we read, “I love the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and my supplication. Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore I will call upon him as long as I live” (Ps. 116:1-2). Our Father inclines his ear to us.

This is the point of our Lord’s words in the Sermon on the Mount. Good fathers love their children and listen to their requests. But even the best of earthly fathers is still evil on some level. God, however, is perfectly good. And so our Lord reasons with us: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Mt. 7:7-11). Hear the how much more as it ought to be heard!

Now that doesn't mean, of course, that God says yes to every prayer. That would not make him good or wise. We wouldn't think that a good and wise father says yes to all the requests of his children, for the reason that we know that many of their requests are made from a lack of wisdom. Many times it is in the best interests of the child is to say no to their request. In the same way, God sometimes says no to our prayers. It is not a proof that he neither hears us or cannot answer us. Rather it means that he has something better for us. In other words, his delight in his children is the reason why he says no to them sometimes. The apostle Paul found this out when he prayed for the removal of the thorn in the flesh and God said no. Paul found that it was necessary for his humility to have this thorn. But more than that, he found that, as God assured him, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:9). God sees (and hears) our prayers.

Not only does God delight in our prayers, but he sees them. In Rev. 8:1-5, there is this emphasis upon the place where the prayers are offered. Like the incense in the tabernacle, the prayers of the saints are offered as and with the incense in the very presence of God. Where is the incense taken from? It is "before the throne" which is of course the throne of God (3). Then we are told explicitly in verse 4 that the prayers "ascended up before God out of the angel's hand." The prayers are not some distant echo faintly reverberating in the halls of heaven. Rather they are right there before God. God sees them and hears them. In fact, all of heaven is silenced so that the prayers of the saints can be heard.

Just as it is important for us to know that in Christ God delights to hear our prayers, we need to know that he actually hears them. A father who loves his children and delights in their presence will listen to what they have to say. Since God is the best Father we can be sure he hears our prayers.

I want you to take notice also of that word "all" in verse 3: "the prayers of all the saints." It is not a subset of special saints who get their prayers

heard, but all of them. And, by the way, we shouldn't take "saint" to mean a super Christian. In the NT saint is the name for anyone who belongs to the Lord. They have been sanctified and set apart through the work of Christ for them and the work of the Holy Spirit in them. If you belong to God through Christ, that means that you are a saint. And that means that your prayers are being heard.

It can sometimes seem like our prayers are just hitting the ceiling. And it is true that God does not respect every prayer. He finds the prayer of the wicked to be an abomination to him. However, if you have received Christ as your Lord and Savior, the reality is that God's throne is no longer a throne of judgment but a throne of grace. We have access to God the Father by Christ through the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:18).

God speaks to us in his word, in the Holy Scriptures. But we are also meant to speak to God in prayer. And the encouragement is this: you are not just praying to yourself. God hears you. How many times in the Bible do we hear this refrain? Of the children of Israel in Egypt who were praying in their time of bondage, we read, "And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows" (Exod. 3:7). When they were by the Red Sea, God heard their cry there as well (Neh. 9:9). When they were led into captivity for their sins and prayed for deliverance, God heard their cry (Ps. 106:44). In fact, the 107th Psalm is mainly about this reality: "Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses" (6, 13, 19, 28). Brother and sister, bring your requests before God. They are not in vain for your Father hears you.

God responds to our prayers.

This is the point, I think, of verse 5. The point of these prayers is that they do something. The "voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake" which culminate each cycle of judgment and are to be seen in connection with them, are very clearly here tied to the prayers

themselves. It is because “the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar” – which is where the prayers of the saints are (ver. 3-4) – and then “cast it into the earth” that this happens. God is seen here responding to the prayers of the saints.

Now, we must repeat a necessary caveat here: God does not always say yes to every prayer. And the Bible tells us that. It tells us that there is a type of prayer that will not be answered. It also tells us that there is a type of prayer that will be answered. So for example, we read in James, “Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (Jam. 4:2-3). God very clearly tells us here through the apostle that if we ask him something for selfish purposes, we can expect him to say no to that. And thank God for that! It is a judgment from heaven when God says yes to lust-based prayers. Speaking of the time when God rained quail for the Israelites who had been complaining about the mana God has so graciously provided, we read: “So they did eat, and were well filled: for he gave them their own desire; they were not estranged from their lust. But while their meat was yet in their mouths, the wrath of God came upon them, and slew the fattest of them, and smote down the chosen men of Israel” (Ps. 78:29-31). So we should be thankful that God does not simply say yes to sinful prayers.

On the other hand, we are told that it is the prayers of those who abide in the Son and his word that have their prayers answered: “If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you” (Jn. 15:7). The “what ye will” must be connected to abiding in Christ and his words abiding in us. That is not a blank check for those who want to use prayer as a way to pad their lives with earthly comforts. Rather, this is a description of people who are completely on board with the priorities of heaven: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.”

You see this also in John’s epistle: “And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things

that are pleasing in his sight” (1 Jn. 3:22). I think these two verses are saying the same thing. If we keep God’s commandments, are living in obedience to God, and do that which is pleasing in his sight, then we can expect our prayers to be answered. The reason is simple: those who keep God’s commandments live in light of God’s will and word and their prayers are shaped by those realities. You see this underlined in a different way later in his epistle: “And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us” (1 Jn. 5:14). Do you want to have confidence in prayer? Then ask according to God’s will, not according to your lusts!

Now someone might say at this point, “Then what’s the use? I mean, if God only answers prayers when they’re according to his will, then why pray? Because isn’t it true that God’s will is always done? Isn’t God going to do what he wants to do whether I pray for it or not?” To answer this question, we must first observe that there are two senses in which God’s will is spoken of in Scripture. One is his will of command, which is not always done. It is true, for example, that it is God’s will that no one commits murder. Yet this is clearly violated again and again. God’s will of command is not always done. When we pray according to God’s will, we really are praying that his will of command be accomplished – isn’t this the point of the words in the Lord’s Prayer, “in earth as it is in heaven”? So we see that there is a point to praying according to God’s will. It isn’t always done in this sense, which is why we pray for it.

But there is another sense in which God’s will is spoken of in Scripture. This is his will of decree or purpose. It is true that God’s eternal purpose is always done. This seems to be what James is talking about when he says, “For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that” (Jam. 4:15). Here God’s will doesn’t depend upon our action, but our action depends upon God’s will. There is an eternal hidden purpose of God that stands ultimately behind all reality (Ps. 115:3; Isa. 46:8-11). This is I think what folks are thinking about when they object to the fact that only prayers according to God’s will are answered.

However, the reality is that even God's will of decree is effected through the prayers of his people. We must not think about even God's eternal plan apart from the prayers of his people. For Scripture reveals, and Rev. 8:1-5 shows, that God's purpose is tied – by God himself! – to the prayers of the saints. In other words, it is right to say that God's eternal purpose will be surely accomplished. But it is equally right to say that it will not be accomplished apart from the prayers of the saints. The point of the prayers here in Revelation have to do with God's purpose for history, and that God's purpose is being effected through them.

So, brother and sister, pray! I firmly believe that God puts it on the hearts of people to pray for things that he has purposed in eternity to accomplish through those prayers. God births the prayers of our hearts through the Holy Spirit who knows God's will and intercedes for us according to his will (Rom. 8:26-27). Your prayers are not wasted breath or time. He hears our prayers and responds to them.

Let me close with a very specific sort of prayer that God has promised always to answer. It is the prayer of Romans 10:13 – “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” The Lord here is Jesus who in the context is the one by whom we receive salvation and righteousness (see esp. ver. 9-12). Those who come to him and ask for mercy through him have the guarantee of God's word that they will be saved. Note the word whosoever and the word shall. There are no exceptions! We don't look inside ourselves for evidence that God will save us through Christ, for we have his word. Where are you this morning? Do you feel your need for God's forgiveness? Then come and pray to him, call upon the name of Jesus, and the sure and certain promise from God himself is that you will be saved!

CHAPTER XVI

A FUTURE EXODUS (REV.

8:6 – 9:21)

THE BOOK OF REVELATION does not read like most other books in the Bible. And when you get to chapters like 8 and 9, you get to chapters that themselves stand apart from the rest of this book. Locusts that look like battle horses? Demon horses with serpents for tails? What in the world is this about? And trying to turn these verbal descriptions into visual images is really difficult: it would be hard even for someone like Picasso.

However, I think the reason why we have chapters like this in our Bibles is because the Bible is from God. God knows what we are. He knows that we are not just disembodied minds in a vat. We are embodied souls. We think and we feel, we make choices and experience life from multiple angles. We see and touch and taste the world around us. We imagine and dream and wonder. We don't always just believe something because we've carefully traced out the logic of an argument: most often we believe it because it fits with our total experience of the world. Sometimes the way a statement makes us feel has as much to do with whether we believe it or not as the way it makes us think.

Revelation

It seems to me that Revelation 8-9 is meant to come at us in the totality of our persons. It is for this reason that it is not meant to be taken in an overly-literalistic way for it is an imaginative description of God's plan for the end of history that is meant to provoke the imagination and move the affections as well as the mind. This is not just offered for our thoughts, but also for our emotions and our will. These images are not only meant to inform our belief system about the last times but to make that belief system more robust by addressing us in the totality of our beings.

So that is the reason why I think Revelation comes to us in the way it does. The Lord knows that we don't just need didactic statements about the world around us but also that we need our entire person to be engaged with the truths of Scripture. So we do have didactic portions of the Bible, like the epistles of Paul for example. Paul was a very logical thinker. I am thankful for that; we need that. We need Romans. But we also need Revelation because sometimes a picture is better than an argument of a thousand words.

Have you ever wondered why so much of the Bible is poetry? The Psalms, the Song of Solomon, the book of Job. Just think about the book of Job for a moment. Here is a book which deals with one of the most profound philosophical problems mankind has ever wrestled with: the problem of evil and suffering. But how does the Lord deal with that? He deals with it through Hebrew poetry: a lot of Hebrew poetry. Christopher Ash explains why: "A poet can often touch us, move us, and unsettle us in way that prose cannot. Job is a blend of the affective (touching our feelings) and the cognitive (addressing our minds). . . . We cannot just sum up a poem in a bald statement; we need to let a poem get to work on us – we must immerse ourselves in it."¹ The problem of suffering is not dealt with best on a merely intellectual level but on a level that engages our affections as well as our thoughts.

¹Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2014), p. 22-23.

Now some people mock the imagery and figures and characters in the book of Revelation and point at it and say that here is a book which is obviously written by a guy on LSD and off his rocker and therefore not from God. But I'm saying that the very way Revelation unfolds is a testament that it is in fact from God, because our Maker knows better than anyone that we can be taught and must be taught through pictures and drama as well as through arguments and propositions.

But is this really from God or is it just a fancy literary work entirely from the mind of John? Some folks have looked at Revelation and noticed that many of the elements of the dreams and visions that John has used are not original with him but find their background in the Old Testament, especially in Daniel and Ezekiel. And so they argue we shouldn't think that John actually saw a vision from God and wrote it down for us but that he is communicating his own view of things using apocalyptic dreams and visions as a literary tool. They might say that we should think of it like you would *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. That book too purports to come from a dream, but I think we all know that this was just a literary tool Bunyan uses to draw his audience in. Is this what John is doing?

I don't think so. We can, on the one hand, allow for the fact that many of the motifs and images in Revelation find their source in the books of the Old Testament. However, on the other hand, this need not cancel out the fact that John is in fact reporting a vision which he really saw and that this vision was from God. What is happening here is that God communicated spiritual realities to John using imagery that John himself would have understood. John knew the Old Testament. He was steeped in the language of the prophets; he understood them. So when the Lord revealed his plan for the end of history to John, he did so using language and images that would have made sense to John.

This reminds me of the experience of Nabeel Qureshi. In his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*, he tells us that as he was wrestling with the claims of Jesus and the Bible, he asked God for a vision. And God gave him one. As he told his mother about the details of the vision,

she turned to a book written by a Muslim to help Muslims interpret their dreams. The interesting thing is that every detail of that dream was interpreted according to that book in a way that pointed Nabeel to the truth of the gospel. Though some would argue that this is all just highly coincidental, I don't see any reason to doubt that God was helping Nabeel through that vision in a way that would have made sense to him given his Muslim background. Now that's not a perfect analogy for what is going on in Revelation, but it does illustrate, I think, the fact that God communicates to people in terms that they can understand. For both John and Nabeel that meant communicating to them using imagery and language from sources they would be familiar with (though I would never put Nabeel's dream on the level with John's visions!).

Why am I saying all this? I am saying it because I want you to hear Revelation as God's word, and unfortunately there are always people out there who want to undermine your faith in the Bible. One of the ways this has been done is through things like so-called higher criticism, and one of the ways higher critics undermine faith in the Bible as the word of God is by pointing to literary sources outside the Bible and arguing that this shows that the Bible is just a human work dependent on other human works. They will argue that John didn't get the content for Revelation from God but that he drew on other sources to craft this book using various literary techniques. This can sound reasonable at first, but it rests on a false dichotomy. What am I saying is that just because you can trace literary sources behind the images of Revelation is not an argument that this was a genuine vision from God, which it is.

So Revelation 8 and 9 is from God. But what are we meant to learn from this? What truth or truths are meant to engage us as we read these words? This vision was not seen to entertain us; it was meant to teach us and to make us feel something. And I think the reality that is conveyed here is this: the Exodus of Israel from Egypt is a type of a much greater future Exodus of the people of God from a hostile world. I want to unpack that in terms of the text we have

just read, and then I want to end with an encouragement and a warning.

The Exodus of the OT points to a future and greater Exodus.

Why do I say this? I say it because the trumpet-judgments are intentionally meant, I think, to remind us of the plagues with which God judged Egypt before delivering Israel from bondage. In doing so, the Lord is telling us through this vision that there is a greater Exodus coming: not from one part of this sin-cursed earth to another part of this sin-cursed earth, but from a sin-cursed planet to one where the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Like the seal-judgments, the trumpet-judgments come to us in a 4-2-1 pattern. The first four are judgments directed at the earth, then next two at rebellious mankind, and the last is marked off from the previous six by an interlude in chapters 10-11. We will be looking at the first six trumpets in this message.

But why trumpets? We argued that just as the seals of a scroll must be unloosed before the contents of the scroll could be enacted, so the seal-judgments represent calamities that are the kinds of things that must take place (cf. Mt. 24:6) before the end comes. But what function do trumpets have in the unfolding of these visions? If the seals bring us to the end, the trumpets introduce the end times. In the OT, trumpets were used for various reasons, such as “declaring a state of emergency and summoning men to battle (e.g., Jg. 3:27ff., 7:8ff., Neh. 4:18).”² But they were also used for announcing days of worship and times of joy: “Also in the day of your gladness, and in your solemn days, and in the beginnings of your months, ye shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; that they may be to you for a memorial before your God: I am the Lord your God” (Num. 10:10).

²G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, p. 152. He also cites Ezek. 33:iff, Joel 2:1, and Zeph. 1:15.

It should not surprise us, then, that we see trumpets used here for both judgment and joy, as they announce catastrophes (following the first six trumpet blows) followed by superabounding joy in the seventh trumpet as the people of God celebrate the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. We are also reminded of the several NT passages in which the Second Coming is announced and preceded by the blow of a trumpet by the archangel.

In verses 6-12 of chapter 8, the first four trumpet-judgments are described. These are judgments against the earth (7), the sea (8-9), the rivers (10-11), and the celestial lights (12). As we look at these, I think there are two extremes that should probably be avoided here. One is to look at these and to interpret them excessively literally. Note the language throughout here of “as it were” and “were like unto” and so on. For example, a strictly literal interpretation of the judgment upon the sun, moon, and stars would demand that the intensity of their light is diminished by a third, whereas it is not the intensity of their shining that is affected but the length of their shining. But this is a vision, and though this is what John literally saw, doesn’t mean that each item must be interpreted literally.

On the other hand, the temptation for other interpreters is to take the principle that these are symbolic and figurative images and to give an interpretation that fails to do justice to truly apocalyptic nature of these symbols. I don’t think these are just symbols for common calamities; they are symbols for calamities and judgments which will be actual events in history that herald the end of the world as we know it. And though I don’t think the point is that we are meant to be able in advance to discern the exact nature of these judgments, we are meant to know that judgments like this will happen and will herald the end of the world and the coming of the kingdom of God in all its fulness.

The First Trumpet

The point, however, that is easy to miss is this: all these judgments are meant to make us think of the plagues God visited upon ancient Egypt. So when the first angel sounds the first trumpet, we are told that, “there followed hail and fire mingled with blood, and they were cast upon the earth: and the third part of trees was burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up” (7). This is very much like the seventh plague, in which we are told that “Moses stretched forth his rod toward heaven: and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and the fire ran along upon the ground; and the Lord rained hail upon the land of Egypt. So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation” (Exod. 9:23-24). Of course, the plague of the first trumpet is intensified because there is also blood mixed in. However, you will also notice that in these first four trumpet judgments, there is not only intensification, but there is also a limitation. Here, we are told that only a third of the trees (probably a reference to fruit trees) are burned up.

The Second and Third Trumpets

Then comes the second trumpet: “And the second angel sounded, and as it were a great mountain burning with fire was cast into the sea: and the third part of the sea became blood; and the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died; and the third part of the ships were destroyed” (Rev. 8:8-9). This should remind us of the first Egyptian plague, in which Moses was enabled to turn the waters of the Nile to blood. Here the focus is on the sea, or the ocean; in the next trumpet, the same thing will essentially happen for the rivers of the earth: “And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter” (10-11). Wormwood, by the way, is the name of a plant which has a very

bitter taste. It is not in itself poisonous but is associated in the Bible with poison. For example, in Jer. 9:13-15, we read, “And the Lord saith, Because they have forsaken my law which I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice, neither walked therein; but have walked after the imagination of their own heart, and after Baalim, which their fathers taught them: therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will feed them, even this people, with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink.”³ There, as here, it is a symbol of God’s judgment upon a wicked people.

What are we to make of this burning mountain and this star called Wormwood? I don’t think we’re meant to associate these events with volcanic eruptions or rivers poisoned from industrial pollution. Rather, these are symbols of judgment from heaven upon an earth which has become the stage for human rebellion and sin against God. Notice that the great mountain is cast into the sea and the star Wormwood falls from heaven. These are judgments from God and the fact that one is a mountain and the other is a star is meant, I think, to help us see the enormity of the calamity which is the result. At the same time, the fact that only a third of things are affected points to the limited nature of the judgments. These judgments herald the end, but they don’t yet bring the end. In particular, they are meant to bring people to repentance.

The Fourth Trumpet

The fourth trumpet then sounds: “And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon, and the third part of the stars; so as the third part of them was darkened, and the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise” (12). This is probably meant to make us think of the ninth plague in Exodus. There, we read, “And the Lord said unto Moses,

³Some translate the phrase “water of gall” as “poisonous water.” See, for example: ESV, NASB, NIV.

Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt. And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days: they saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days: but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.” (Exod. 10:21-23). Then, only three days were darkened. In the fourth trumpet judgment, only a third of the day and night were darkened.

The Fifth Trumpet

The next two judgments are judgments against mankind, whereas the first four are directed against nature. However, John spends a lot more time on the judgments that accompany the sounding of the fifth and sixth trumpets than he does the first four. But even in the fifth plague (Rev. 9:1-12), I think we are reminded of the Egyptian plagues, in particular, the plague of the locusts (cf. Exod. 10:4-20), though the plague of locusts described in the book of Joel is also in the background here as well.

Of course, then the locusts were actual locusts. In the fifth trumpet judgment, the locusts “were like unto horses prepared unto battle; and on their heads were as it were crowns like gold, and their faces were as the faces of men. And they had hair as the hair of women, and their teeth were as the teeth of lions. And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle. And they had tails like unto scorpions, and there were stings in their tails: and their power was to hurt men five months” (Rev. 9:7-10). I don’t think these are actual locusts at all, nor are we meant to imagine them to be the size of locust but more the size of horses prepared for battle.

In John’s vision, these locusts are demons from the Abyss, from the bottomless pit. In 9:1-3, an angelic being described as a star is given the key to the bottomless pit, which serves as a prison for these demons (we

are not told which angel, or whether this is a demon – the fact that it falls from heaven is not a reference to a moral fall or exile from heaven; it need mean no more than it descended to earth much as a meteor falls from the sky). They are led by a king, “the angel of the bottomless pit,” who is called Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek – both which mean “Destroyer” (9:11).

What they do is to torture men rather than kill them (9:5-6) – though the pain will be so severe that they will want to die. They are limited, however, not only in the extent to which they can hurt people, but also in the time – they have five months. (This corresponds to the summer months in Palestine when the threat of locust infestation is real.) However, there is another limitation: they are not allowed to hurt God’s people: “And it was commanded them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree; but only those men which have not the seal of God in their foreheads” (9:4). I think we need to remember that when we read this. This is a book given to the churches, and the believers are being told here that this is something they will never have to experience. They are sealed; they will be protected. In other words, the Christian is not meant to read this and be afraid. If you are in Christ, you will be spared from this judgment.

The Sixth Trumpet

If the final trumpet has a corollary in the Egyptian plagues, it would be the death of the firstborn. So here, you have these four angels which command an innumerable army of mounted cavalry of fire-breathing horses with venomous snakes for tails whose task is to kill a third of mankind (9:13-19). Whereas the locusts could only hurt but not kill, these actually kill.

The four angels which seem to lead this army “are bound in the great river Euphrates” (9:14). The river Euphrates was in Solomon’s time the eastern extent of the Judean kingdom; over it lie Israel’s enemies, and

it was from the other side of this river that the empires of Assyrian and Persia arose, and on the river itself that Babylon was situated. In John's time, the Euphrates marked the eastern edges of the Roman empire and on the other side sat the feared Parthian cavalry which had defeated Roman armies more than once. So again, this is the Lord communicating to John in a vision in terms he would have well understood. The Euphrates was certainly an apt symbol for the origin of armies that would gobble up mankind.

The fifth and the sixth trumpets are the first two woes announced by a bird of prey (in KJV, an angel) in 8:12-13). The third woe is associated with the seventh trumpet which will not sound until late in chapter 11.

An encouragement and a warning.

Again, we need to ask: but why these judgments which really are just intensified versions of the Egyptian plagues? What is the spiritual profit we are meant to cash in on when we read these chapters? And I think the answer to that is that they point us to a greater Exodus. They point us to a greater redemption. They point us to a greater deliverance. And that brings both encouragement for the follower of Jesus and a warning for those who abandon Jesus for the world.

The encouragement

This letter was written to churches. These churches were being persecuted. For the most part, they had no influence or power or wealth. They dwelt under the shadow of the might of the very pagan Roman empire. Christians didn't raise their children in a culture which was amenable to the Christian faith; they raised them in an atmosphere swirling with the sights and smells and sounds of a polytheistic and immoral culture. The world was not there to encourage the Christian to follow Jesus faithfully, but with the devil it did everything it could,

either by persecution or pleasure, to sift their faith and turn them from the true God and true religion.

How does your faith flourish in that climate? How do you keep the faith when the injustice of your pagan persecutors is unlikely to be challenged? How, when it is much more profitable for your business to just fit in than to stand out? And how do you live in a culture today that celebrates sin and is proud about it? We are living in a time which is seeing a resurgence of a new paganism, so this easily applies to us as well. It's all around us in a reality-abandoning, unborn-killing, child-sterilizing, God-denying, and Christ-ignoring secularism. How do you live in a culture like this?

You persevere in the faith of Jesus with joy and hope and peace because you know that in the end God will judge your enemies and the enemies of all his people. These trumpet judgments are a reminder of that reality. They are a reminder that justice will come and that the enemies of God's people won't escape it. This world which is presently under the sway of the evil one will one day fall under the judgment of the King of heaven. And these judgments presage the end and will lead ultimately to the final judgment in which all humanity will stand before the throne of the King of the universe and give an account. Justice will be finally done. Judgement will be finally rendered. All wrongs will be made right, and all the unrequited deeds of courageous righteousness will be made public and celebrated. Not pride but piety.

So there is great encouragement in these verses. They remind us to live in light of the end. They remind us that the way things are will not always be the way things are. This world is temporary. The world to come is eternal. So, with John we say: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2:15-17). What we are seeing in these judgments is the passing away of this world. And

what we will see in future chapters of Revelation is that the saints – those who do God’s will – will indeed abide forever.

The warning

But embedded in these verses is also a warning. It is a warning to those in the churches who were thinking about deconstructing their faith. It’s so easy to do that. You become an exvangelical and call yourself brave for leaving the faith. But that really is not brave. The easier thing to do is to do what the majority of the culture is doing, which is the way of the world, not the way of faithfulness to Jesus. The way of the world, the way of the exvangelical, is the broad way, through the wide gate. The hard way, the narrow way, is the way of following Jesus. But here’s the thing: the broad way and the wide road leads to destruction. The angels in Revelation 8-9 are trumpeting the judgment of God. And God’s judgment is far more severe, far more intense, than anything the world can dish out. And God’s judgment is just inescapable.

And by the way, you have to notice that the agents of the fifth and sixth trumpet judgments are demons. In other words, the agents of the prince of this world – the devil, whom the world serves – are the very ones who are persecuting the persecutors of the people of God. The devil is a bad master, and God is an inescapable judge. It doesn’t make sense to cast your lot in with Satan who won’t reward you and can’t save you.

In 9:20-21, we are told that those who survived these judgments didn’t repent. They should have and we are meant to see that this is tragic. They should have repented of their idolatry and murder and witchcraft and sexual immorality and greed, but they didn’t. So when we read this, if we are not living under the Lordship of Christ, our response ought to be repentance. For a person to laugh this off and say they don’t believe it and keep on with their idolatry and love of this world is as tragic as the condition of these folks in Rev. 9:20-21 who refused to repent. Oh my friend, flee from the wrath to come.

Revelation

And run to Jesus. He is not only the Lion of the tribe of Judah who will devour all his enemies; he is the Lamb slain for the sins of his people, and all who come to him in faith and repentance, will find that he will never cast them out. Those who embrace him as their Lord and Savior will find that all their sins are forgiven and that their hope is eternal. Come to Jesus!

CHAPTER XVII

THE ANGEL AND THE BIBLARIDION (REV. 10)

MY APPROACH TO THE INTERPRETATION of the book of Revelation can be summarized in two words: *futurist* and *minimalist*. That I am a futurist means that I take the fundamental message of Revelation to be about the future and in particular the end of history as we know it when Christ returns to judge his enemies and fully usher in his kingdom. That I am a minimalist means that I interpret the symbolism of the book without trying to squeeze meaning out of every detail. I don't think we are meant to go scrambling for our Bibles every time someone sneezes in the Middle East. So, for example, I interpreted the mountain of fire in chapter 9 as a symbol pointing us to a future judgment of God upon the earth without trying to pinpoint the exact nature of that judgment. I believe that the function of the symbolism of mountain on fire falling from heaven is meant to indicate two things: that this is a judgment from God and to point us to the enormity of the judgment. To say anything more than that is, I think, to press the symbol beyond its intended purpose.

However, even with this minimalist approach it is still sometimes difficult to know what exactly the point of some passages in Revelation

is. This becomes more difficult when there is a wide range of interpretations even among some of the more judicious and cautious commentaries. I have found Rev. 10-11 to fall into this category. One of the things I was surprised as I first began to think seriously about this book is how difficult these two chapters were (and still are!) for me to understand. So I have to admit here at the outset that I approach this part of the book with a bit of fear and trembling.

The next chapter is certainly (in my opinion) much more difficult than this one, but there is still a lot of disagreement here among interpreters. For example, is the “little book” (10:2) the same book as the one in chapter 5 or is it a different book? Some say they are the same and give good reasons for their position and others say they are different and give good reasons for that position. Another question that is often asked of this chapter has to do with the meaning of the seven thunders and what it meant for John to seal them up (10:3-4). Does the fact that John was told to seal them up mean that they represented another cycle of judgments that never happened? Or does this mean that this is something that will in fact happen, but which John was not allowed to disclose? Again, there is a difference of opinion about this, even among the most careful and discriminating of commentators.

I say all this, not because I want to confuse you, but because sometimes people think that when we teach the Bible is clear (the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture), we mean that all the Bible is equally clear to everyone, or at least to everyone who is a genuine Christian. But this is just not the case. Even the apostle Peter said that there were places in the apostle Paul’s writings “in which are some things hard to be understood” (2 Pet. 3:16). If one apostle says that about another apostle, it’s obviously okay for us to say that there are “some things hard to be understood” in the book of Revelation!

However, we have to be careful here. It is true that some things in the Bible are difficult, arising (at least partly) from the fact that the Bible is a compilation of very old documents between 2000 and 3500 years old from cultures very different from our own. But this does not imply

that all the Bible is opaque or difficult to understand or interpret. The heart of the gospel message is certainly easily grasped (at least on an intellectual level) by all. As Charles Hodge put it, when it comes to the Christian Scriptures, “in all things necessary to salvation they are sufficiently plain to be understood even by the unlearned.”

The way the Bible speaks to us implies that it is clear, for it commands us on a personal level. It speaks to us directly, not through channels. Though we do not teach that we are free to interpret the Scriptures any way we want to, and though we do not teach that we can ignore the teaching of the Church through history, we do teach that the Bible is our final and highest authority. But that would be impossible if the Bible weren't clear on matters essential to salvation. The doctrine of sola Scriptura is meaningless part from the basic clarity of its message. Paul tells Timothy that “from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). This is not the Holy Scriptures mediated through an infallible tradition alongside Scripture – but through the upbringing he received from his mother and grandmother. The apostle goes on to say, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (16-17). The Scriptures in themselves are sufficiently able to make us perfect, and that reality again must rest upon its basic clarity.

But not all Scripture is equally clear. The Bible is like the ocean in a way; there are places shallow enough that even a toddler can wade into its riches, and there are places so deep that even the most intellectually gifted are challenged. We should expect this; it is something you would expect if the Bible were given by inspiration of God, as the apostle says.

However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't take the challenge offered to us in the harder to understand parts of the Bible. The Lord didn't include this in our Bibles for us to skip over. We need to read it and we

need to try to understand it. It too is given by inspiration of God; it too is meant to equip us and to furnish us for good works.

One more point before we come to the text. On the one hand, we shouldn't despise scholarship and the teaching gifts God has given to the church through the ages. To despise that is to despise God. On the other hand, if the Scriptures are really inspired by the Holy Spirit, surely it makes sense for us to ask for enlightenment from him who gave us the Scriptures. We should read the Bible upon our knees as it were. This in fact is modeled for us in the Bible itself. For example, the psalmist prays: "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Ps. 119:18). And, "Make me to understand the way of thy precepts: so shall I talk of thy wondrous works" (27). And, "Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart" (34). This is the way we should read Revelation.

What is the function of Rev. 10-11 in the scheme of Revelation? Let's now come to the text, to chapter 10. This is part of the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments. We noted that the trumpet judgments follow, like the seal judgments, a 4-2-1 pattern. In particular, in both cases the first six judgments in the cycle are separated from the seventh by an intermission of sorts. But both intermissions are placed there to help us understand what follows. Chapter 7, which divides the sixth from the seventh seal, shows how the people of God are sealed. Then in chapter 9 we see why: they are sealed to be protected from the outpouring of God's wrath.

In the case of the trumpet judgments, the intermission goes from 10:1 to 11:14. This text also helps us to understand the material that will follow. Up to this point, the book of Revelation has mostly been about the judgment of God upon the wicked for their rebellion against him and the safety of the saints as they are sealed by God. But as we move into the following chapters we will be confronted with another reality: the suffering of the saints as they confront a world under the sway of an unholy trinity of dragon, beast, and false prophet. In this chapter and the next, the book of Revelation shifts our focus onto

this conflict and the necessity of persevering in the faith in the face of demonic opposition. Chapter 10 introduces this by pointing suffering saints to two truths they need to know: they need to know that God's long-awaited promise will be fulfilled, and they need to know that God has spoken to them to direct, encourage, and equip them as they await the fulfillment of that promise. I think the first reality is pointed to in verses 1-7 in the mystery of God fulfilled, and the second in verses 8-11 in the prophetic message imparted.

The Mystery of God fulfilled (1-7)

I want to try to unpack the meaning of these verses by asking three questions: (1) Who is the angel introduced in verse 1? (2) What is the little book introduced in verse 2? (3) What does it mean for John to seal up the things uttered by the seven thunders?

Who is the angel introduced in verse 1?

Apparently John's point of view has changed from heaven (4:1) to back on earth, for we are told, "And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire" (10:1). In 5:2 we are alerted to "a strong angel" who proclaimed "with a loud voice, Who is able to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?" In this case, we see "another mighty angel" who has come down from heaven to earth in order to stand on the sea and on the land. Instead of asking who can open the book, this angel has a little book already opened in his hand (10:2).

The fact that he is described in such exalted language has apparently led some to conclude that this is Jesus. However, this is not Jesus. For one thing, our Lord is never called an angel in any other part of this book, and angels are seen in Revelation as being servants of God who do not deserve to be worshiped (cf. 19:10). Also, in verse 6, he swears by

God, differentiating himself from God; but we have already seen that in the book of Revelation Jesus has divine status. He is not just like God, he is God. Finally, in the scheme of Revelation, we are told that God the Father gives the Revelation to his Son Jesus who gave it to his angel who gave it to John. We see here in chapter 10 the angel giving John a little book, which must contain at least part of the contents of Revelation. This angel, according to 1:1, must have received it from Jesus who received it from God the Father.

But we should not be surprised at the exalted nature of this angel. Like Moses, no being can be in God's presence and not come out without some indication of this. Moses came out with his face shining like the sun. This angel has come from the presence of God clothed in a cloud, his face also shining like the sun with the radiance of rainbow about his head and with feet like pillars of fire (some commentators think this is meant to remind us of the pillars of fire that led the children of Israel out of Egypt). He is a mighty, a strong angel, not because he is God but because he represents God and serves him for the good of his people. Whatever the saints have to endure on earth, they are reminded that their sufferings don't happen to them because God can't help it but because it is part of his wise plan for his glory and their good.

What is the "little book" introduced in verse 2?

"And he had in his hand a little book open: and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth" (2). This angel comes down to earth and puts one foot on the sea and the other upon the land. This not only shows us that this angel is larger than life but also points us to the universality of the message that he brings. In his hand (his left hand, for he uses his right hand to swear an oath, see verse 5, ESV) he has a "little book" (or, more likely, a little scroll) opened. Some argue

¹The Greek word *biblaridion* means "little book." See verse 2. In case you're wondering, the title of the chapter was inspired by a certain John Wayne movie.

that because Jesus opened the scroll he was given in chapter 5, that this opened scroll is that scroll, given to the angel to give to John (cf. 1:1). That is possible, I suppose, but the fact that it is called a little scroll surely indicates that this is different in some way. This book will be given to John in verses 8-11, which he will eat (like Ezekiel of old; Ezek. 2:8; 3:1-3), representing the fact that this is the prophetic message which has been entrusted to John to deliver. Since the nature of the intermission of chapter 7 was to help explain the significance of events described in later chapters, I think the interlude of chapters 10 and 11 are also meant to help us understand what John is yet to see in the vision. What John is yet to see is the struggle between the people of God and the dragon, beast, and false prophet. In other words, I think the contents of the “little book” are about the contest between the people of God and their persecutors and the direction and encouragement given to believers in it.

I think the basic difference between the two scrolls, then, is this: the scroll sealed with seven seals is God’s plan for the end of history, to be fulfilled by the person and work of Jesus Christ. The scroll given to John is the prophetic message he is to deliver to the church as they await the fulfillment of God’s plan. Of course, there is overlap between the two scrolls. John’s prophetic message reveals aspects of God’s plan. But the fact that John’s scroll is a little scroll probably at least implies that not everything in God’s plan is revealed to John. The secret things still belong to God but those revealed through his prophets belong to us (Deut. 29:29).

What does it mean for John to seal up the things uttered by the seven thunders?

In verse 3 the angel roars like a lion, and in response seven thunders utter their voices: “And cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth: and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices.” Since we have read about seven seals and seven trumpets, both which describe cycles

of judgment, it would seem to naturally follow that the seven thunders represent another cycle of judgment which will interpose themselves between the sixth and seventh trumpet calls. If this is the case, this would necessitate a longer period of time before the end comes and the salvation of God is fully experienced.

However, as John sits down and begins to write, he is given further instructions: “And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not” (4).

Now some think that all this means is that there are some things about God’s plan for the end of history that are not to be revealed to the church. Maybe so. We argued earlier that this might be an implication in the fact that the scroll given to John is a little scroll. However, I think the point is that since John is not allowed to include the utterances of the seven thunders in the Revelation, this is meant to convey the fact that God will not allow them to lengthen the time until the final trumpet call and the fulfillment of the mystery of God. We see this in the following verses: “And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer: but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets” (5-7). The sealing up of the thunders is followed immediately by a proclamation that the end has come.

That this is the point is clarified by the words, “that there should be time no longer.” Now that is not saying that in the eternal state there will be no experience of the succession of moments and that we will live in an eternal “now.” For one thing, John is not interested in making such a philosophical statement here. For another thing, it is impossible for finite beings like we are to not experience time in the sense of a

succession of moments. The distinction between the present age and the eternal state is the different between the present age and the age to come (cf. Mt. 12:32; Mk. 10:30; Lk. 18:30; Eph. 2:7; Heb. 6:5²).

Rather, the point here is that the time for awaiting the fulfillment of God's promise has come to an end: the time is now. Or, as the ESV appropriately (and I think more accurately) translates: "that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets" (Rev. 10:6-7). The time for the seventh trumpet which represents the fulfillment and finishing of God's mystery will not be delayed by the seven thunders but will be immediately realized.

The "mystery of God" is not something which is mysterious in the sense that we can't understand it. A mystery in a Biblical sense is something which we cannot know unless God reveals it to us (cf. Eph. 3:5). It is something which God reveals to us through his apostles and prophets. So here, the mystery of God is God's plan for the end of history revealed in the past to God's prophets and in the present to John.

The point here is that the Lord will not delay or draw out unnecessarily the fulfillment of his promises to us. The end is coming. The present age will not last forever. As we said last time, the way things are will not always be the way things are. God will bring all things to their appointed end. We know he can do this because he is the one who "liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein." He is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, the first and the last. He is the creator of all things. And God is not to be imagined as if he were captive to the world he has created, for he is the Lord over all things and sovereign in his direction of the affairs of men. The world goes on not because of some irrevocable law independent of God but because God wills it to be so. And the God who keeps all

²In most of these passages, the KJV translates the world *aion* as "world," but a better translation is "age."

things in existence will bring all things to their proper completion at the right time, not a moment before and not a moment later.

It is comforting to know that God is in control, and nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the fact that God will bring all things to an end and fulfill all his promises and finish the mystery revealed in his good time.

In fact, I think this is one of the things that sets the Christian religion apart from others. Our story has a beginning (in fact, it literally begins with, “In the beginning,” Gen. 1:1) and it has an ending. Not only that, but for all who are in Christ, the ending is a good ending. It is not only a good ending, but it is the kind of ending that can’t be improved on: “in the ages to come [God will] show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7). We will literally live happily forever after. Do you know why we want stories to end that way? Because that is the way the story behind all stories will end. It is the way the story God is writing will end.

On the other hand, the secular story is one without an objective storyline; just a bunch of different characters with “their own” story without a meaningful beginning leading to a meaningless end. Is it any wonder then why our age is characterized by despair rather than hope? But the Christian need not and must not give in to the despair of the age for we live in hope of eternal life which God who cannot lie promised before the world began (Tit. 1:2).

The prophetic message imparted (8-11)

At the end of the chapter, John is told, “Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings” (10:11). The word “before” in that verse is one of those Greek prepositions that is incredibly versatile and can be hard to translate at times.³ It is possible to translate this as “before,” but it is more likely to mean “about.” He

³It is the Greek preposition *epi*.

is to prophesy about many peoples and languages and kings, which is exactly what we see in the chapters to follow.

Though the nations include both Christian and non-Christian, we must remember that the reason God gave the Revelation to John and gave him this prophetic commission was for the strengthening and encouragement of the church. That is because between Now and Then, the Christian needs instruction; he needs direction and encouragement. And I think that is at least partly the point of John's commissioning as a prophet in these verses. Like Ezekiel, he is told to take a scroll and eat it. In both accounts (Ezekiel's and John's) the scroll tastes like honey. But in John's experience, after eating the scroll he experienced bitterness in his stomach: "And the voice which I heard from heaven spake unto me again, and said, Go and take the little book which is open in the hand of the angel which standeth upon the sea and upon the earth. And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey. And I took the little book out of the angel's hand, and ate it up; and it was in my mouth sweet as honey: and as soon as I had eaten it, my belly was bitter" (Rev. 10:8-10).

Now why did it make his belly bitter? John doesn't exactly say. Some say that it was because of the judgments upon the nations that John was to predict. Certainly, Ezekiel's burden was a burden of judgment, and perhaps the similarity between Revelation and Ezekiel at this point is meant to point us to that. But if we look ahead a bit, what we discover is the new theme of conflict between the saints and Satan. Personally, I think that this is what makes John's belly bitter. He sees what is in store for the saints. He sees that they will be called upon to love not their lives unto death (12:11). He sees that the beast will make war against the saints and will overcome them (13:7).

However, this is not all that John has to say. For though the beast, the Antichrist, will be able to overcome and kill God's people now, he cannot overthrow God's plan. He can kill the body but after that he can do no more. He cannot take away eternal life from the elect and he

cannot subject them to God's wrath. For the one who trusts in Jesus as Lord and Savior the end will be indescribably sweet.

And this is the thing we have to remember. As it will be in the end, so it is now: in this world we will have tribulation, but we can be of good cheer for our Lord has overcome the world (Jn. 16:33). Those who remember this, who keep the end in sight, who remember the crown, who value the age to come over the present age, will be able to persevere to the end, even in the face of great trials. The way we remember this is by paying attention to God's word, to the prophetic message. The Lord told John, "Thou must prophesy," and that means that we must hear. Or, as the apostle Peter put it, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19).

The point is that God is not only bringing the mystery to an end. He has also provided the follower of Jesus with sure direction as we journey to the end. We are not wandering about in darkness (cf. 1 Thess. 5:4), but we have God's prophetic word which is a lamp to our feet and a light unto our path (Ps. 119:105).

Conclusion

What then should be our response to the teaching of this chapter? At least two-fold. First, let us be reminded again to live in light of the end, to let the light of the future shine into the present darkness. Let us be like Paul who kept his eye on the prize, rather than like Demas who loved this present world. This chapter reminds us that the end is not some unreachable goal. It is not like the point at infinity but will be reached in a finite amount of time. The end will come; let us live in light of that reality.

Second, let us be encouraged by the fact that God has spoken to us in the prophetic word, which we have in the Scriptures. We don't write the Story in which we find ourselves; God does. God writes it and interprets

it for us. He shows us how to live as we await the end. He provides us with great encouragement as we run our race. We must therefore hear the words of life given to us in his holy Word.

This Word is fundamentally about Jesus Christ; the book is the Revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1). It is the name of Christ that is the name by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). The fulfillment of the mystery of God centers on Christ; the glory to come is a glory purchased by Christ. He alone is worthy to take the book and to open the seals thereof. For he was slain and by his blood he has ransomed people from every nation, tribe, and language. Are you in that number? Believe on the Lord Jesus and repent of your sins. Those who do so will find that their names have been written in heaven from the foundation of the earth.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TWO WITNESSES

(REV. 11:1-13)

THIS HAS BEEN PERHAPS the most difficult passage in Revelation for me to get my head around up to this point. However, I am not alone and there seems to be a general consensus among the commentaries that this is indeed a difficult text to explain. It brings us back to the method of interpreting this book. How is it best approached?

Some think that the best approach is just to take everything literally. So in this chapter, they would say that it's a prediction that there really will be exactly two fire-breathing prophets who will be able to kill their enemies and call down droughts upon the land. There will be an actual beast that literally comes out of a shaft going down into the Abyss who will kill these prophets and let their dead bodies lay in the streets of Jerusalem for three days. Then they will rise from the dead and ascend into heaven, and this is then followed by an earthquake that kills seven thousand men, causing those who remain alive to tremble and quake at the judgment of God. That's what the text says, and we are to take it literally.

That's a simple and straightforward approach, but the problem is that it is almost certainly wrong. It reminds me of those students who

try to add fractions by adding the numerators and denominators. Very straightforward but also very wrong. Now the argument that some make is that we should take everything in Revelation literally unless John interprets it for us. For example, in chapter 5 we noted that the incense is interpreted to be the prayers of the saints (5:8). The reasoning is this: if John interprets some things for us, that must mean that the uninterpreted parts are meant to be taken literally.

Nevertheless, this just doesn't work. For one thing, it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of apocalyptic genre. But it doesn't even work when you try to apply it consistently in the book of Revelation itself. For example, in chapter 5, we see a lion and a lamb. But the Lion is interpreted by the Lamb and the Lamb is never interpreted in the book of Revelation to be Jesus. Now some may say that it's obvious it's Jesus, but that misses the point: if we are to take this principle and run with it, it would mean that the Lamb really is a Lamb, full stop. However, we all know this is Jesus, and that the Lamb is a symbol for the sacrificial nature of the atonement which our Lord accomplished on the cross. The bottom line is that not every symbol is interpreted.

Another problem with this approach is that some symbols are themselves interpreted symbolically. For example, in 4:5 the lamps of fire around God's throne are interpreted to be "the seven Spirits of God." Many (if not most) commentators would agree with me that the seven Spirits of God are a symbolic reference to the one Spirit of God in the plenitude of his grace and power. So you have a symbol interpreted by a symbol! You see that even here in chapter 11, where the symbolic "great city" (which, as we shall see as we progress through this book, is almost certainly Rome as a symbol of the power of wickedness under the rule of the Antichrist) is interpreted symbolically in terms of Sodom, then Egypt, then Jerusalem (ver. 8). So it just doesn't work to say that we must take things literally unless they're interpreted for us when even symbols get interpreted symbolically.

What then is the key to interpreting the book of Revelation? The answer is that the Old Testament is the key to interpreting the symbols

in Revelation. In this chapter, we see the temple, the two witnesses, the judgments they render on their enemies, and the 42 months or 1260 days. John didn't just pull these images out of his hat; they all came from Old Testament figures, events, places, and prophesies. It's as we understand the Old Testament background of these symbols that we will be able to understand their meaning in the context of the book of Revelation. So I think as we approach this chapter we have to understand that a point is being made here, but it is being made symbolically. And the key to understanding what these symbols mean is to try to understand their OT background.

What then is the big picture here? What is the main point that is being driven at in these verses? What do the symbols symbolize? I think it is this: God will preserve and protect his church as it bears witness to him in the last days even as it suffers persecution. And in the end, he will vindicate his church in a bodily and glorious resurrection.

That is, I think, the big picture, but it doesn't make all the difficulties go away. In particular, one of the most difficult things I've struggled with in the interpretation of this passage is trying to understand the timeframe for it. There are a lot of different views on this, more than you might think. I won't go through them all, but I'll mention a couple that I have found plausible. Most are convinced (I am too) that John is alluding to a prophesy in the ninth chapter of the book of Daniel, in which the Lord disclosed to him that even though Jerusalem was to be restored, this didn't mean the end was at hand, or even that there would be an end of Israel's troubles (cf. Dan. 9:24-27). Daniel is told that instead there will be seventy weeks of years that begin from the order to rebuild Jerusalem. In this prophesy, the seventieth week is distinguished from the previous sixty-nine. The question is, how is John alluding to this seventieth week?

Well, some think that the timeframe for the events of this passage, the 42 months or 1260 days (42 times 30 days – the months were all 30 days long back then), represents the entire period of time between the first

and second comings of Jesus. This may very well be correct, though I favor a slightly different interpretation which I will get to in a moment.

Others think that John is splitting the seventieth week of Daniel into two periods of three-and-a-half years and interpreting both halves. The first half represents a period of time in which the church is protected, and the second half represents a period of time when that earthly protection is removed, and the church is severely persecuted. In addition to all this, some think that the 42 months is a literal period of time and others believe it is a figurative period of time.

I'll tell you what I think and let you decide whether it makes sense to you or not. Almost everyone (if not everyone) agrees that the 42 months or 1260 days is a three-and-a-half-year period that comes from the book of Daniel. In the book of Daniel, every place where you come across this time period ("time, times, and half a time," see Dan. 7:27; 9:27; 12:7, 14) it is referring to a future time a great tribulation for the people of God. That is obviously the background for the three-and-a-half-year period in Revelation. It would seem then that every instance in the book of Revelation to this three-and-a-half-year period would also be a reference to this period of intense persecution for God's people. So therefore I don't think John is using this timeframe in different ways; I don't think he is referring to two different three and a half year periods of time. In every case, they refer to the same period of time, this time of intense and severe persecution.

Now when is this? Are we living in this period of time now? I don't think so; I really do think this is a reference to a future period of time at the end of history. Daniel seems to understand this period to belong to the end of history – and not merely the new age ushered in by the death and resurrection of Christ but a time when "many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever" (Dan. 12:2-3). Daniel goes on to ask "How long shall it be to the end of these wonders? (6), to

which we get the following answer (in terms reminiscent of Rev. 10:5-7): “And I heard the man clothed in linen, which was upon the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever that it shall be for a time, times, and an half; and when he shall have accomplished to scatter the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished” (Dan. 12:7). This sounds very much like the end.

Also, I think the overall structure of Revelation favors an end-times perspective. We have argued that the opening up of the seals had to happen in order for the contents of the scroll – God’s plan for the consummation of history in the salvation of his people and the destruction of his enemies – to be enacted. The trumpet judgments which follow the opening of all the seals are therefore the inauguration of the end. In chapter 11, we are still in the midst of these judgments (the second woe apparently includes both the sixth trumpet and the events of chapter 11), and so I take this to refer to a great tribulation at the end of history through which the church will have to pass.

How would churches in the first century benefit from this though? Well, I think again Daniel is a guide here. Daniel also prophesied of this future time of persecution, which though it was partially fulfilled in the times of Antiochus Epiphanes, even that was still future to Daniel. Nevertheless, Daniel clearly wrote his book to encourage other Jews like himself who were having to remain faithful to God’s law while living in a pagan environment. But this message about the future was not irrelevant to them; it was certainly meant to be relevant to them as well. And we can easily imagine how it would be. Both Daniel’s past experience and the future experience of the saints narrated in the prophecies were meant to encourage Jews who felt beleaguered in a foreign land. The example of past, present, and future was meant to give them courage and to know that what they were called to do is something God’s people have been called to do, are being called to do, and would be called to do.

In the same way, Revelation reminds us that at the end God’s people will be called upon to pass through the severest of persecutions. And in

that persecution they will be called upon to remain faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ. They will be called upon to remain faithful unto death. Their example is meant to put iron in our blood. It is meant to give us courage though their example. It is meant to show us how to live. Therefore, there probably is not that much difference between the way I see this and the way folks see it who interpret this whole section as pertaining to all of church history. For though I think it is about the end-times, I also think believers in every part of the history of the church are meant to apply the example of these future believers to their own lives. So in the sense of application it does pertain to all of church history.

These verses are divided naturally into two parts. Verses 1-2 picture both the protection and persecution of the church in the last days in terms of the temple. Then verses 3-13 picture the witness of the church in the last days in terms of two prophets. Together these verses underline the main point, that God will preserve and protect his church as it bears witness to him in the last days even as it suffers persecution.

The Church as God's Temple (1-2)

We read: "And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein. But the court which is without the temple leave out, and measure it not; for it is given unto the Gentiles: and the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months" (1-2).

Remember we said that this is a symbolic passage and that the key to interpreting these symbols is the Old Testament. So what is the OT background to these verses? And the obvious answer is Ezekiel 40-42 in which Ezekiel is shown God's temple in a vision and in this vision an angel measures the temple, just as John is told to do here. Ezekiel's temple is not Solomon's temple (which had just been destroyed) nor is it Herod's temple (which would be destroyed). Rather, this temple is closely associated in the prophet with the final age of blessing (see

especially the later chapters of Ezekiel) and which is fulfilled in the New Heavens and New Earth in which all the earth becomes the temple of the living God and in which God will dwell with his people and they with him. This also means that we should see Ezekiel's temple in light of the heavenly temple shown to us in Rev. 21-22.

But there is another aspect to this temple in Revelation. In Revelation, the New Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven and which will function as the temple of God is called the Lamb's bride (21:9-10). In other words, there is a close connection in Revelation between God's city, God's temple, and God's bride. We have seen this already in 3:12 in the promise to the church of Philadelphia: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name."

You also see that here in 11:1, for John is told to measure "the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein." In Ezekiel, the angel only measures structures, not the saints; but here John is told to measure the saints along with the sanctuary. It points us again to the close identification in this passage of the temple with the people of God. In other words, the temple is meant to be a symbol for the people of God.

Isn't this what the rest of the NT teaches us as well? The apostle writes to the Corinthians: "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are" (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Or to the Ephesians: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22). Or, as the apostle

Peter puts it: “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5).

But what is the significance of measuring the temple? In Ezekiel, measuring the temple comes right before the indwelling of the temple by God. In other words, measuring was a symbol of God’s ownership and blessing and presence in the temple. By implication it would also include God’s protection of the temple. And that’s what you see here. The part of the temple, the outer court, which is not measured is left to be trampled underfoot by the nations (Rev. 11:2). It is clear that the inner temple, that part which is measured, is protected from this desolation by the unbelieving world.

What is this supposed to mean? What is signified by the inner and outer parts of the temple? Recall that the inner part of the temple is where the priests alone were allowed to go. It was in the inner temple that God’s presence was manifested over the ark. The outer court on the other hand was open to the rest of the people of Israel.

It seems that this picture is meant then to portray the dual reality that on the one hand God’s people are protected with God’s blessing and sealed from enduring God’s wrath, but that on the other hand they are not immune from the opposition of the world. Perhaps it is meant to say that whereas the souls of those who belong to Jesus are eternally protected and secure, they are not always guaranteed physical safety from the persecutions of the world – here the soul is represented by the inner court and the physical body by the outer court. Even if this is not the exact application of this image, the main point still stands: the dual nature of the church as protected by God for his blessing while being exposed to the persecutions of the world. I am reminded of the words of Jesus to his apostles: “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But

the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (Mt. 10:28-31).

We should not interpret this to mean that God only cares for our souls. The words of our Lord to his apostles makes that clear. God cares about all of us, body and soul. This is shown later in the text in the fact that the prophets who are killed are physically raised up by the Lord and ascend into heaven. God reverses the worst the enemy can do. Even when he allows the outer court to be trampled, he is still with his people. He will never leave us or forsake us. And what we need the most cannot be touched or taken away: men cannot take away God’s favor and blessing from us.

These themes are further developed in the next verses (3-13).

The Church as God’s witness (3-13).

In verses 3-4, we read, “And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth.”

Again, to properly understand this passage, we need to understand the OT background to it. In fact, there are several OT themes running in the background here. The first is the prophesy in Zechariah 4. There, Zechariah the prophet sees a lampstand representing a rebuilt temple and two olive trees furnishing oil to the lampstand. The two olive trees (“the two anointed ones,” Zech. 4:14) most likely represent Zerubbabel the ruler in Judah at the time, and Joshua the high priest, who together helped to rebuild the temple, and who did so despite the serious opposition of the enemies of the Jews. The one main difference between Zechariah 4 and Revelation 11 is that in the latter passage the one candlestick (lampstand) becomes two.

What do the two lampstands and the two olive trees represent here? Well, since in Revelation 1-3 the seven lampstands are specifically said to represent the churches, it seems most likely that the two lampstands

here also represent the church. The reason why they are two here instead of seven is probably for a couple of reasons. First, they are two in order to correspond to the prophesy in Zechariah. Although there is only one lampstand in Zechariah, there are two olive trees. The fact that both lampstand and olive trees are two in number here again shows the close correspondence between the church as temple (the lampstand) and the church as a witness. So secondly, they are two because they represent the function of the church as witnesses for Jesus (“my two witnesses”), and in the OT you needed two witnesses to establish legal testimony.

The application of the image is straightforward. The church, the lampstands, are the new temple, as we saw in verses 1-2. But the church also functions as witnesses for the Lord Jesus, just like the two prophets who are the two olive trees. And the church does this despite serious opposition from the enemies of the Lord. This is the way it will be at the end, but it is also the way it has always been. The apostle Paul expresses it this way: “For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Cor. 16:9). God opens the door of witness for his church, which the world cannot close, but that does not stop them from trying.

There are two things to note about the witness of the church as represented by these two prophets. First of all, we see God’s protection of them in verses 5-6: “And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed. These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with all plagues, as often as they will.” The OT background here are the careers of the prophets Moses and Elijah. You might recall that Elijah called down fire out of heaven to devour the two squads of soldiers who were sent by the king of Israel to arrest him (2 Kings 1:9-12). Elijah also shut up heaven for three and a half years (42 months!, see Jam. 5:17). Moses, on the other hand, was able to “smite the earth with all plagues.” He

also called down fire out of heaven to consume the Kohathites who wanted to displace him as the prophet of the Lord (cf. Num. 16:35).

Whether or not the church will literally consume its enemies in this way I'm not sure is the point. The point is that God will preserve the witness of his church. The gates of hell will not be able to prevail against it. The enemies of the church have no more power to silence the church than the enemies of these prophets were able to prevail against them. The judgments which are visited upon them also signify that God will vindicate his people. As the psalmist put it, "God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day. If he turn not, he will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready. He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death; he ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors" (Ps. 7:11-13).

What was the message of these prophets? What is the message of the church? It is a message of repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). We see that it is a message of repentance in the fact that these prophets are clothed in sackcloth (Rev. 11:3). On the other hand, we see that it is a message of faith in Jesus in the fact that they are his witnesses (3). This has always been the message of the church to the world. Turn from your sins and turn to Christ. Though it is through this message that God will gather in his elect, it is also the fact that it never has been and never will be popular with the world. Nevertheless, it is the very best of news. It is a message of astonishing mercy and grace, and it underlines the hardness of men's hearts that they reject it.

But then there is an unexpected turn of events. Here we see the persecution of the two witnesses, which is the second thing we notice here about the witness of the church: "And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified. And they of the people and kindreds and tongues and nations shall see their dead

bodies three days and an half, and shall not suffer their dead bodies to be put in graves. And they that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them, and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth” (Rev. 11:7-10).

This text has given a lot of people the wrong impression because of the phrase “where also our Lord was crucified.” Some say this means the whole text is about Jerusalem and the Jews, either as they pertained to the events of AD 70 or as they will pertain to the events of the last days. But I agree with the NT scholar G. K. Beale who argues that “where also our Lord was crucified” further elucidates the spiritual or figurative identification of this city: “which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.” In other words, John describes the “great city” in terms of places upon which God’s wrath had fallen, and proceeds chronologically from Sodom to Egypt to Jerusalem. In every other instance in Revelation, the “great city” is Babylon, prefigured by Rome, and the center of earthly power against the people of God. What John is indicating here is that this city will itself one day experience God’s wrath, poured out upon it at the end of history. One day the back of the persecutors will be broken.

Note the words: “when they shall have finished their testimony.” I love those words. The rise of the beast is not what determined the end of their testimony. The language here indicates that it was because the testimony of the two witnesses was finished that the beast was allowed to kill them. You see this “Divine passive” in chapter 13 which describes the same events from a different perspective: “And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations” (7). Who gave this to him? God did. God sometimes in his wise and mysterious purposes allows evil to temporarily triumph, but not until his servants have fulfilled their purpose in his plan. There is truth to that saying: we are immortal until our life’s work is done. That is certainly true for the church. The enemies of Christ may put Paul in prison, and they may even kill him. Yet this stands true: “Remember that Jesus Christ

of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel: Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:8-10).

The one who kills the prophets and persecutes the church is called the beast. This language again comes from the book of Daniel where several different types of beasts represented world kingdoms both present and future. The beast John probably has in mind here is the one from Dan. 7, the fourth beast the prophet saw in his visions who shall "shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time" (25). We note in Rev. 13 that this beast is given power for the same length of time that the witnesses prophesy (Rev. 13:5), which is 42 months or "a time and times and the dividing of time." I believe that this beast is the Antichrist but is also prefigured by Rome and by every government hostile to the kingdom of God since.

These verses remind us that it is dangerous (though easy) to interpret events just in light of earthly consequences. If we just interpret our lives this side of eternity it would be easy to become depressed, and like Elijah to think we've not accomplished anything, and woe is me. But we must remember that God is sovereign even over evil. God determined when the testimony of the witnesses was finished, not the beast. God is sovereign even when a good work falls flat or is squelched by the enemy. That doesn't mean God causes people to sin. But it does mean that if evil happens, it happens because God allows it. And God allows it on purpose. It is a good purpose. It is for his own glory and our eternal good and happiness. We need to remember that. Jesus conquered by dying. Though a Christian becomes a martyr, this is not a defeat for them; it is a glorious victory. Over and over again in the book of Revelation we see that God's people conquer through death. They would may rejoice over our deaths, but the One who sits on his throne laughs at them (Ps. 2:1-4).

The following verses help us to see why: “And after three days and an half the spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them. And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. And they ascended up to heaven in a cloud; and their enemies beheld them. And the same hour was there a great earthquake, and the tenth part of the city fell, and in the earthquake were slain of men seven thousand: and the remnant were affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven.” (Rev. 11:11-13).

Here we see the vindication of God’s people pictured in two ways. First, we see it in the resurrection of the two witnesses. Second, we see it in the earthquake visited upon the great city. That is the main point, although the details are admittedly a little more difficult.

The difficulty is this: if the witnesses represent the church it would seem then that their resurrection is the resurrection of the righteous. But then what do we make of this earthquake? The fact that not everyone dies in it, and that those who are left are terrified yet not converted indicates that this is not the final judgment. But doesn’t the resurrection take place at the very end of the age? The order here doesn’t seem to be right. We would expect it to be, earthquake then resurrection, not the other way round.

I may not be correct here, but here is what I think: I believe that to get too wrapped up in the order of things misses the point of the text. I’m not sure that John’s point is for this to picture the order in which things will take place or which comes first. I think the point here is that the church will be vindicated in the resurrection of our bodies and that the wicked will be judged. This judgments of God upon an evil world will increase as the end draws nearer. Already in this book many judgments have fallen upon the wicked and more will come. We will note that God’s judgment is often represented by earthquakes in Revelation (6:12; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18), and an earthquake will be a part of the last vial of judgment in which God’s wrath is fulfilled. So though

this may not be a complete representation of the final judgment, it does seem to be a sort of inauguration of it.

Nevertheless I do think all this is at the end. We are told that the ministry of the two witnesses lasts 42 months. We are also told that the reign of the beast is for 42 months. Again, I don't think these are two different periods because the three-and-a-half-year period in Daniel always refers to the same thing. So I think the ministry of the witnesses and the reign of the beast basically coincide. The point of Rev. 11:7 is not that the beast just then emerges (the text doesn't actually say that), but that it is at that time that he is able to finally kill the prophets. The triumph of the beast will actually be very short, "one hour" according to Rev. 17:12. In fact, you see that in chapter 11: how long do the enemies of God get to rejoice? Three and a half days. Then God's judgment falls. In chapter 11, all this takes place at the end of history without necessarily indicating the order in which it is going to happen. The main takeaway is not the order of things but that the vindication of the people of God will be sweet and eternal, whereas the triumph of the wicked will be at best swift and temporary.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, let us learn from this text that God calls upon the church to be his witnesses. These two prophets may represent the church at the end of the age, but the role of the church is no different now than it will be at the end. Our Lord told his disciples prior to ascending into heaven, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). We are still called upon to be his witnesses to the uttermost parts of the earth. It is a part of the Great Commission which is for the church in every age: "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Fa-

ther, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Mt. 28:18-20).

We are not witnesses for ourselves; we are to be witnesses for Christ. Not our name, but his name; not our glory but his. The only good news we have for anyone is the good news of Jesus Christ, that though we are unrighteous before God and deserve his wrath, God has opened up a way for us to escape his wrath. Not by our good works or by our righteousness, but by the righteousness of God given as a gift to those who put their trust in Jesus Christ. For Jesus became our propitiation – the one who bore God’s wrath in our place, who bore the punishment due to our sins – so that we might receive his righteousness as a gift of grace. The gospel is this: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, not because you are good enough but because Christ has been good – not only good, but perfect – for you.

The Revelation is also a reminder that we are called to be bold in our witness. We can be courageous because for us the outcome is sure. And the outcome is sure because, no matter how much the world may rage against the church, God protects us. Our eternity is secure in Christ. I like the way John Piper has put it: we can take risks for God because we serve a God who doesn’t take risks. He doesn’t take risks because he knows and is sovereign over the future. We don’t know the future, but God does, and he is letting us know here that his plan will triumph, his church will be vindicated, and both his and our enemies will be judged and overcome.

Brothers and sisters, there is therefore no reason for us to become depressed, no matter how bad the world around us gets. Revelation reminds us that no amount of Satanic or beastly power can thwart the plan of God for his glory and our good. Do we live like that is reality? If we believed that as we ought, it would change our despair to hope, our sluggishness to zeal, our unbelief to faith.

CHAPTER XIX

THY KINGDOM COME

(REV. II:14-19)

TO PRONOUNCE A WOE is to pronounce judgment. The seventh trumpet call is described here as the third woe in verse 14. But when we come to the sounding of the seventh trumpet we hear the seventh angel in a loud voice say, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever” (15). How in the world is that a pronouncement of judgment?

The answer to that is that it depends on who you are. If you do not belong to Christ, the coming of the kingdom of God will indeed be judgment for you. We see that in verse 18, where we read, “And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldst give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great; and shouldst destroy them which destroy the earth.” The nations were angry, that is, they were hostile toward God and his people. This ferocity is behind all the persecutions God’s people have had to endure throughout history. But the wrath of the nations will one day be finally overcome and overwhelmed by the wrath of God who

will exercise his great power (17) and destroy those who by their sin and rebellion destroyed the earth.

One day the dead will be raised and be judged and those who lived their whole lives resisting God's right over them will be confronted by the power of God and by that power they will be eternally destroyed. There is no judgment, no woe, more final or more terrible than that.

But on the other hand, those who by God's grace have through faith in Jesus Christ become a part of God's kingdom will find this same event to be an event of breathtaking joy. To them the announcement that the kingdom of this world has now become the kingdom of God and of Christ will be the heralding of the very best of news. They will surely join the twenty-four elders and give eternal thanks to God for the coming of the kingdom of God in its fulness.

This is where history is headed. This is the reality by which we are meant to order our lives. And this needs to be said today because the oft-repeated mantra, "You're on the wrong side of history" is also meant to order our lives in light of a so-called progressive agenda which sees the values of modern sexual confusion as more enlightened than the values of God's word. But the values of secularism, though they may cost you today if you stand against them, will have no weight at the bar of God before whom we will all have to stand. The values of this world will one day be displaced by the values of God's kingdom. The kingdoms of this world will not last forever; God's kingdom will. This is the unavoidable reality that we will all face. This is the reality before which we must live our lives. The world passes away, but the one who does the will of God abides forever (1 Jn. 2:17).

There are many different ways we can imagine this reality. There are many different ways the Bible helps us to do so. But the thing that is emphasized in these verses is the future of this world in terms of the kingdom of God. You see that in verse 15: there is this immediate reversal and change where the kingdoms of the world are displaced by God's kingdom, and he reigns for ever and ever. You see it in verse 17 in the hymn of the elders who rejoice that God's omnipotence has been exer-

cised to fully bring about the eternal reign of God. You see it in verse 18 in the scene of final judgement as the King sits upon his throne and judges those who have committed treason against him.

This is the reality that I want to meditate on with you this morning. I want to talk about six realities about the future kingdom of God that should make us fall on our faces and worship God and give thanks to him. And then I want to end by pointing to two reasons why we can be absolutely certain that this will come to pass.

Six Realities about God's kingdom that should make you want to rejoice.

First, the coming of God's kingdom will mean the final and complete overthrow of all evil in this world.

There is truth to the statement that the kingdom of God is present in the here-and-now, and that Jesus has received a kingdom and rules in the hearts of his people. That is true. The apostle Paul writes, "The kingdom of God is not [does not consist in] meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God and approved of men" (Rom. 14:17-18). I take that to mean that a believer belongs now to the kingdom of God and experiences the kingdom through righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit as he or she serves Christ. There is also a sense in which the kingdom is not only present but growing. This is the lesson of the parables of the mustard seed and leaven in Mt. 13:31-33.

But the Bible makes it very clear that there is a "not yet" aspect to the kingdom of God, and that this "not yet" aspect is not something that will be grown into, but which will be climatically and immediately ushered in when our Lord returns in glory with the holy angels and establishes his kingdom in its fulness. You see this in the parables as well, especially the parable of the tares of the field (Mt. 13:36-43) and the parable of the net (47-50). There will come a time "in the end of this

world” when the “Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (40-43).

You see this in the Beatitudes. The meek will inherit the earth (Mt. 5:5); this is future. The persecuted for righteousness’ sake will inherit the kingdom of God; this again is future (10-12). There is a blessedness which belongs to the age to come. Though there is joy to be had now, there is also a future entering into the joy of the Lord. Entering into the kingdom of heaven is associated also in the Sermon on the Mount with the final judgment: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?” (Mt. 7:21-22). In that day – the day of Final Judgment. It will be in that day that men will either enter into or be turned away from the kingdom of God. There is a future coming of the kingdom, not absolutely, but in its fulness.

This is the reason why we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” You don’t pray for something to come that’s already here. And we see the sense in which we are to pray for it: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This is not the way things are. But there is coming a day when this will be true. There is coming a day when God’s will is done on earth as surely as it is done in heaven.

In that day, the back of wickedness will be broken. No longer will the wicked triumph. The oppression of the righteous and the advocacy of wickedness will be over. There will be no more devil to stand against. No more flesh to fight. No more world in the sense of humanity in rebellion against God. You see this in these wonderful words, “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). This is the opposite reality to that which is expressed in the second Psalm: “The kings of

the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed” (Ps. 2:2). To say that the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdom of the Father and the Son is to say that the kings who set themselves against God and his kingdom are no more. God alone rules. It is expressed in the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians: “For he [Jesus] must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:25-26). All the enemies of Christ will one day be put under his feet.

You see this also in the judgment referred to in verse 18. The nations are angry now. They rage now: “Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?” (Ps. 2:1). But one day the wrath of man will hit an immovable brick wall in the wrath of God. It is coming and it will judge the wicked finally and for all time. They destroy the earth now with their wickedness but there is coming a day when there will be no sinner to rage against the people of God.

This is beautifully portrayed in the words of the 37th Psalm: “Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil. For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the Lord, they shall inherit the earth. For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming. The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright conversation. Their sword shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken” (8-15).

In this psalm, we see there all the things we are tempted to do when we think that wickedness is triumphant. We are tempted to fret and be envious of the wicked (1), to not trust in the Lord or delight in him (4), or to commit our way to him (5), or to rest in him and wait patiently for him (7), and we are tempted to be angry (8). Does the evil around you

tempt you to be this way? To be envious and unbelieving and impatient? We can see how meditating on the final end of the wicked is not just for the purposes of having correct theological thoughts, but is absolutely crucial for joyful and hopeful and holy perseverance in the faith: “Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction” (Ps. 73:17-18).

Brothers and sisters, don't let the prevalence of evil around you at the present time cause you to think and live as if this is the dominant and final reality. It isn't. The time of the wicked is short. And if you are tempted to join the world in its rebellion against God, know this: the pleasures of sin only last for a season and you will reap eternal destruction in the hands of an angry God. Better to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (Heb. 11:25).

Second, the coming of God's kingdom will mean the full and complete establishment of righteousness in this world.

The overthrow of the kingdoms of the world is not an end in itself. It is to make way for the kingdom of God. Wickedness makes way for righteousness. The apostle Peter put it this way: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:10-13). Wherein dwelleth righteousness. Right now righteousness is a sort of foreigner in this world, as are those who are righteous. But there is coming a day when this will no longer be the case. Don't you look forward to that?

Don't you look forward to a day when the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea? Don't you look forward to a day "when conditions are changed, when grief, aggressiveness, acquisitiveness, sin, and violence no longer dominate human society"?¹ When the both the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule are automatically and immediately and flawlessly and universally obeyed?

Living in this world we sometimes forget that all the unhappiness in this world is either directly or indirectly related to human sin and rebellion against God. The attempt to cast Christianity in the light of a doctrine that keeps people from enjoying themselves is a deceptive ruse that averts their attention from the true source of unhappiness and misery in the world: selfishness and godlessness on the part of man. Paradise was lost because Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. We are still going after forbidden fruit, and still believing the lie that it will make us happy, but what we get is more fallenness, more estrangement, more bitterness, more hopelessness. It is only when sin is done away that joy will be fully restored and enjoyed undiluted and unmixed with sorrow and discontent. And the fact that this is certain to happen is surely a reason to rejoice.

Third, the coming of God's kingdom will mean the public and eternal vindication of the persecuted people of God.

Along with the full establishment of righteousness will be the public vindication of God's people. You see this in Matthew 25 when all people are gathered before the throne of Christ, and he openly welcomes his sheep into his kingdom but reject the goats. But you also see it here in verse 18, where the wicked are judged and the righteous are rewarded. There is a distinction being made here, and it will be public distinction.

Right now there is no such distinction. In fact, if there is a distinction at all, it is one where the wicked are rewarded and the righteous are

¹G. E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1952), p. 67.

punished. But there is coming a day when the cry of the martyrs will be answered: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10).

Sometimes the injustice of it all makes us want to do something wrong to get back at the wicked. We want revenge. We want to make them pay. It is just so wrong what they have done. But this is where the doctrine of future judgment is so important. It keeps us from taking into our hands what really belongs to God. The problem is that when men try to take the law in their own hands, when they are motivated, not by true justice but by hatred and bitterness and revenge, they only end up making a bad thing worse. Often, taking revenge on our enemies doesn't end a cycle of injustice; it only perpetuates it.

This doesn't just apply to people who have suffered what we might call an atrocity. It also applies to the rest of us who think someone has wronged us and now we need to get them back. I had someone tell me once that they planned to get revenge on someone, and it took them 30 years to do it. Talk about revenge being served cold! We all therefore need to look forward and to remember that God will make all things right. We need to remember Rom. 12:18-21: “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” In particular, the way you do verses 18 and 20 and 21 is by really believing the truth of verse 19. God will repay; of that, we can be absolutely and infallibly certain. And even better: the justice that God achieves will be fully in accord with his holiness and justice and truth.

Fourth, the coming of God's kingdom will mean eternal reward for all who love Jesus Christ.

Note that word “reward” in verse 18. I know that some folks in our neck of the evangelical world shy away from the notion of heaven as reward. They think that to say such things is to compromise the gospel of grace. They think that if God rewards his people then that must mean that our enjoyment of the age to come is merited in some way by us. This is not true, of course, but the first thing we must recognize is that reward is a very Biblical category for thinking about the age to come.

The Bible does not shy away from this. It encourages us to see the age to come in terms of reward. There are not just one or two passages about this. It is pervasive. Consider the following examples:

“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6-8). God will give Paul a crown “at that day,” that is, at the day when the kingdom of God is fully ushered in.

Moses was able to esteem “the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward” (Heb. 11:26). Now if that is a reference to the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, that’s not much of a motivation to live like Moses lived! No, this is a reference to the reward of heaven.

“Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life" (Mt. 19:27-29).

"Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Mt. 5:12).

"For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works" (Mt. 16:27).

"Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:24).

Now it is true that we should jealously guard against any notion that we can merit anything. All of salvation is all of grace. We can boast of nothing. So we cannot say that we are rewarded in the sense that we are given a prize because we achieved something independently of God, however small or great. God owes no man anything. We are debtors to God, not he to us (Rom. 8:12).

However, in God's generosity and grace, he is pleased to crown the gifts of his grace in us. That is the way we should view this reward. It doesn't mean I merited anything. It is simply God magnifying his own grace in us by rewarding those who by God's grace persevere in the faith. But the fact that the Lord speaks about this in terms of reward says something about the nature of the kingdom of God. It is an indication that our enjoyment of the age to come is the eternal answer by God to the trials and suffering we have had to endure on the way to heaven. Though our trials don't merit the crown, yet God is pleased to grant a crown of glory to those who by his grace endure to the end. Isn't this what the apostle said? "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they

do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible” (1 Cor. 9:24-25).

Another way to look at this is that our sufferings which we endure through faith in Christ mean something in heaven. Let’s let the apostle put it to us in his words again: “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). Now remember that Paul said in Rom. 8:18 that our sufferings are not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be manifest in us. So we shouldn’t think that we get so much glory for so much suffering. That can’t be what Paul is saying here. Our suffering and God’s glory are incommensurable things. Rather, what he is saying though is that God wants us to see that the eternal weight of glory is like a reward given to the runner who made it through a difficult obstacle course and made it to the end when others gave out and gave up.

In other words, what I am trying to say is this: the idea of the kingdom in terms of reward is meant to convey the reality that it is worth it to persevere in the faith of Christ through persecutions and trials and discouragements and unanswered questions and heaviness and grief and sorrow. It is worth it in the same way that an athlete finds it worth it to discipline themselves and overcome numerous obstacles to win a race in order to win the crown. The kingdom as rewards says, in the words of the hymn: “It will be worth it all when we see Jesus!”

One more thing here: there is a reward for all who are faithful to Jesus, no matter how small or insignificant they are. We must not miss this here in verse 18: “thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy name, small and great.” In Revelation, the prophet seems to be exalted as perhaps the most important office in the community of God’s people. However, the reward is not just for the prophet, it is for anyone who fear the Lord, to all who are sanctified, both small and great.” As our Lord was

wont to say: in the age to come the first will be last and the last first. The reward does not just go to those who have been recognized by men here. It goes to all, no matter how unnoticed they are, yet who are noticed by the God of heaven.

Fifth, the coming of God's kingdom will mean a more glorious display of the perfections of God for all to see, especially his power.

God's glory is not something which is contingent upon his creation. However, the display of God's glory is sometimes more clearly seen in some things than in others. What we see here is that in the full coming and establishment of God's kingdom, God's power will be clearly displayed: "And the four and twenty elders, which sat before God on their seats, fell upon their faces, and worshipped God, saying, We give thee thanks, O Lord God Almighty, which art, and wast, and art to come; because thou hast taken to thee thy great power, and hast reigned" (Rev. 11:16-17).

One of the characteristics about God's kingdom now is actually weakness. The apostle Paul himself was well aware of his own limitations and weakness: "And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). This was not just something he felt but that others saw: "For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2 Cor. 10:10). In this, he compares himself with his Lord: "For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God toward you" (2 Cor. 13:4).

What Paul says in 2 Cor. 13, however, also points us to the fact that God's kingdom will not always be characterized by weakness. Our Lord was crucified through weakness – a weakness willingly taken on for our sake – but he didn't remain weak; he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and "lives by the power of God." And by that power he will

return and put all his enemies under his feet. By that power he will fully establish his kingdom.

That is the point of Rev. 11. One day God's power will be more fully known. I say, more fully known because I don't think it is possible for finite beings to fully know an infinite Being. Note how God is addressed here: "Lord God Almighty." He has taken his great power – he has manifested it ways for all to see in the judgment of his enemies and the reward of his children.

The apostle Paul points to this reality in Rom. 9, in answering the question why God would choose some to eternal salvation and not others. He responds in this way: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory" (22-23). In other words, what is behind the Pharaohs of the world is the willingness of God "to make his power known" in the judgment of his enemies and the rescue of his people.

Brothers and sisters, right now it seems as if the wicked are triumphant. The beast arises and kills the two witnesses. He wages war with the saints and overcomes them. But his time is short. God's power will one day be fully displayed in the destruction of his enemies and the salvation of his people. And surely that is something in which we ought to rejoice.

Sixth, the coming of God's kingdom will mean the complete undoing of all that sin has done to the physical creation, especially the earth.

I find it interesting that the wicked are described in verse 18 as "them which destroy the earth." I don't think that we should interpret the destruction of the earth here in light of twenty-first century environmentalist concerns. This is not primarily talking about atom bombs and fossil fuels. Rather, we should interpret this in light of what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8: "For the earnest expectation of the

creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom. 8:19-22). The apostle is saying that sin has done something even to the physical creation around us, and that it is, as it were, groaning and travailing in pain as a result. So those who destroy the earth are those who are in rebellion against God.

However, that doesn't mean there isn't a physical dimension to this. For example, every war waged on the earth is the product of human sinfulness. Wars bring death, not only on the battlefield, but from the things they leave in its wake: famine, disease, poverty, grief, despair. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied against ancient Babylon (the OT backdrop to the “great city” of verse 8): “Behold, I am against thee, O destroying mountain, saith the Lord, which destroyest all the earth: and I will stretch out mine hand upon thee, and roll thee down from the rocks, and will make thee a burnt mountain” (Jer. 51:25).

But there is coming a time when wars will be no more, when the “wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:6-9). There will come a time when the earth will no longer work against us, as it has since the Fall of man into sin, but will once again work with us. There is coming a time, which our Lord calls “the regeneration” (Mt. 19:28) – not the regeneration of the soul, but the regeneration of the world, a new heavens and a new earth.

Even now the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament his handiwork (Ps. 19:1). Nature shows often help us to see this. But I often think as I watch those shows, as they highlight this or that remote region in the world, how that those places would be places of death for most of us if we were just left there. Beautiful, yes, but not places we could live. However, the world to come will not be like that. No more death. The world will not kill us anymore. For those who destroyed it are themselves destroyed. All things will be made new. And surely that is a reason to rejoice.

Why we can be sure this will come to pass.

Briefly, let me give you two reasons. First, because God is all powerful: he is preeminently displayed here in terms of his power. God is omnipotent; he is sovereign, and he exercises his sovereignty for his glory and the good of his people. There really is nothing that can keep God from implementing his plan for the end of the world.

Second, because God is our Savior through Christ. The kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. It is said this way because it is through Jesus Christ that God is bringing about this kingdom. It is why when Jesus preached, he preached the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:15), because that is what he had come to bring about through his atoning death. What this means and why this is good news is that the future doesn't hang on our worthiness or merit or goodness; it is the sure gift of God's grace through Jesus Christ. It is not a gift given to those who think they are righteous, but to those who know they are not righteous and who seek righteousness in Jesus Christ alone, who by faith trust in him as Lord and Savior.

We can summarize both reasons with this: God is a powerful Savior. Or as the OT reminds us again and again, salvation is of the Lord. He is with his people because he has made atonement for them. God's presence and atonement are both symbolized by the appearance of the ark of the covenant in God's heavenly temple.

Do you believe this? It is one thing to say we believe it, but to appropriate it personally, to really put our trust in Christ and to believe that he will through grace bring us to the glory of the kingdom fully come – this is the key to true joy and peace.

CHAPTER XX

THE FURY AND FALL OF SATAN (REVELATION 12)

You might wonder, after the end of chapter 11, when the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, why in chapter 12 the apostle is telling us about the persecution of the people of God again? Shouldn't the story be over at this point? Surely, this shows us that the book of Revelation is not linear at all. It is built on cycles that recapitulate the same events from various points of view. So, having brought us to the end of history with the seventh trumpet, John now starts over again, to help us see the story of God's plan for the future of the church from a different angle. Not only does he come at this from a different angle, but he also introduces new features into the story and goes deeper in some sense, helping us to see further into what is going on in the story of the church. That is what is happening here as we begin the twelfth chapter of the book of Revelation.

Since we have taken a little over a month off of our study of Revelation, before we go further I think it would be helpful to remind ourselves what this book is about and how and why John is writing it. Let's remember that this is a book which is about the future of God's church and how God is bringing all things to a glorious consummation for the

good of his people and the glory of his name. In particular, this book is about the victory of Christ over all things and how those who are overcomers will join him in his victory. This book is therefore meant to function as an encouragement to saints to persevere to the end by showing them what the end will be for those who do so, that it will be a glorious and wonderful end. In contrast, the end of the wicked will be frighteningly awful.

We have also seen that this book is very different from other books in the New Testament in that it is full of symbolic language. Some argue that we should only take as symbolic those things which are not interpreted for us. But I showed in a previous message that this just doesn't work. It can be shown that not all symbols are in fact explicitly interpreted and that sometimes even symbols are interpreted by symbols.

But if the book is so symbolic, how can we have any hope of interpreting it? The answer is the Old Testament. God is revealing his plan for history to John using symbols that he and the early church would have readily recognized. The symbols were not arbitrary for them; they would have understood them against the background of OT imagery and teaching.

At this point, let me say something more about the imagery here. I've just said the background of Revelation is the OT. And that's true. But many scholars have noted that the story told here in Revelation 12 about a woman giving birth to a child who is hunted by an ancient serpent but who is then rescued and comes back to slay the dragon, is an old story told in many ancient myths (many of which predate Revelation by hundreds of years). You see similar stories in Greek, Egyptian, and Babylonian mythologies. And so some people will say that the presence of all these myths prove that the Bible is just an extension of pagan myth.

But this is getting it backwards. Here's why: suppose for a moment with me that at the beginning of human history, when mankind sinned against its Creator because it had been duped by a malevolent being under the guise of a serpent, that God made a promise to mankind. And this promise was that the Seed of the woman would crush the head of

the serpent. Suppose this is true. What would it mean about all these myths? It would mean that these myths are pointing to something true. These myths have gotten the promises garbled up along the way, which is what we tend to do. We take God's word and mess with it and change it to fit our propensities and purposes. But the presence of all these myths doesn't mean that John's vision is myth. John's vision is firmly rooted in the true story which goes all the way back to the promise given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The point is not that the myths predate Revelation; the point is the promise of Genesis 3 predates every pagan myth. It is not then that the myths explain the gospel, but that the gospel explains the myths. John is getting right what the myths got wrong. The Seed of the woman is not some pagan god like Apollo – he is Jesus Christ, God's eternal Son, who slew the dragon by dying on the cross and redeeming from death all who belong to him.

The point is that we don't need to be embarrassed by these myths. In fact, we should expect such myths to have been told if Genesis 3 and the promise of the Seed of the Woman were in fact true. They are the human-garbled re-telling of the Protoevangelium. The gospel, on the other hand, is the inspired and inerrant proclamation that the Seed has come in the person of our Lord.

You may ask: but why would John write this way? Or perhaps a better question is: why would God reveal truth to John in this way? The reason, I think, is that the Lord not only intends for us to know facts about his plan for the church, but he wants our imaginations to be fired with these truths, and a really good way to do that is to bring the truth to our minds and hearts in the form of these pictural and symbolic representations of God's purpose and plan for his people.

What we see here in the symbolism (the "signs" or "wonders," see verses 1, 3) of Rev. 12 and the following chapters is the explanation why the church suffers in this world and what the outcome will be. The explanation is that there is a real being called the Devil who hates God and hates his people and will do everything in his power to try to frustrate God's plan and purpose and destroy his people. It is the same reason the

apostle Paul gave to the Ephesian Christians to stand fast: “Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Eph. 6:11-13). We are motivated to stand when we realize that to capitulate means to give in to the devil. If you stop standing firm in the faith, it’s not just that you are no longer standing, but that you have fallen before and given into the greatest evil in the universe. You have aided and abetted the cause of the devil. We must not do that; we cannot do that.

So this chapter is meant to give us a reason to stand firm in the faith. There are two great motivations here at least. First, there is the motivation from the fact that our enemy is the devil. Just as the soldiers of the Second World War were motivated to fight because they understood just how evil Nazism was, even so we ought to be motivated by understanding that our foe is ultimately not the politician in Washington or the blogger on that website we don’t like but is in fact Satan.

But second, we ought to be motivated knowing that Satan, powerful though he may be, and dangerous as he is now, has been decisively defeated at the cross. In fact, though he is allowed to carry out many schemes against the church and to make war against the saints, he cannot win. To join the devil is to join a losing cause. He may at times appear to be winning. But the devil “knoweth that he hath but a short time” (Rev. 12:12).

So these are the two things I want to consider with you today: the evil of our enemy and the end of our enemy, and how knowing these two things can help us stand fast in the faith.

The Evil of our Enemy

The Devil is the enemy of the church. You might ask, “But where is the church in these verses?” And the answer is that the church, or the people of God, appears in the form of this woman in verse 1: “And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.” Some have interpreted this to be Mary the mother of Jesus, because in the following verses the woman gives birth to the Messiah “who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron” (5). But this woman is also seen to be the mother of all who “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (17). This is not Mary. Instead, I think we should see the woman as Israel from whom Christ has come. Note that she has “upon her head twelve stars” indicating the twelve tribes of Israel. In Isaiah’s prophesy, (54:1) Israel is pictured as a woman in labor who gives birth to many children, which the apostle Paul applies to the people of God: “But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, [quoting the Isaiah passage] Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise” (Gal. 4:26-28). In verse 2, the woman “she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.” The pains of childbirth here may represent the persecution of the people of God prior to the birth of Christ.

The fact that the woman appears in heaven clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and a crown upon her head indicates the glory and honor of the church. Though the world may belittle and even detest the people of God and persecute them, God loves and delights in the church. Our Lord died for the church, his bride, “That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26-27).

This woman is opposed by another sign in heaven, “a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads” (3). In the seventh chapter of the prophesy of Daniel (see esp. ver. 7), there is a vision of four ferocious beasts, the fourth of which is more terrifying than the previous three, and this beast had ten horns as well. He also persecuted the people of God (Dan. 7:19-21), just as the dragon is seeking to do here – in particular, to devour the Messiah at his birth: “And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born” (Rev. 12:4). The actions of Herod who had the children in and around Bethlehem killed in order to do away with the threat of Jesus was no doubt inspired by the dragon of Revelation 12. So we see that the devil is the enemy of God’s people, the church, in his attempt to kill Jesus, the one who saves the church and gives her eternal life, when he was born.

Some commentators believe that the reference to the Devil drawing a third part of the stars and casting them down to the earth is a reference to the origin of the fallen angels, which we call demons. I think this is likely, given the fact that in a few verses we are told that the church is not only opposed by the Devil but also by “his angels” (9). Where did they come from? Perhaps verse 4 is an explanation. But there are other expositors who think this is a reference to the persecution of God’s people before Christ came, and they appeal to Daniel 8:10 and the little horn who probably refers to Antiochus Epiphanes and his persecution of the people of God then. We are told that he “waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them.” Here the stars are almost certainly a reference to God’s people and their being cast down a reference to their persecution by their enemy who is represented by a little horn.

In other words, the Devil didn’t start persecuting God’s people when Christ came. He has been doing this from the beginning of time. This is why he is called “that old serpent” (9). He is the serpent who came in

the Garden of Eden and tempted Adam and Eve and led them to their downfall and to the sin and condemnation that has plagued the human race ever since.

But he is our enemy in other ways as well. In verse 9, he is described as “the great dragon . . . that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world.” Satan means “adversary” and Devil means “slanderer.” The Devil opposes Christ and his people. One of the ways he does this is by slandering them to God, just as he did with Job (see the book of Job 1-2) and just as he did with Jehoiada the high priest (see Zech. 3:1-5). We see that he does this by accusing them to God, for in verse 10 we read that he is called “the accuser of our brethren . . . which accused them before our God day and night.”

He also does this by lies and deception: “which deceiveth the whole world.” Our Lord said of certain people who opposed him, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not” (Jn. 8:44-45). The Devil murders by his lies. He commits spiritual murder and by his lies he inspires his servants to commit physical murder. Paul wrote something similar: “But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:3-4; cf. 2 Thess. 2:8-12).

I think this is reinforced in verse 15 of our text, where we are told that “the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood.” The Devil has always sought to drown the church in a flood of lies. He is constantly introducing new heresies, new lies, as well as old lies dressed up in new clothes. He never tires of this. He is tirelessly seeking to overwhelm the church which is supposed to be the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:14) with false teaching from false teachers. Which is why we

must not just assume that because someone is speaking in the name of the Lord that therefore they must be alright. No, let us “believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1). As the apostle Paul would put it to the Corinthians: “I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. . . For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works” (3, 13-15).

It is in these ways that the Devil goes “to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (17). He is truly the evil enemy of the church. But thank God, this is not the whole story. We have an enemy, yes. He will hurt us, yes. As a result, we can expect trials and tribulation and persecution in this life. But this is an enemy who has been decisively defeated.

The End of our Enemy

The Devil can do a lot of damage; I don’t want to minimize that. Some of you bear the battle scars. But his days are numbered, and this fact is highlighted in at least three different ways in this chapter.

First of all, he was defeated in his attempt to kill Jesus at his birth: “the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne” (Rev. 12:4-5). The interesting thing is that though we know this is referring to Jesus who fulfills the prophesy of Psalm 2:9, the story goes from the birth of Jesus to his ascension, skipping the life and death of the Lord! We know the Devil played a part in the death of Jesus (cf. Jn. 13:2). However, it was in

his very death that our Lord defeated Satan, and this was confirmed by his resurrection and ascension into heaven. It is this that is highlighted here, and it was in his exaltation at the Father's right hand that Satan's fall and defeat was decisively effected. It was during his earthly ministry that our Lord in fact said, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Lk. 10:18).

Moreover, our Lord did not ascend into heaven only to leave the church alone, for we are told that "the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days" (Rev. 12:6). Many times in OT history God led his people into the wilderness to protect them and care for them. One thinks of the children of Israel and the Exodus, or Elijah fed by the ravens in the wilderness and kept safe from the wrath of Ahab. The 1260 days is the same time period as the 42 months or the "time, times, and half a time" (three and a half years). This is the same time that the beast reigns who persecutes God's people (cf. 13:5). The point here is that God will protect the church and he will do this as long as it is threatened by its enemies. The gates of hell will not prevail against the church.

Second, the Devil was defeated in heaven: "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (7-9). This immediately follows upon our Lord's enthronement, so this is a consequence of the resurrection of our Lord. In other words, this doesn't seem to be something that happened before human history, nor does it seem to be something that will happen at the end of history, but rather something that happened when our Lord died and rose again and ascended into heaven. Before this, the Devil could legitimately accuse the saints on account of their sins. But once their sins were paid for, which they were at the cross, he no longer had any standing in heaven.

And so Michael the archangel (cf. Jude 9; Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1) and the holy angels with him cast Satan and his angels out.

Not that they go willingly; they fight back. But they do not win. Satan was defeated at the cross and as a result he was defeated in heaven. No longer can the accuser of the brethren accuse them before God as he did before. This is the heavenly reality behind Paul's exultation: "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us" (Rom. 8:33-34).

Third, the Devil is defeated through the testimony and lives of the followers of Jesus.

It is because our Lord has defeated the Devil that we can defeat him. We can only defeat a defeated foe. Note how verses 10-11 read: "Now [as a result of our Lord's ascension into heaven and the expulsion of the Devil and his angels from heaven] is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb." It is because we are saved by Christ, and transferred into the kingdom of our God, that we have the strength and the power to overcome the evil one: "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4).

But notice how the saints defeat the Devil. It is not only through their lives but also by their deaths: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death." The defeat of the Devil doesn't mean that life here on earth is going to be peachy. Opposing him just might mean martyrdom. It means not loving your life to the death. But we can do that because our Lord has defeated death. He is risen and those who belong to him will rise with him. The Devil can kill our bodies but he can't touch our souls and Christ will recover our bodies in the resurrection at the end of the age.

We defeat the Devil by a life of faithfulness to Jesus. The “word of their testimony” is the “the testimony of Jesus Christ” (17). It is by living a life of witness to Christ, both with our lips and our lives, with our words and our works. The Devil is defeated when believers consistently refuse to believe his lies and drink in his deceit.

Reasons for Faithfulness

Why would a person not love their life to the death? But this is what Christ calls us to, whether we are actually martyred or not. We are to take up our cross and follow him. Why would you do that? Why would you live like that? This chapter gives us three reasons to be faithful, doesn't it?

First, because Satan was not able to conquer Christ – he was decisively (though not yet finally) defeated at the cross (and we through him). All our sins have been paid for by our Lord and his reign at the Father's right hand is proof that redemption has been accomplished. And though it is true that Satan still goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, it is also true that he is living on borrowed time. He knows that his time is short. We are fighting a defeated enemy. We have no reason to join a losing side!

Second, because of what Christ has done, Satan is no longer able to accuse believers before God – he has been cast out of heaven. God is for us and he is with us. We are accepted by God, justified and declared righteous before him, adopted into his family, and given an inheritance that is incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, if you have received him as Lord and Christ, the Bible says that God is on your side, that he loves you, and will give you all things. The accusations of Satan no longer ring in the halls of heaven; he has been cast out. Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?

Third, Satan is not fighting saints who are on their own – they are supported, nourished, and protected by the God of heaven. This is un-

derlined in the remaining part of the chapter: “Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time. And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (12-17).

God told the children of Israel at Mount Sinai, “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself” (Exod. 19:4). God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, tells us, “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isa. 40:31).

Dear believer, you are not on your own! God will give you wings of eagles and protect, and nourish you on your journey to heaven. Not around trials, but through them, he will be with you: “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee” (Isa. 43:2). He will hold you and bear you up. That is his promise. There is grace and strength for the warfare God has called us to wage. He has not sent us to the front empty-handed but full of the ammunition and support of heaven. Our Captain has gone before us and has already gained the decisive victory. Why would we then turn and join our enemy? He is

finished! He is evil and his wrath though brutal is short. Let us conquer him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of his testimony.

And if you are not a Christian this morning, may I not encourage you to enlist in the army of Jesus? You are either in one camp or the other. If you are not in Christ's army, you are serving Satan. To live for yourself is to live for the Devil. Repent of your rebellion against God and put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and the promise is that all who do so will never be ashamed and will be given the forgiveness of all sins and eternal life.

CHAPTER XXI

THE UNHOLY TRINITY (REVELATION 13)

Satan is a mimicker of God. He mimics the Trinity (Dragon, Beast, False Prophet). He mimics God's power. The False Prophet mimics Jesus (11) and the Holy Spirit (12). He mimics miracles. He mimics God because he seeks worship. He seeks the allegiance of "all who dwell on the earth." And he is jealous, though in an evil and wicked way. He will not tolerate those who give their allegiance to the true Sovereign of the Universe, the true God. This is what this chapter is all about: how Satan intends to turn our hearts away from worshipping the true God by turning them to false substitutes.

We saw in chapter 12 that the church's conflict is with the Devil, who appears in the Revelation as a dragon. However, in order to turn the hearts of people away from God and to prosecute his war with the saints (12:17), he does not do this directly but as it were through the instrumentality of other means. The means he uses are the subject of chapter 13, and they come to us under the guise of two beasts who together exercise power given to them by the dragon.

It is important to see just how the Devil fights against the church and what his preferred weapons are. What we will see here is that his

preferred method of attack is to use the places of worldly power to make the worship of God implausible and undesirable on the one hand and to replace it on the other with the worship of the creature. As we look at this chapter, I want us to consider the interpretation of the symbols and then to consider the application of the symbols. The goal, as in all the book, is for “the patience and the faith of the saints” (10).

The Interpretation of the Symbols

There are two beasts, the first from the sea in verses 1-10 and the second from the earth in verses 11-18.

The Beast from the Sea (1-10)

The beast is described in verse 1 as coming up out of the sea, “having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion: and the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority” (1-2). There are a couple of things to notice about this description.

First of all, it likens the beast to the dragon since both have seven heads and ten horns (cf. 12:3). So whatever this beast is, it is demonic in its origin. We note that “the dragon gave him his power, and his seat, and great authority.”

Second, it is also like the beasts of Daniel chapter 7 (see esp. Dan. 7:1-8). Daniel’s prophesy is about four distinct kingdoms, which are likened to beasts. The first is like a lion (4), the second like a bear (5), the third like a leopard with four wings and four heads (6), and the fourth “dreadful and terrible” with “great iron teeth” and “ten horns” (7-8). Many expositors identify these beasts with kingdoms, and it seem clear at least that the first three beasts represent the Babylonian, Persian, and Greek empires, respectively. There is more ambiguity about the fourth,

since it “was diverse from all the beasts that were before it” (7). Some identify it with Antiochus Epiphanes (a second century B.C. ruler who desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem and persecuted the Jews), others with the Roman empire, and still others with the Antichrist of the end times.

What is clear, however, is that the beasts are not literal beasts, but symbolize kingdoms, totalitarian states that oppress and persecute the people of God. So we should see the beast in Revelation 13 in the same way. The beast is probably a power-wielding person (or persons) who rules a power-wielding state. What is interesting is that John does not identify this beast with any one of the beasts of Daniel, or even the fourth beast, but puts them all together in one beast. In other words, this person or kingdom combines all the features of power and persecution from all the empires of the past that have stood against God’s people and God’s purpose in the world.

An antichrist and the Antichrist

Now some think that this beast is representative of all oppressive regimes that persecute God’s people throughout all of history (this is especially plausible since it combines features from past empires). Others think that the beast has a unique reference to the Antichrist of the last days. Which is it? Well, I personally don’t think you have to pick. I think it is both. It is any oppressive totalitarian state that persecutes the people of God, and it is the Antichrist of the last days.

Now if we are going to call this beast the Antichrist, we have to look at how the Bible actually uses this term. The only place this word is used in the Bible is in First and Second John. Of these occurrences, I think perhaps the most important is 1 John 2:18: “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” John seems to envisage a future antichrist who “shall come.” But he also acknowledges that “even now are there many antichrists in the world.”

So in a similar way I would say that the beast of Revelation 13 is to come, but that in many respects he already has come and is here already in every kingdom and state and ruler who has wielded his power to stand against the truth of God's word and to oppress God's people.

We see a similar theme in the writings of the apostle Paul. In 2 Thess. 2, he writes, "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way" (3-7).

This is an important passage because the "man of sin," the "son of perdition" here has many of the same attributes of the beast in Revelation 13. In particular, both blaspheme God and demand worship. However, notice that, just as John says that the spirit of antichrist is already present, Paul says that "the mystery of iniquity doth already work" (7). Now it seems clear to me at least that the "man of sin" is an individual who will be revealed in the end times, but the apostle also makes it clear that the spiritual forces that will eventually clear the way for this son of perdition are already at work and that the only thing keeping such an individual from emerging right now is the hand of God's providence.

So yes, I think it is right to apply Rev. 13 to totalitarian regimes of any age. This is buttressed by the fact that the beast combines features from many empires of the past and by the fact that its heads are interpreted later to refer to several kings (cf. 17:10). But I think it will be ultimately and finally and fully fulfilled in the Antichrist, the man of sin, in the days and years immediately preceding the return of our Lord.

The Beast Mimics Christ

John goes on to write: “And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast” (3). The phrase “as it were wounded to death” in the Greek is very, very similar to a phrase describing our Lord in 5:6 – “a Lamb as it had been slain.” In other words, just as our Lord survived death and rose again, so the beast is slain and rises again.

Is this a reference to some historical event? Some say this refers to a rumor about Nero who died by his own hand in A.D. 68 but whom some in John’s day thought to still be alive in Parthia and scheming to return and take the Roman throne again. Or is this a reference to the fact that every time a totalitarian regime goes down, another one inevitably pops up in its place? Or is this referring to something that will happen to a future, end times king who is part of an antichristian kingdom?

Again, this is one of those things that I’m not sure we have to decide on. The point is that the beast does what he can and the dragon through him to convince people of his Godlike attributes. You can’t get people to worship you in God’s place if you can’t convince people you are God, and you aren’t going to do that if you can’t convince people (however deceitfully this is done) that you have the attributes of God. This is all about worship!

The big point here is that the beast seeks worship. Everything he does is for this: “And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him? And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months. And he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme his name, and his tabernacle, and them that dwell in heaven” (Rev. 13:4-6). The praise they sing to the beast is praise that really belongs to God: “Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?” (Exod. 15:11).

We will have more to say about this in a moment, but for right now I just want to register the observation that all the power of the first beast operates either to impress people to worship him or to oppress those who won't. We go on to read, "And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations. And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (7-8).

The Beast from the Earth (11-18)

We will come back to verses 9-10. For now, let's see what we learn about the second beast: "And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon. And he exerciseth all the power of the first beast before him, and causeth the earth and them which dwell therein to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed. And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men, and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast; saying to them that dwell on the earth, that they should make an image to the beast, which had the wound by a sword, and did live" (11-14).

Unlike the first beast, this one doesn't have a counterpart in the book of Daniel. He is called the "false prophet" in 16:13, 19:20, and 20:10, which tells us that he functions much like the Holy Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit bears witness to our Lord and seeks to glorify him (cf. Jn. 16:13-15), even so the False Prophet does what he can to make people worship the first beast. He does great wonders (cf. Mt. 24:24; 2 Thess. 2:9-10) to cause people to believe in him. We are told that he deceives by his miracles and magic, so these are not true instances of God-like power but parodies of them.

This whole show is in fact a parody of the Holy Trinity: instead of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit you have the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet.

We are even told that he gives breath to a statue: “And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed” (15). There were stories in the first century world where devotees of pagan gods claimed that the idols representing these gods actually spoke or moved so that the gods acted and spoke through them [see Dennis Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, p. 195]. This is what the False Prophet seeks to convince people of regarding the statue of the beast. But we must not think he is actually able to give life to an inanimate object; only God can give life. This is a false prophet, not a true one; a deceiver, not an honest truth-teller.

The number of the beast

The tyrannical and oppressive nature of the beast’s rule is further indicated by the following verses: “And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: and that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six” (16-18). You will be made to care, as they say. You will either get on board with the beast’s agenda and worship him, or you will die, either by the sword (10) or by famine (17).

Now many have caused a lot of distress over bad interpretations of the “mark of the beast.” I have heard it interpreted as some actual mark on the body or computer chip implanted under the skin. During the latest Covid scare, some even wondered if it might be the Covid vaccine. This is an illustration of how bad interpretation can do real damage,

frightening people over things about which they need not worry. This is symbolic; to take this literally is bad interpretation and pastoral malpractice.

The beast's mark on the foreheads of his follower is as symbolic as the Father's name written on the believer's foreheads is (cf. 14:1). It is meant to point to the ownership of the beast of those who worship him and their devotion to him.

What then does the 666 refer to? One of the most popular interpretations is that it refers to Nero. People keep trying to insert him into this passage in various ways, but he just won't fit! The argument is that John is using gematria here, or the practice of assigning numerical values to names. With both the Greek and Hebrew alphabets, the letters doubled as numbers, so each letter had a numerical value. It is said that if you take the Greek name for Caesar Nero and transliterate it into Hebrew, the numerical value of the resulting name is 666. Case solved, right? Well, there are a couple of insurmountable problems to this approach.

The first insurmountable problem is that the resulting suggested Hebrew transliteration is not spelled correctly. You have to leave a letter out to make it add up to 666. The second problem is that the solution is too complex. Many if not most of John's readers almost certainly didn't read Hebrew; they were native Greek speakers in Greek-speaking cities. This is a code they would have had a hard time cracking. I don't think when John said "let him that hath understanding" he was referring to language scholars in the churches.

There actually is another problem which I don't think is insignificant. None of the earliest interpreters of Revelation ever thought of the possibility of Nero as the man pointed to by 666. Irenaeus (who, remember, knew Polycarp who knew the apostle John) suggested three possibilities and Nero wasn't one of them.

The solution is probably that this number doesn't refer to a specific name of a specific individual. Rather, just as seven is the number of completeness so six is the number of man. It was on the sixth day that man was created. The fact that the number six is repeated six times is

just to emphasize that the beast who is represented by this number, is in fact just a human, just a man. It “is the number of a man” because that’s all the beast is – he is just a created being at the end of the day. For all his pretensions to deity, he and the kingdom he represents and rules is human after all and will not be able to stand against the power and purpose of the sovereign King who rules over all things.

These two beasts, along with the dragon parody the Trinity. They seek to turn the allegiance of men away from the true God to themselves. The beast from the sea was a symbol in John’s day no doubt of the Roman empire; the beast from the earth of the pagan religious worship with their temples to the emperor. Together the political and the religious spheres of first century life conspired to make Christianity undesirable and implausible.

We won’t have to wait until the end times to experience this, though it will be ramped up then. The fact of the matter is that the devil has been and still is “the ruler of the darkness of this present world” (Eph. 6:12). He is still trying to make true religion look foolish and wicked on the one hand, or to make it impossible to practice on the other.

How is he doing this today in our part of the world? Well, we are living in a culture which is doing its best to make Christianity look foolish and wicked. Christians are lambasted as being against science (which we are not) and therefore made to look backward and foolish. We are also now in the West being accused of being hateful because we won’t go along with the sexual revolution. We won’t go along with our culture’s effort to normalize sinful behavior; we won’t affirm people in their delusions. And that is said to be unloving and unkind. But you see what is happening: this is an effort and an attempt to make allegiance to Christ and to his Word look stupid and silly and even sinful. This is exactly what the False Prophet is doing in Revelation 13.

There are other places around the world where you can lose your life for being a Christian. So today there is the power of the state (the beast from the sea) in persecuting the followers of Jesus and making Christianity undesirable, and there is the influence of false teachers (the

beast from the earth) in deceiving people into thinking Christianity is false and bad and making it implausible.

The Application of the Symbolism

What then should we do? How do we live in a world which is against us? How do you operate in a culture and city where the halls of power and the positions of influence are given over to those who oppose the faith of Christ? Let me suggest three ways we should respond to the beast of the sea (political opposition) and the beast of the earth (religious and cultural opposition).

Don't be surprised!

One of the things I think John is doing in writing Revelation is to remind believers in every generation that they should not be surprised when their lives are made hard for them because of their faith. We will always be struggling against these beasts. This is especially important in our day because we've had it so easy for so long. For a long time, the winds of the culture were blowing in our direction. But this has definitely changed. We are living in a post-Christian world, one that is increasingly hostile toward the faith of Christ.

It's important to emphasize this also because of the idea common in many Christian circles that if you are just nice enough or winsome enough, you can get the world to like and respect you. The argument is that if the world doesn't like you it must be your fault; it must be because you are not loving enough or not convincing enough or good enough. But this is just not necessarily true. You can be winsome all day long, but if you are faithful to our Lord, the world is going to hate you. How do I know this? Because our Lord said it, that's why. Here is what he said to his disciples: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out

of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not him that sent me. If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father. But this cometh to pass, that the word might be fulfilled that is written in their law, They hated me without a cause" (John 15:18-25). I want you to particularly notice that last verse. How did they hate Jesus? "They hated me without a cause." The world doesn't need a reason to hate you. Even if you do everything right (and we should!), they are still going to hate you. Why? Because they love darkness rather than light.

This is what the apostle Peter told his audience: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified" (1 Pet. 4:12-14). Don't be surprised if you are persecuted; don't think it strange. It's actually the normal thing according to pretty much every apostle of our Lord and the Lord himself.

If you lose something because of your faith and can't get it back – like a job or a position or an opportunity of some kind or a friend or a family member – because you are a Christian, you can respond in a number of ways. You can become angry and hostile and want revenge, but that is not Christlike. You can become discouraged and disheartened and tempted into thinking the faith of Christ is just not worth, but you don't want to go there, either. Rather, let us be armed with the knowledge that suffering is part of what our Lord calls us to. So

“let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator” (1 Pet. 4:19). Indeed, our Lord promised that those who suffer for his name’s sake will be blessed and great will be your reward in heaven (Mt. 5:10-12).

Remember the Sovereignty of God

Four different times we come across this expression, “It was given unto him” (Rev. 13:5 (twice), 7 (twice)). So, for example, we read in verse 5, “And there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies; and power was given unto him to continue forty and two months.” It might at first be tempting to read this as if the dragon is the one giving the beast these things, since in verse 2 we read explicitly that the dragon gave the beast his power. However, it is utterly implausible to think that the dragon only wanted this to go on for 42 months (cf. 9:5). Rather, we should see this as an expression of the sovereignty of God. If the beast rages against God’s people, it is only because God, in his sovereign prerogative, has allowed him to do so. It is not the devil who ultimately gives power to rule to the beast; it is God. God is sovereign over the beast and his rule. In particular, he determines how long he rules.

I know a lot of people have a problem with this. They can’t see how that God can be sovereign over evil without becoming evil. And we certainly want to hold firm to the Scriptural teaching that God is not the author of sin. He doesn’t tempt people to sin and he himself cannot be tempted by sin (Jam. 1:13-15). But God, who holds the breath of every individual in his hand, could certainly stop the actions of evil men at any time he pleases. If he doesn’t it is because he has an eternal and wise and good plan in allowing it to take place.

The Bible has no problem seeing the actions of evil men ruled over by God and yet simultaneously seeing the actions of wicked men as wicked that they are responsible for. Here’s an example from the life of David. As he is fleeing from Absalom his son, Shemei comes out and curses

David and throws dirt at him. One of David's guards wants to go and take off the guy's head, but listen how David responds. It's amazing: "And the king said, What have I to do with you, ye sons of Zeruiah? so let him curse, because the Lord hath said unto him, Curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so? And David said to Abishai, and to all his servants, Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life: how much more now may this Benjamite do it? let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day" (2 Sam. 16:10-12). David argues that the reason Shemei was cursing David was because God told him to do so! In other words, it wasn't as if God was an indulgent parent who was too lazy to discipline a child who gets out of hand, but that God had a good purpose in what happened to David through Shemei. And in the same breath he acknowledges that what Shemei did was evil, and looks to the Lord to hold the man responsible for his actions.

This is all over the Bible, but nowhere it is more obvious than at the cross: "Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:22-23). God delivered Jesus over according to his "determinate counsel" and yet it was "by wicked hands" that our Lord was "crucified and slain." It is men meaning something for evil but God meaning it for good (cf. Gen. 50:20).

Let us remember that God is sovereign over all things. This is good news, not for the enemies of God's people, but for God's people, because it means that God isn't going to let any kind of suffering happen to his people that will not in the end redound to his glory and contribute towards the good of his people. We can indeed commit the keeping of our souls to our faithful Creator in doing what is right, because whatever we suffer, we suffer according to his good and wise

will.

Remember the end of the wicked

Let's now come back to verses 9-10. In the KJV they read: "If any man have an ear, let him hear. He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity: he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints." We are reminded of two things here. First, that the saints will be persecuted, so don't be surprised by that (our first point of application). But, secondly, that the saints will be vindicated and that those who persecute them will one day be judged.

This point is emphasized throughout the book of Revelation. Over and over again we are reminded that those who have the mark of the beast and who have joined him in oppressing and resisting the church will one day join him in receiving judgment from God. For example, we read in the very next chapter, "And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name. Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (14:9-12).

When John goes on to write in both places, "Here is the patience and the faith of the saints," the idea is that the saints are being called to patient endurance and obedient faith through the knowledge that God will one day judge their enemies. God will not forget. He will vindicate his people.

And yet this doesn't mean that if we are persecuted today, that we should expect this to happen tomorrow. In chapter 14, God's punishment of the wicked doesn't happen in temporal judgments but in the outpouring of his wrath in hell. We must be willing to endure and wait for God to make all things right. He has promised to do so.

On the other hand, we are also reminded just how foolish it is to join the unholy trinity of dragon, beast, and false prophet for their end is unimaginably awful. The days of the beast are numbered, and so are the days of all who join him.

So dear saint, persevere in the faith! Of course the primary reason we can have confidence in doing so is because God is for us. We are reminded of this in verse 8, where we are told that those who worship the beast are precisely those whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world. The implication is that those whose names are written there will not worship the beast. The elect cannot be deceived (cf. Mt. 24:24), not because they are more clever than everyone else, but because God keeps them. They belong to Jesus who died for them, and he will never let them perish and no one will pluck them out of his hand. Let us therefore, all of us, commit the keeping of our souls to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Let us follow him, for to follow him is to be victorious. Even if we die, we are victorious. On the other hand, to follow the devil is to follow a fake. The fruits of his victory are the pleasures of sin for a season. The fruits of God's victory in Christ is an eternal inheritance. "Here is [a call for] the patience and the faith of the saints. Let us hear that call and let us follow our Lord into victory.

CHAPTER XXII

YOU WILL SING AGAIN!

(REV. 14:1-5)

In chapters 12 and 13, the veil has been lifted to uncover the primary forces against the Christian church and its faith. We have seen that they are demonic in their nature and origin. We have seen that Satan wages war with the church through political means (the beast from the sea) and through religious and cultural means (the beast from the earth). And though this will ramp up towards the end, there has never been a time when the church has not had to stand against this devil in this conflict.

As John is seeing all this in these visions, the Lord makes it clear that despite all Satanic opposition, the church will be victorious. Satan is and will be defeated by Christ and by his people. The beasts in chapter 13 are overcome through the perseverance of the saints. However, we are also reminded that often the way the saints conquer the devil is through their death: “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Rev. 12:11). The life of a Christian in this world is a life of endurance and patience (13:10).

We need to hear this. We need to be reminded that the Christian life is a battle. The reason is that if we aren't, we can begin to think that God is being unkind or unfair to us when we go through hard times. We can begin to have unrealistic expectations of this life. And that can lead to disillusionment and even deconversion if not dealt with in a Biblical way. We need to remind people to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3).

However, we also don't want to paint a picture as if warfare and hardness are the only things that characterize the Christian life. The Christian must be determined to stand, but that doesn't mean that we are to be grim-faced all the time. It doesn't mean that we can't have joy and peace this side of heaven. In fact, these are the fruits of the Spirit now. We ought, even in the midst of trials, to be people who are characterized by peace: peace with God leading to inner peace and peace with each other. There ought to be a contentment that emanates from our faith in Christ. We are commanded to be always thankful.

The question is, with all this emphasis on spiritual warfare and dying to yourself and even martyrdom, how can you have joy and peace in this world? How can you maintain a joyful and thankful and contented heart in the midst of tribulation and difficulty? What if you have lost something or someone so precious that you can't imagine you will ever smile again?

It is part of the Biblical answer to sadness to say that the sadness will not be forever. For the Christian, this world is the closest to hell they will ever get. Joy comes in the morning, pure, undiluted joy that will never end.

That's not the only answer. I say that because I don't want to give the impression that we have to wait for heaven to have joy and peace. The Bible also teaches that our Lord is with his people and for them now, that he will bear them up and give us daily grace and strength. He can give real joy when all our circumstances preach gloom and doom. He can give peace that passes understanding when life continually hands us cares and stresses.

But if we want to be truly Biblical, we must learn to train our hearts to look toward the glory to come. We must live with heaven on the horizon of our perspective. We are on a journey and if you are a follower of Christ, it is a journey into his presence. We need to learn, as the apostle put it to the Romans, to be rejoicing in hope (Rom. 12:12). Not hope in the next job promotion or hope in the next vacation or hope in freedom from the current disappointment but hope in the promise of God that all things are ours in Christ Jesus, that we will inherit the earth, that we will see Jesus and enjoy immediate and eternal fellowship with him. On the other hand, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Cor. 15:19). It is just not an option for the Christian to have hope in this life apart from hope in the next. Our joy now is supposed to be a foretaste of the joy that is to come.

This is what the opening verses in Revelation 14 tell us. We go from earth and the spiritual struggle here recorded in the previous chapters to heaven and the spiritual celebration we see there. This is not the first time we have been transported to heaven in this vision. In these visions, we are shifting back and forth from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth through this book because we need to be people who have our feet planted on earth and our hearts fixed in heaven. We need the hope of future glory in heaven to fuel our fight with the devil here on earth. So we need to perspective of both heaven and earth, and this is one of the great benefits of reading and studying and meditating on the book of Revelation.

In these five verses, we encounter the 144,000 again. Let’s remember that the 144,000 are a symbolic reference to the people of God. In chapter 7, they are the people of God on earth who are sealed against the wrath of God which is about to be poured out in the seven trumpet-judgments recorded in chapters 8-11. But because they are on earth, they are also in the same place where the beast’s rule holds sway. These are the people against whom the beast will go to war, many of whom he will kill. This is recorded for us in chapters 12-13. So the background to these verses is of the church militant (the church on earth) sealed

against God's judgments and fighting with the beast. But in chapter 14, we hear them singing: "And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth" (Rev. 14:3). Our life as a Christian will not always be one of struggle. One day it will be characterized, as we see here, by singing. I think that is very significant, and I want to meditate on that reality with you. So as we consider these verses, I want us to consider, where they are singing (1-3a), what they are singing about (3b), and who they are who are singing (4-5).

What scenes like this teach us is that it is God's intention for his people to happy forever. That of course has implications now; it teaches us that God is not against us, that he is not disinterested in us, but that he delights in those whom he is saving through Jesus Christ. It teaches us that whatever we have experienced and whatever we are going through that brings the spirit down and turns the heart into a minefield of sadness and depression, we will sing again. This is what the psalmist expresses in his lament: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance" (Ps. 42:5). The Christian is a person who can always say, no matter what they are feeling or what they are experiencing: "I shall yet praise God." There is an eternal yet for the Christian, one that has been purchased and secured for us in Christ Jesus.

Where they are singing (1-3a)

Songs are so powerful. The full range of human emotion in some sense is probably best expressed in song, whether sad songs or happy songs. I don't have any doubt that this is one reason why singing is a part of the God-ordained worship: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart

to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19). It is an inevitable and necessary expression of being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

It’s also why we should not be surprised to find singing in heaven. C. S. Lewis said that if we find in ourselves desires which no earthly thing can satisfy, then the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world. We were made for heaven; we were made for the presence of God. In his presence is fulness of joy; at his right hand there are pleasures for evermore (Ps. 16:11). An implication of this reality is that we will never be able to sing as we were meant to sing until we are in heaven.

And that’s where this is taking place. Some take the reference to “mount Zion” in verse 1 to be the literal hill on which ancient Jerusalem was built and to argue that the future millennial reign of the Lord will take place in that geographical location. But in the book of Revelation, Jerusalem is the heavenly city (see chapters 21-22). This is consistent with the rest of the NT. Paul writes to the Galatians, “But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:26). In the letter to the Hebrews, we read that as believers in Christ, we “are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels” (Heb. 12:22).

We also note that the sound of music which John heard was coming from heaven: “And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps” (2). The singing of the 144,000 was a “new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders” (3); in other words, in heaven, the very place of God’s throne (see chapters 4-5).

Now this is significant because the first time we come across 144,000 they are on the earth about to confront the fury of the devil and the beast. Many of them will probably have been killed. Here you have a relatively small group of people (144,000) against “all kindreds, and tongues, and nations” (13:7). These were people with no power against the power of the beast.

The story of the 144,000 might be a sad one if you ended in chapter 13. But what we see here is this same group of people in heaven. And note this – all of them are there. Not 143,999. In chapter 7 there are 144,000 and now they are all standing in heaven and celebrating and singing. They were called to endurance, and they have endured. And they are in heaven celebrating the victory.

It has been noted by others that there is a difference between the mark of the beast and having God's name written on your forehead and being sealed by God. The mark of the beast may give you temporary empowerment and prosperity. Being on the side of those who control the halls of political and economic power may serve you well in this life. But it will not protect you from the judgment of God. On the other hand, those who are sealed by God are protected from his wrath. No matter how they are treated in this world, they are saved from the wrath to come and are given an eternal inheritance in the age to come.

The point is this, brother and sister: we need to remember where we are going. I don't know what tomorrow holds for you or me. I'm kind of glad, to be honest, that I don't. But I do know this: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (2 Tim. 1:12), and therefore I can "hold fast the form of sound words . . . in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (13). We are going to heaven, to paradise, to the presence of God, to be with Christ, to a home eternal in the heavens, to glory, to an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away. And when we get there, we aren't going to hang up our harps on the willows and weep – we will reach for our harps and sing like we've never sung before. That's not pie-in-the-sky, because God has promised it, purchased it for us in Christ, and because it is received by faith not earned by works.

We need to remember this. We need to remember that this world is not our home. We are strangers and pilgrims here. If you feel out of place, that's a good thing. You are not home yet. But if you belong to Christ, you will be. You may not feel like singing now. But you will sing

again; of that there is no doubt. Why? Because it is God's intention for all who belong to Christ to be eternally happy.

What they are singing about (3b)

But what are they singing about? What is it that makes them break out in song? Are they singing about their exploits on earth? Are they singing about all the times they overcame sin and temptation and the beast and the devil? Well, let's let the text tell us what they sing: "They sang as it were a new song" (3). The only other time in the book of Revelation a "new song" is mentioned is back in 5:9, where we read: "And they sang a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation." In other words, this is a song about how Jesus redeemed them, saved them, and kept them to the end. They are praising the Lord, not themselves. They are extolling the works of the Lord.

Furthermore, we are told that "and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth" (3). This also seems to indicate that it was their experience of redemption is what gave them the ability to sing this song. No one else could learn this song, not the angels, not anyone else. Why? Surely not because they couldn't learn the words or the notes. No one else could learn it and sing it because they hadn't experienced what the song was about. To be able to sing a song in heaven about being redeemed is only possible when you are yourself redeemed. This is a song about being saved by the Lord Jesus by his death on a cross for our sins and his keeping us in grace to the very end and making us more the conquerors.

What we sing about reveals the priorities of our hearts. Here on earth, we often prioritize the wrong things, and this is reflected in our songs. But in heaven, the saints will only value that which is most valuable and most lovely and most worthy. This then shows us how valuable salvation by Christ really is because this is what they sing about. This is

what perfect people sing about. It is what people with minds and hearts and wills without any trace of sin sing about, who see clearly and feel fully for the first time. It is significant that, even when they are in heaven and no longer inhabit a world scarred by sin and grief and illness, they aren't singing about the perfection and beauty and majesty of heaven but about salvation itself.

Why is this? Because it is in saving us that God reveals his glory and it is by saving us that we get to see that glory. Recall what they are singing in 5:9 – “and hast redeemed us to God.” That is what salvation is ultimately about; it is about redeeming us to God, bringing us to God, experiencing the immediate presence of God in heaven.

It is significant that the greatest displays of God's glory on the earth are connected with the work of redemption of man.¹ When God revealed his glory to Abraham in Genesis 15, it was to make a covenant with him by which God covenanted to bring through Abraham the Messiah into the world. When he came in glory on Mount Sinai he was redeeming Israel from Egypt, a type of the salvation from sin. We are told in 2 Cor. 3 that the glory of the New Covenant exceeds the glory of the first covenant made on Mount Sinai. Or consider the glory of God revealed in the 40th chapter of Isaiah. How does that chapter begin? It begins with the announcement of comfort to the people of God, that pardon had been secured. It goes on to describe the ministry of John the Baptist who will announce the coming of Jesus. It is in that context that we read things like this: “Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understand-

¹I am indebted to a sermon of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “The Glory of God,” for this insight. You can listen to this sermon here: <https://www.mljtrust.org/sermons/book-of-ephesians/>

ing?” (Isa. 40:12-14). The God who redeems his people is the God who measures the oceans in the hollow of his hands.

Or consider that remarkable display of God’s glory at the birth of Jesus: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:8-14).

We could go on to talk about God’s glory revealed at the baptism of Christ, and at the Mount of Transfiguration. The point is this: God has revealed his glory, the public display of his excellence and splendor and attributes, most clearly in the salvation of sinners, in satisfying his justice on their behalf, in granting them free and full pardon for their sins, in accepting them into his family and fellowship. And so it will be that in heaven we will fully see the glory of the God who saves. This is the prayer of our Lord himself: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world” (Jn. 17:24).

So the saints in heaven will be singing about the Lord Jesus Christ and glory of God in the salvation of men. They have seen glory, tasted glory, and they cannot help but to sing of that glory.

What a contrast to what so many sing about here. In our day we sing songs about victims, and we are usually the victims. It’s the kind of song that gives you a temporary sense of gratification, but it doesn’t last and usually leaves you more empty than ever before. But in heaven they are singing about a victor, not themselves, but Jesus Christ. They

are not singing about themselves because they understand they didn't save themselves; God did. Salvation is by God's grace and by grace alone. And it is because of that grace that they are enjoying God fully for the first time. They are perfectly happy for the first time because Christ has saved them to himself. And that is why they are singing: because it is God's intention for his people to be happy forever.

Who is singing (4-5)

The Bible is not a universalist text. What I mean by that is that the Bible does not allow us to say that God will save all humanity from final and eternal judgment (see verses 9-11!). Who then will be saved? How can we distinguish the saved from the unsaved? And can we even do this?

The answer is that we can. The Bible makes this clear in a number of ways. Our Lord himself said that you can tell a tree by its fruit. And what we see here are the fruits of grace in the lives of believers that distinguish them from the lost, from those who have received the mark of the beast. We see this in verses 4-5: "These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God."

Now as we read these descriptions of the redeemed, we have to keep in mind that these are symbolic descriptions. So, for instance, we are not to interpret the fact that they are described as virgins who have not been defiled with women as if to say that this is a group of male-only super-saints. Rather, this is a picture of the church at war. In the OT, one of the requirements for the Israelite soldier was to keep ceremonially pure during the times of war (Deut. 23:9-11), and this would have required celibacy (cf. 1 Sam. 21:5; 2 Sam. 11:8-13). Even so, the point here is that the church is viewed at war with Satan, and this celibacy is meant to be a picture of the purity of the church and its devotion to the Lord.

You see devotion to Christ pictured in other ways as well. When they are pictured as “firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb,” this is meant to point us to the holiness of the church. According to the Law of Moses, an Israelite farmer had to give the firstfruits of his harvest to the Lord as an offering; it was only then that he could keep the rest of the harvest for himself (cf. Exod. 23; Deut. 26). In the same way, the fact that this group is called “firstfruits” is not meant to indicate that they are the beginning of a larger harvest, but it is meant to indicate their status as wholly devoted to the Lord.

There are two other ways this is pictured. First, in the sentence: “These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth.” Throughout his ministry our Lord called on people to follow him. For his disciples during his earthly ministry, that literally meant following him around and listening to his teaching. But there is still a sense in which we are all called to follow Jesus. We follow him whenever we obey his word. His word is given to us in the Bible. Do we know what the Bible says? Do we believe it and obey it? Do we follow Jesus wherever he goes? Or do we just pick and choose what we want to obey? The church follows Christ by obeying Christ. The true Christian goes for universal obedience, not just selective obedience. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes, even to the point of death.

Finally, we see it in the words, “And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God.” In contrast with the dragon and the beasts who are all about deceiving people, God’s people believe the truth, tell the truth, and practice the truth. They believe God’s word which is truth. They reject false idols which are lies. They are therefore “without fault” or “blameless” (ESV), not of course in the sense that they never sinned on the earth, but in the sense that they are true to Christ. They have kept themselves from idols (1 Jn. 5:21).

These are the people who are singing. It’s so important for us to hear this because the devil wants you to believe that if you will just “follow your heart” and “be true to yourself” you will be happy. It is a lie! You

see this perhaps most clearly today in the transgender chaos which has inundated our country. Its advocates claim that to oppose this is to harm people with gender dysphoria and to make them so unhappy that they will commit suicide. Well, to say that is psychological blackmail, and it is also false. If you won't believe the Bible on this, at least listen to one of the advocates for transgenderism. He admitted in an op-ed for the New York Times, in talking candidly about a gender reassignment surgery he was about to have: "I still want this, all of it. I want the tears; I want the pain. Transition doesn't have to make me happy for me to want it. Left to their own devices, people will rarely pursue what makes them feel good in the long term. Desire and happiness are independent agents."² He frankly admits that what he wants won't make him happy and that this is usually the case. Following your heart is not the path to joy; it is universally the path to destruction. "The heart is deceitful above all things," said the prophet, "and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). To follow your heart is not the path to singing; it is the path to irreversible mourning and weeping.

Yes, to follow Christ wherever he goes always involves bearing your cross. But his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Follow your heart and you will end in despair. Follow Christ and you will have heaven and never-ending and ever-increasing joy. Heaven is a place of singing, because it is God's intention for his people that they will be eternally happy.

God made us to glorify him and to enjoy him forever. You won't find true or lasting joy anywhere else. You find it in living to the glory of God. But we cannot; we are sinners. We have fallen short of the glory of God, infinitely short. How then can we glorify him and enjoy him? The Biblical answer is through Christ, who took the sadness and the grief and the pain that we should have endured in eternal judgment and took it upon himself. He suffered in our place so that we can have our sins forgiven and be admitted to the fellowship of God where there is

²Anderson, Ryan T.. *When Harry Became Sally* . Encounter Books. Kindle Edition.

true happiness and peace to be found. And the way we receive this is not through works of any kind, but through faith in Christ, by resting in his finished work of redemption upon the cross.

If you have trusted in Christ, you are to follow him wherever he goes. Christ was baptized; he commands all his followers to be baptized and to publicly identify with him. If you have trusted in Christ and received the forgiveness of sins by grace, I urge you to openly identify with him – put on Christ in baptism, take up your cross, and follow him!

Brothers and sisters, let me leave you with this one last thought. We have seen the saints singing in heaven, and we have seen that this means that it is God's intention for his people to be happy forever. Here is the truth, no matter where you are at today, no matter how you feel today, no matter how dark tomorrow seems, no matter how hopeless it might all feel: you will sing again. You will yet praise him who is the help of your countenance and your God. Believe that; hold on to that. It is true, not because we are good enough but because God loves us in Christ freely and eternally and unchangeably.

CHAPTER XXIII

“HERE IS THE PATIENCE OF THE SAINTS” (REV. 14:6-13)

EVERY PERSON IS A WORSHIPPER. This is an unavoidable reality. You are worshipping something or someone. And it really boils down to one of two things: you are either worshipping the creature or the Creator. The creature a person worships could be a literal idol. It could be the god of a false religion, like the one worshiped by Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses. It could be the false god of Islam, or the polytheism of eastern religions like Hinduism. Or your god could just flat out be yourself. We worship whatever it is that has the supreme allegiance of our hearts. Something has that allegiance today, right now. What is it?

The Bible tells us that the primary and fundamental problem with humanity is that we have made an exchange: we have exchanged the worship of the true God for the creature. The apostle Paul puts it this way: “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they

became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen” (Rom. 1:21-25).

It is suicide to choose the creature over the Creator, and yet we all do it. It is suicide because it alienates us from the true source of our blessedness happiness and eternal life. Because he is eternally blessed he is able to bless us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3; Rev. 14:13). But when we turn to idols, we exchange truth for lies, and we exchange what God has ordained for what is unnatural.

One way you see this in our country and culture today is in the whole-hearted embrace of what has been called “expressive individualism.” For example, thanks to the secularism that now pervades our culture, we have lost any grip on objective reality, especially the reality that gives us an objective ground for what it means to be human, for what it means to be man or woman. We think we can just make it up, that we can be whatever we feel like at the present moment. But in doing this we are exchanging the Creator for the creature. We are replacing God’s order with our own wishes. Instead of calibrating our desires to the identity God has given us, we are resting our identity upon the changing and unstable foundation of our fickle desires. And in in the long run it is causing a lot of people to hurt themselves, to mutilate their bodies, to cause irreversible damage, all in the name of following their own hearts. Of course, we should not mock such people; we should weep over them. It is just another form of worshiping the creature over the Creator, of hewing out broken cisterns that can really hold no water.

The way out of this maze of endlessly trying to find yourself is to know the true God and his Son Jesus Christ. It is to gladly surrender to his sovereignty over us. This is not oppressive; it is the only way to true freedom. It is to worship him, for you cannot truly know him without

worshipping him. For to know him is to know that he has made us, that we are not our own, that we are the sheep of his pasture and that as a Good Shepherd he leads us beside the still waters, restores our souls, provides for our needs, walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death, and causes goodness and mercy to follow us all the days of our lives and into eternity. And unlike the devotees of our modern pagan gods who love to use cancel culture on each other, the true God never turns on his people. Jesus gives his life for his sheep. He gives us life abundant. He holds us fast.

God is God and God is good. The fact that he alone is God means that it is the ultimate treason to abandon him for other gods, whether it is the god of self, or some other creature. The fact that God is good means that it is very good news that we – even sinners who have embraced false gods – are through the mercy and grace of God called and invited to worship him. That fact that God is God means that those who ignore the call to worship him and abandon him for self-sovereignty and a life devoted to doing their own thing means that they are justly condemned and will experience everlasting punishment if they do not repent. The fact that God is good means that he has ordained that those who turn from this idolatry and embrace him through faith in Christ will have eternal joy at the Father's right hand.

In the verses we read just now, we see both the good news that calls us to worship the true God and the very bad news that warns those who abandon the Creator for the creature. In these verses, we hear three announcements of three angels. The first angel announces the good news that calls us to worship the Creator (6-7). The second angel announces fall of Babylon, the seat of opposition to God (8). A third angel then announces the very bad news that those who have worshiped false gods will drink God's wrath unmixed with mercy for ever (9-11). We then are told the point of these verses: they are a call for the saints to endure and persevere in the faith of God and in obedience to the commands of God (12-13).

In other words, these verses show us what the call to perseverance is a call to: it is a call to remain faithful worshippers of the true God. This is the connection between verses 6-7 and 12-13. They also tell us that you are a true worshiper of God when you keep God's commandments and the faith of Christ (no vague spirituality here). The intervening verses (8-11) help us to see why we should persevere in the true worship of God. First, because the false gods will fall (8); second, because the Divine and just retribution which will fall upon the worshippers of false gods is inevitable and eternal and unbearable (9-11). Hence, we have the description of faithfulness (we are to be faithful in true worship) and the motivation to faithfulness (in the futility of false gods, and the certainty, eternity, and enormity of the punishment for those who worship false gods).

The Description of Faithfulness

In verses 6-7, we read, "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." John sees an angel flying through the sky overhead and proclaiming "the everlasting gospel." But what follows is not what you would expect to hear: it is not the gospel as we normally think of it in terms of the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus over sin and a corresponding call to embrace him as Lord and Savior. Rather, it is a call to fear God, to give glory to God, and to worship God. Notice that all humanity is called to do this: it is a genuinely universal call to repent of idolatry and to turn to the true God in worship.

Why call this "the everlasting gospel"? Another way to translate this would be, "the eternal good news." But then this "good news" is at-

tached to a warning of judgment. So how again is this eternal good news?

It is good news in the same sense that the ministry of Jonah to Nineveh was good news. When the people believed Jonah's message about impending judgment and repented, God spared the city. The message itself was quite dire ("Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown," Jon. 3:4). But the effect was good: it resulted in repentance and the staying of God's hand in mercy. In the same way, the warning of judgment and the call to worship the true God (which implies repentance of idolatry) is an instance of the mercy of God towards humanity. God doesn't have to do this. There is no reason why God has to extend the mercy of repentance to anyone. Seeing repentance as mercy is one of the reasons why I like the definition of repentance given in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience." What is repentance? It is, in part at least, an "apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ." The warning of judgment and the call to repentance is an act of grace and mercy on God's part, and that makes this good news.

We should not think that this good news is to be thought of apart from "the mercy of God in Christ." After all, this book is the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the Lamb slain for the sins of people from every nation, kindred, and tribe. However, the focus here is on the worship of the true God in contrast to idolatry. To worship the true God is to worship the Triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit. We have seen that this letter highlights the Trinity in a number of ways. So this is not just a call to worship some vague Divine Being or a call to some kind of vague spirituality, but this is a call to worship the God of the Bible, the Creator of all things, the Lord over all, the Savior of sinners.

The fact that the call is a call to worship God shows that repentance from idolatry is not just a matter of lip-service to God. It is not just being

intellectually convinced that there is a God. Rather, this is a matter of the heart. You can't fear and reverence God, give glory to him, and worship him if your heart is far from him. This requires conversion of the whole person: heart, mind, and will. It means that we love him and his commandments and the way of salvation that he reveals to us in his word.

Gospel conversion is not saying a canned prayer and walking an aisle: it is such a change of life that the fundamental allegiance of our heart has changed from self and the world to Christ. This is why the eternal good news, the gospel, is a call to worship and fear and give glory to God. Saving faith, gospel faith, is a worshipping faith. You see the effect of this change also in verse 12: "Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus." Those who worship God, who fear him and give glory to him, are precisely those who keep God's commandments and the faith of Jesus. Not simply those who profess to be Christian, but who obey God and persevere in the faith of Christ.

So this is what God requires of all, and this is what those who have been called by God are required to persevere in. The saints keep the faith of Jesus; that is, they trust in him as Lord and Savior. The saints keep the commandments of God; that is, they have repented of their sins and they are seeking to obey him in everything he has commanded them. The saints keep the worship of God; they are people who love God and treasure him above all things and have given the ultimate allegiance of their hearts to him. This is the direction in which the saints persevere; this is how they endure.

Before we leave this point, I just want to point out again the universality of the everlasting gospel. All men and women are called to fear God and give him glory. Why? Because God is their Creator: he is the one who "made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters." Christianity is not a religion for white people only or for Western people only. It didn't even begin among white, Western people. It is a global religion, and it is right that it be so, for Jesus Christ

is the one to whom every human being owes their life. He alone has the right to rule over every individual on this planet, and any attempt to wrest that from his hand is wicked and wrong. And it is right that we obey the command of Christ to make disciples of all nations for all authority in heaven and earth has been given to him (Mt. 28:18-20). As the psalmist puts it, “O let the nations be glad and sing for joy: for thou shalt judge the people righteously, and govern the nations upon the earth” (Ps. 67:4).

The Motivation to Faithfulness

There are three motivations to the faithfulness urged upon the saints here in these verses.

The first is this: the powers allied against the Lord Jesus Christ will certainly and inevitably fall. This is the point of verse 8: “And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.”

Now John has not yet introduced Babylon at length here; he will do so in later chapters. But he certainly expects his readers to know what he is talking about in this passing reference to Babylon. And the reason why he expects them to know what he is talking about is that he knows his readers know their Old Testaments. They would know that Babylon was the city responsible for the destruction of the temple and the deportation of the people of God out of the land of Canaan. In fact, John is almost certainly thinking of several OT passages here. For instance, in Isaiah 21:9 the prophet announced the destruction of Judah’s (at the time, future) enemy: “And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground.” There is also a parallel in Jer. 51:7 with Rev. 14:8: “Babylon hath been a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the na-

tions are mad.” In both places, Babylon is said to have made the nations drunk on the wine of her idolatry.

But Babylon on the Euphrates was no longer a menace; the city had by John’s time long since faded into oblivion (just as the prophet Jeremiah predicted). So what is John talking about? He clearly is not talking about the literal city of Babylon. In any case, this doesn’t comport with what he says about it later (for example, being the place where the followers of Jesus were martyred, Rev. 17:6). We should see this as a symbolic reference to the powers of this world of any age which oppress and persecute the people of God. In John’s day, Babylon would have been represented by the power of Rome. Mounce argues, “It is the symbol of the spirit of godlessness that in every age lures people away from the worship of the Creator. It is . . . ‘secular humanism’ in its attempt to destroy the remaining vestiges of true religion.”¹

Babylon was the largest city on the earth in its heyday. It was the center of idolatrous and godless power. It was the place that sent out armies to persecute the people of God. It was in the center of this godless center of power that the exile Daniel the prophet was to exercise his faithful witness. The rulers of Babylon tried to take God’s people and indoctrinate them in the idolatries of their paganism.

The old city of Babylon and its empire may be long gone, but this kind of thing is still going on today. The temptation to give in is powerful because the inertia of history seems to be behind the forces of secular humanism and atheism and godlessness. The privileges of this present world belong to those who go along with those who oppose the gospel and the faith of Christ. In our own country at the present time, things are changing in a way that will probably make it harder and harder to be a Christian.

How do you brace yourself against a world that opposes Christ? How do you remain faithful to Jesus when faithfulness will put you on the margins of society and will cost you? What if it meant losing your job or

¹Robert H. Mounce, *Revelation (revised)*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1998), p. 271.

losing a promotion? What if it means ridicule and hardship? We don't know the cost of being a Christian like many in the world experience every day. But no matter where you live, to follow Christ will require bearing your cross. It will require sacrifice. So again: how do you joyfully endure hard things in obedience to Christ in a world that not only won't support you but is against you?

One of the ways we do this is to remind ourselves that the powers of this world will fall. The world in opposition to God and his people will one day be overthrown. Karl Marx and his devotees envisioned a world in which forces would inevitably lead to a utopia where there would not only be no different economic classes but also no religion. And they saw history on their side. But the fact of the matter is that history is on the side of the Christian. All history ends at the judgment seat of Christ, and all of life is to be lived in light of this reality. The apostle Paul put it this way: "Wherefore we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:9-10).²

Babylon will fall. No matter how mighty it looks today, one day it will be a waste and a wilderness. In the prophet Isaiah's time and in the prophet Jeremiah's time, Babylon was unimaginably great. I don't think anyone could ever have imagined it to fade in significance or power. Imagine New York City being nothing more than a pitiful collection of empty and broken buildings. Babylon is worse than that. It has virtually disappeared from the face of the earth. One day, all the power arrayed against Christ and his people will be thrown down. You need to remember that when you feel the pull of the world on your heart. You need to remember that when you feel attracted by the power and the privilege of a godless world. It may look dazzling today, but we will all one day see it fallen into rubble before the majesty and might of the true Sovereign to whom we all owe the final allegiance of our hearts. This

²The ESV translates verse 9 as, "So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him."

world is a sinking ship; don't anchor your heart to it. Remember what the apostle John said: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever" (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

The next motivation is the certainty, the eternity, and the enormity of God's judgment upon those who gave their hearts to Babylon and its idols instead of to the true God. You see this in verses 9-11: "And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name."

Those upon whom this judgment will fall are precisely those who do not worship the true God – that is, the God who is revealed to us in the pages of Scripture – but who "worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand." Again, this doesn't refer to people worshiping a literal beast or who receive a literal mark on or in their bodies. It is a reference to those who have given the allegiance of their hearts to an idolatrous way of living, who reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who do not keep the commandments of God. They do not love God with all their heart and soul and strength. They love themselves first. They give themselves to lifestyles that God hates. They fall in with the order imposed by secular and worldly authorities. They live to cash in on whatever is the easiest path to prosperity in the here and now. These are the people referred to here in verses 9-11.

What will happen to them? First of all, they will “drink of the wine of the wrath of God.” This is in contrast to the wine of the wrath of Babylon’s idolatrous immorality in verse 8. The wrath of Babylon is the hostility of the enemies of God against the people of God. Its anger is manifested in the marginalization and the persecution of the followers of Christ. We must remember that the world has two weapons in its arsenal when it comes to trying to get people to abandon their faith in Christ. It will either try to allure us or it will try to destroy us. If it can’t allure us and get us to worship the beast and to receive its mark in our bodies, then it will try to destroy us. If it can’t entice us with its smiles it will persecute us with its sword.

It is hard to resist the smiles of the world. It can be even harder to resist the sword in its hand. How do you resist it? You do so by reminding yourself that the enemies of Christ will not only be defeated but they will also be punished. They will drink of the wine of the wrath of God. There is no more fearful enemy to have than to have God as your enemy. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:29). Indeed, as Babylon falls, it will fall into the hands of a justly angry God.

Second, we are told something more about this wrath of God. God’s wrath can be poured out on the earth in temporal judgments. But God’s wrath now is tempered with mercy. However, we are told here that the wrath of God poured out here “is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation.” What does that mean? It means that it will not be watered down with mercy and grace. Right now is the day of salvation; right now is the day of grace. But there is coming a time when the wicked will be cut down. And in that day there will be no more mercy. No more rain on the just and the unjust. No more sun rising on the good and the evil. No more common grace. In that day, the wicked will receive their just due: unmitigated wrath untempered with mercy.

If you want to know what wrath without mercy looks like, just keep reading: the wicked “shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb.” Now

some people go to great lengths to drain this of anything that would provoke the kind of unsettling terror this is actually meant to inspire. They do this by arguing that this is just a symbol. They argue that we should not imagine that in the age to come the wicked are actually tormented by actual flames and so on. Well, I'm not so sure about that. Fire is a pretty consistent way the Bible speaks of God's wrath in the age of come and one reason for that could be that this is actually the way God's wrath will come. But let's suppose that it is a symbol. That does not mean that we can now relax and stop worrying about God's future judgment. Quite the contrary: if anything symbolism is used here because the actual thing is so awful that it cannot be put into words. Imagining the wicked in fire forever is the way that God intends us to see the punishment of the wicked in the age to come. This is not meant to downplay anything; it is meant to show us the enormity of the wrath of God which the wicked will experience.

Third, we are told something about the eternity of this punishment: we are told that "the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night." This is a punishment that does not end. It is eternal. There is no respite from it; there will be no rest for the wicked. Whereas the righteous will rest (verse 13), the wicked will not. There is no redemption beyond the grave; it is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment (Heb. 9:27).

The righteous have to endure the wrath of the world now but they will enter into rest later. On the other hand, the wicked have rest in this world now but they will endure the wrath of God "for ever and ever." I cannot imagine anything more awful and terrible than that. There is nothing more terrible than that.

And this is certain. Notice the language here: "shall drink," "shall be tormented," and so on. The wicked may escape judgment now. Or they may be caught and get off easy. But it will not always be so. Eternity will tell a different story.

However, there are a lot of folks who have a problem with this. They cannot imagine a God who would punish anyone with eternal judg-

ment like this. And when they realize that this is not just for Hitlers and Stalins but for anyone who aligns himself for herself with a secular and godless way of thinking and living, for anyone who does not submit himself or herself to the righteousness of God in Christ, they are even more revolted.

Perhaps one of the reasons we are revolted is that we have participated in trading the worship of the Creator for the worship of the creature – man himself. Once we make man into a god and put him in the place of the true God, hell becomes unthinkable. But man is not God. To sin against God is finite dust and ashes sinning against infinite majesty and glory. The Bible teaches that the only appropriate punishment for the rebellion of the creature against the Creator is the kind of judgment pictured here in Rev. 14. We must not judge the seriousness of our sin in the light of our own excuses. We must judge the seriousness of our sin against the testimony of Scripture, which is God’s word to us. We must be taught by the horror of hell just how horrible our sin is.

But there is another point to this: “Here is the patience of the saints.” It is as the saints, God’s people, remember that God’s wrath is coming on their enemies and God’s enemies, that they are both comforted in their affliction and warned against apostasy. Those who once named the name of Christ but then abandon him for the beastly power of idolatrous Babylon and who do not respond to the mercy of God in repentance will participate in the wrath of God unmixed with mercy forever.

There is yet another motivation for faithfulness, and we see it in verse 13: “And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them.” Here we are motivated not by God’s punishment on the wicked, but by the future blessedness of the believer. Whereas the wicked will suffer forever and have no rest, those who “die in the Lord,” that is, those who die belong to Christ by faith, who have fought a good fight, who have kept the faith, who have finished their course, will find that they will

inherit a crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:7-8). They will have eternal rest. They are “Blessed . . . from henceforth.” Just as the punishment of the wicked will never end, the blessedness of the righteous will also be forever (cf. Mt. 25:46).

When the voice from heaven tells us that “their works do follow them,” we learn that there is a reward of grace and glory in the age to come for those who have endured to the end. God will never forget, not now nor in the age to come, the works and labor of love that the saints do in his name and for his people (Heb. 6:10). Our labor is never in vain, for however we may be rewarded here, God will always bless those who follow him, if not in this age then in the age to come.

Just as the punishment of the wicked is awful beyond imagination, so the blessedness of the righteous is wonderful beyond description. When Paul went into heaven, he said that he “heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (2 Cor. 12:4, ESV). It is so great it is simply indescribable. “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift!”

Brothers and sisters, let us live in light of eternity. As Jonathan Edwards put it, may God stamp eternity upon our eyeballs! Let us live in light of the certain and eternal judgment upon the wicked but also in light of the certain and eternal blessedness of those who embrace Christ by faith and endure in that faith.

We have considered in these verses the awful end of the wicked, and I have said that we should gauge the seriousness of sin by this. But as I close, let me remind you that there is another place we can see how serious sin is. It is on the cross, for on the cross God the Son, Jesus Christ, willingly laid down his life as a sacrifice in order to bear the punishment for the sins of all who would believe on him. So terrible is sin is that it took God himself in the person of Jesus Christ to bear the guilt of our sins away. Hell is eternal because no mortal human can ever pay the debt he or she owes to God. But Jesus on the cross drank damnation dry. We cannot even begin to imagine the suffering he endured, not only the physical suffering, but also the suffering of the soul.

But God did this, Jesus willingly did this, so that all who believe on him might have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16). Our Lord himself said that all who come to him by faith he will never cast out. Will you flee from the wrath to come? Then flee to Christ!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TWO HARVESTS (REV.

14:14-20)

THE BOOK OF REVELATION brings us again and again to the End. The book itself tells its story through many cycles; not that history itself is a cycle in this way, but that the Lord is putting the same lesson to us in many different ways. The lesson is that this world is coming to an end. But what it ends in will not end. For the righteous, the end is eternal life. For the wicked, the end is everlasting punishment. So far, we seen two explicit cycles of seven judgments: the seals in chapters 6-8 and the trumpet judgments in 8-9. Each cycle brings us to the Final Judgment and the Second Coming of our Lord and the establishment of his kingdom. But we see it again in 10-11 which ends in the announcement that the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. And we see it again in the events in chapters 12-14, which starts with the power of the devil and the beast and ends with the saints singing in glorious triumph in heaven and the enemies of God worn down and destroyed.

In the text we are considering today, we are beckoned to the world of agriculture in order to behold the End of the world in terms of two harvests. The first is a harvest of grain in verses 14-16 and the second is a

harvest of grapes in verses 17-20. That the first harvest is a grain harvest is implied in the word “ripe” in verse 15, which literally means to be dried up, and is probably a reference to grain ready to be harvested. In the first harvest, the harvester appears to be the Lord himself (we will argue why in a bit), and in the second an angel does the harvesting.

Now one of the big questions we are confronted with as we consider the interpretation of this passage is whether or not the two harvests represent essentially the same event from different perspectives or two different events altogether. On the face of it, the second harvest clearly appears to be a harvest of judgment, for the grapes which are harvested are “cast into the great winepress of the wrath of God” (19). But what about the first? There are a number of ways to look at this (I won’t go into all the different ways this has been interpreted), but just say that I am inclined to think that these two harvests represent the same event (namely, the final resurrection and general judgment) but with the second focused especially on the judgment of the wicked.

The Scriptures teach that there will be a resurrection (a harvest) of the just and the unjust [“Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28-29).] and that at that time the wicked will be separated from the righteous [“So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” (Mt. 13:49-50).]. The first harvest in Rev. 14 points us to the general nature of the final resurrection for it is a “harvest of the earth.” However, the second harvest points us to the fact that it will be at this time that the wicked will be decisively and finally punished for their crimes against God and his people.

The other question has to do with the identity of the figure sitting on a cloud with a golden crown and sharp sickle in verses 14-16. Some interpreters say this is an angel – if so, it would give you seven angels in

chapter 14, and thus another pattern of seven with which the Book of Revelation is already filled. However, we have already met with “one . . . like unto the Son of man” in 1:13 and this is clearly our Lord (see 1:17-18). The fact that he is seated on a cloud reminds us also of the vision of Daniel: there the prophet “saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14). You will notice that the KJV has Son capitalized, which means that the translators believed this to be Jesus, and I think the cumulative evidence points to the fact that they are right.

The point of this identification is to remind us of the realities underlined in chapters 4-5: the events of this world are ruled over, not by blind chance or fixed yet unseen material forces, or even by wicked spirits working through human agents, but by God himself ruling through the person of the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, for his glory and the good of his people. The angels come in both harvests from the temple of God in heaven (15, 18) in order to bring about the harvest. This is another way of pointing to the reality that it is heaven, not earth, God, not the beast, which determines when the end comes. And just as a stalk of wheat cannot keep a sharp sickle from cutting it down, neither can the powers of men keep God from bringing about his sovereign purpose for history. This passage brims with the power of God and the authority of God and the sovereignty of God over all things.

Here in chapter 14 of the book of Revelation, we find ourselves face to face again with the end of the end. I say “end of the end” because the NT sees all of history from the resurrection and ascension of our Lord to his Second Coming as the end of time. For example, the apostle John writes: “Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby

we know that it is the last time” (1 Jn. 2:18). However, there will come an end to the end. This age will not go on forever. Christ will return and history as we know it will be wrapped up. Our Lord promised his church that he would be with it to the end of the world, or to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20), which implies that there will be an end to the age inaugurated by our Lord’s ascension into heaven. What the Bible in general, and Revelation in particular, teaches, is that this age will end in the harvest of the world, in the resurrection of the just and the unjust, in the judgment of the wicked and eternal life for the righteous.

And this is not a teaching based on one or two verses: it is pervasive throughout both the OT and NT, and especially the NT. This is a big deal, and one of the lessons we are to take from this is that this is a reality that we ought often to think about. And that implies that this is a reality that ought to shape not only our thoughts but our affections and decisions, indeed, our entire lives. Which leads me to the doctrine of this passage, which is this: that the harvest analogy for the end of time shows us how we ought to live all of life now in light of eternity, in light of the end of the age. And the analogy itself is meant to help us to do that.

So what I want to do today is to help us think through the practical implications of the analogy of harvest which is used here. I think there are at least three.

First, it teaches us that this present age is coming to an end.

One of the parables our Lord gave was the parable of the wheat and the tares. This is the parable:

“Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder

came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn” (Mt. 13:24-30).

Our Lord then gave this interpretation of the parable, which not only sheds light on the parable in Matthew 13, but also on the symbolism of Revelation 14:

He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Mt. 13:27-43).

According to our Lord, this world is like a field which is ripening for a harvest. The harvest is the end of the world, or the end of the age. This is true in Rev. 14 as well. The symbolism of Mt. 13 and Rev. 14 represent an important reality, and the reality is that things will not go on as they have forever, and the reason they will not is that God will himself bring

all things to an end. We are to live in light of this fact. This present order is not what God intends for eternity. This present order is something that God wills to come to an end. We often wonder why God allows bad things to happen. But what we can tend to forget is that there is an expiration date to the present age and to the bad things that happen in the present age. God has purposed that there will be a day in which evil will forever pass away. And this will be good. It is good when the harvest comes and it will be good when this present world comes to an end, when the curtains come down and the whole show is over.

In other words, everything around us is temporary. We need to remind ourselves of this fact. Sickness and death are temporary. Injustice is temporary. The prevalence of wickedness and the power it wields in the halls of governments around the world is temporary. It will not always be this way. It may seem that way sometimes. We may live an entire lifetime in places where the wicked rule. But . . . the harvest is coming.

This is surely what the apostle Paul reminds us of when he writes, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17-18). Don’t be discouraged for one day the temporary will be exchanged for the permanent and the eternal, affliction with glory. Live your life in light of that reality.

Second, this implies, in turn, that the age to come will never end.

This is because there is one harvest, not many. We should not interpret the two harvests in Rev. 14 as different events. There is one harvest, one resurrection, and one general judgment. The world does not keep on going in endless cycles of growing and harvesting. As the author of the book of Hebrews reminds us, “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

Revelation

While our Lord can speak of the end of the world, this is not the way the Scriptures speak of the age to come. This world is temporary; the age to come is eternal. This world will come to an end; the age to come will never come to an end. We sing it, but do we really understand just how incredibly wonderful this is?

*When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we've first begun.*

As I've gotten older, I've come to realize more and more just how short life here really is. You don't realize it when you're young, and that is probably a good thing. But life is just a vapor here, as the apostle James puts it. As Moses wrote in the 90th Psalm, "For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told. The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (9-10). But the age to come – for the believer, how wonderful! Look, our lives here are short, but that means so are our sorrows. There is coming a day when sorrow will be replaced with shining like the sun, and this will last forever, with no diminishing of the glory – in fact, I think the glory will just grow brighter and brighter forever. The joys here grow thin and dim, and disappointments increase, but in the age to come, joy and peace keeps coming forever and ever, with a never diminishing newness to them.

On the other hand, the sorrows of the wicked will have just begun, with no end! As I cannot imagine the happiness of the righteous, so I cannot imagine the misery of the wicked. The harvest is coming, and it will be terrible for the ungodly, for those who reject the gospel. But it is as certain as the glory of the righteous.

At this point, we ought to say something about the imagery of verse 20: "And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles, by the space of a thousand and six hundred furlongs." This refers to the practice of taking the

grapes and trampling them under foot in order to squeeze the juice out to make wine. Here, the juice of the grape is a metaphor for the blood of God's enemies, who will perish in the final judgment. It's a lot of blood. In fact, it's a river of blood deep enough to reach to a horse's bridle, and long enough to stretch for about 184 miles long. Why so much blood, you might ask? Why so much violence? Isn't this below and unworthy of God?

You must remember two things to keep the metaphor here in perspective. The first is that the blood of God's enemies, in the context of Revelation, is the blood of those who have been persecuting and shedding the blood of the people of God. These are not innocent victims. Those who are enduring the winepress of the wrath of God are the wicked oppressors of God's people. This is not genocide; this is justice, pure and simple.

Second, the reason there is so much blood at the end is that literally thousands of years of long-delayed justice will happen all at once at the end of the age. There is a lot of blood here, not because God delights in the death of the wicked, or takes pleasure in violence, but because there has been a lot of injustice and violence against God's people throughout history. The wicked often think they have gotten away with it. But they will pay for what they have done. Justice will not always be delayed. That is the point here. No matter how much suffering the saints have had to endure at the hands of wicked men, their time is coming. There will come a day when the martyrs will no longer need to cry out: "How long, O Lord?"

Third, that the reason for the present age is for what is coming on the other side of the harvest.

A farmer does not plant a field primarily to watch the crop grow. The entire reason for planting is the harvest. In the same way, we can see from the fact that there is only one harvest and that what comes after is eternal whereas what went before is temporary is that this world

and its order exists in order to give way to the age to come. Our lives in this world exist for the purpose of the age to come.

So we shouldn't think that the temporality of the present and the eternality of the future means that this present age is meaningless. It is not! This present age serves the ends of the age to come, just as the growth of a crop serves the ends of the harvest. Just as you cannot have a harvest without the previous growth, the age to come cannot happen apart from what precedes it.

Furthermore, just as God sends the rain and the seasons which allow plants to grow, even so God has determined the length of time till the end of the age. This world is not running on like a horse out of control; it is proceeding according to God's eternal plan. And that means in part that the days we live here in this world that God has allotted to us are days of purpose and meaning.

The harvest analogy helps us to see how our lives now have eternal significance. The harvest does not represent an absolute disjunction between what came before and what come after, for the farmer carries the crop that grew up to the harvest to the barn after that harvest. In a similar way, it is the lives we live now for Christ that will redound to the glory of God in the age to come. We quoted this earlier, but it bear repeating; listen to the way the apostle Paul puts it to the Corinthian believers: "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17-18). Our light affliction, that's now. What is it doing? It is working for us, it is producing something for us, like a crop planted by the grace of God in our lives, a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. It's not just that we suffer now and celebrate later and that the suffering and the celebrating have nothing to do with each other. What the apostle is saying is that our sufferings now work for our celebrating later. Our afflictions today will blossom into an eternal weight of glory in the age to come.

Again, what this means is that our lives here are not meaningless. Some people think that if you preach to people about heaven, you are just keeping them from present productivity or numbing their minds to their present sorrows so that they won't work for change. But that is false. The Bible motivates the believer to vigorous labor and work in the present because of the glory to come. It is in light of the resurrection of Christ that guarantees the resurrection of the believer that ought to motivate every thing that we do: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:28). Because the resurrection of Christ guarantees this harvest in the future, our labor now, done in faith and obedience to the Lord, is not in vain. It cannot be in vain.

And this doesn't just apply to the work that pastors and evangelists do. It means that everything a Christian does in faith and obedience to Christ, from schoolwork to pushing a broom to cutting the grass to filling out a spreadsheet to programming a computer to working on a car to whatever, all of that done for the Lord is work that is part of the growth now that will be harvested by the Lord in the age to come and will redound to his glory and our good throughout eternity.

On the other hand, suppose that this life is all there is to it. Suppose, in other words, that there is no harvest. Suppose in this scenario that you do something great. Suppose you make some great scientific discovery, one that will benefit millions of humans in many years to come in terms of making their life on earth better than it would have been otherwise. That would be wonderful, and we ought to thank God for the men and women who make such discoveries! But if there is no harvest, if there is no resurrection, if there is no age to come, no future blessedness and no future judgment that makes right all the wrongs, then what's the point? As the book of Ecclesiastes puts it, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Even more fundamentally, if there is no God who is over it all, then there just is no real, objective meaning to anything, period. Your life has no answer to the question "why?" behind it if scientific materialism

is all there is to it. Science can explain how things work or why they work in a particular way, but all the science in the world can't tell you that your life has any kind of meaning to it or that there is any kind of transcendent purpose to it. To use an illustration from the mathematician John Lennox, science can tell us why a pot of water is boiling in terms of heat transfer, but science can't tell you about the reason for the boiling water. To explain that, you have to refer to the person who put the water on the stove. They might tell you that they put the pot on the stove in order to make a cup of tea. In a similar way, unless you can invoke the Divine Person who spoke all things into existence for good and wise ends, you are left without an explanation for meaning and purpose.

And if that's the case, what is the point of doing anything? What is the point of work? What is the point of doing good, especially when it means sacrifice on your part, if there is nothing ultimately meaningful in anything you do? So I would argue that the realities of God and heaven and eternity are far more important in terms of motivating us to do meaningful and fruitful and sacrificial and hard work than all the empty theories of secularism. (I'm not of course saying that atheists can't work hard; all I'm saying is that they can't think too hard about the meaning of it all or they will end up too depressed to keep on keeping on.)

Of course, to compensate our society tries to create its own meaning. But this is a cheap substitute for the real thing. And deep down, we know it's fake. We are lying to ourselves. But this is the price you have to pay for the religion of secularism.

So the harvest points us to three realities: that this present age will end, that the next will not, and that the reason for the present is the future. We are to live in light of these realities. And we've seen that this means that we value what is eternal over what is temporal. It means that our affections are set on things above not on things on the earth. What are those things? It means living in love. It means sacrificial living, holy

living, gospel living, and evangelistic living. It means that we are willing to suffer now to shine forever instead of sinning now to suffer forever.

We gladly live this way because our Lord Jesus Christ who is over the harvest has risen from the dead himself, the first fruits from the dead, for all who belong to Christ will rise in him gloriously to eternal life. Will you have this life? You will find it in Christ and in Christ alone. Come to him, receive him by putting your trust in him as Lord and Savior and his promise to you, recorded in promise after promise in the Bible, is that you will not only have life, but have it abundantly.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SONG OF MOSES AND THE LAMB (REV. 15)

THIS PAST TUESDAY SAW A CATASTROPHIC DEFEAT for the pro-life cause in our state and a complete failure on the part of our society nationwide to protect the most vulnerable, the most innocent of human life among us, namely, the unborn.¹ Fifty years of *Roe v Wade* taught our society that this is about a woman's right over her own body. But it is a complete fable to say that in passing Issue 1 we are protecting a woman's right over her own body. We are not. In abortion, a woman is not primarily doing something to her body; she is having another human life ended. There is no doubt about this, quite apart from religious or Biblical perspectives. This is the standpoint of basic biology and science. When confronted with these facts, those who support abortion will sometimes shift and say that these are human beings but not human persons, simply because the baby has not been born yet. But to say that is to draw the line at a completely arbitrary point. It is completely arbitrary to deny a human being personhood either on the

¹Tuesday, November 7, 2023, when Ohio decided to bow at the altar of Molech and pass an amendment to the state constitution codifying societal permission for the murder of unborn babies.

basis of development, location, or size. The same arguments would also make infanticide legitimate, as some of the pro-choice advocates (like the Princeton ethicist Peter Singer) actually argue. Our society needs to come to grips with the fact that we are justifying the killing of millions of human beings by arbitrarily denying them personhood for the sake of our convenience. It's that simple. And it's the same way people in the past justified the way they treated native Americans, the African-American slaves, and the Jews in Europe during the Second World War.

As Christians, we believe all human life is valuable. A human being is a human person from conception, made in the image of God. For that reason, as Christians we must abominate and grieve over recent political developments.

And we do. But we must be careful that even as we weep, we don't descend either to despair or to hate. How then do we guard our hearts from sinful reactions to a wicked world? How do we not be overcome by the evil around us? Well, I think the Book of Revelation is especially helpful here. It is a book-long reminder of the reality the apostle Paul speaks of in his letter to the Romans: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:19-21). We overcome evil with good partly by reminding ourselves that God is sovereign, and God will repay.

A Proper Perspective

This chapter (Rev. 15) helps us to see that. In this chapter, we see the way prepared for the final cycle of seven judgments in chapter 16 and introduces us the "seven angels having the seven last plagues" which bring to completion the pouring out of God's wrath on the wicked (15:1). Towards the end of this chapter, we see the angels come out of the temple, indicating again that what happens in history is according

to God's eternal plan (5-6). The four living creatures who guard the throne of God give them "seven golden vials full of the wrath of God who liveth for ever and ever" (7). (These vials were shallow and wide, rather than narrow and thin, which is the reason why the Greek word behind the word "vial" is often translated as "bowl." They would have been easily emptied of their contents, the content being "the wrath of God.")

Verse 8 reminds us of scenes from the tabernacle in the wilderness and Solomon's temple, both of which were filled with smoke from the presence of God when he manifested his glory in those spaces at the time of their inauguration. Now we are reminded of God's presence in the heavenly temple. The fact that "no man was able to enter into the temple, till the seven plagues of the seven angels were fulfilled" (8) indicates that once God begins to bring about his purpose in bringing justice to the world, he cannot be stopped.

All this sets the stage for the events of the next chapter, the seven bowls of wrath. Each cycle of seven judgments has brought us successively closer to and has focused more intently on the end of the End. In other words, the bowls of wrath will not be a description of the way things go through all of human history, but this is a description of the final outpouring of God's wrath upon a wicked world at the very end of human history.

However, in between the introduction of the seven angels with the bowls of wrath in verse 1 and verses 5-8, the scene shifts to the "sea of glass mingled with fire," which according to 4:6 is immediately before God's throne, that is, in the immediate presence of God. On this sea are "them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name" with "harps of God" (2). Here we have another perspective of heaven. On the one hand, there is the perspective of coming judgment. On the other hand, there is the perspective of God's victorious people.

What are they doing? Well, they are singing, as at the beginning of chapter 14. The contrast between the people of God singing in heaven

and the wicked about the receive God's wrath on earth could not be greater. It reminds us again that there is coming a great change one day. Joy comes in the morning. The righteous will shine like the sun in his strength while the wicked are gathered up and thrown into the fire of God's wrath. This is the perspective that we are to have.

A Proper Pattern

However, it's not just perspective that is being offered to us here. We are also being given a pattern. Even though we are not yet in heaven, we ought to as much as possible be like the saints who are in heaven. And when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven," surely we mean for God to begin with us, in our hearts and homes, right here and right now. Heaven is our future hope, yes, but it is also our goal and pattern for the present.

The pattern offered here is a pattern of worship which manifests itself in song. As in chapter 14, the saints are singing praise to the Lord. Even as we see the wickedness around us, we need to remind ourselves that the wicked do not define ultimate reality or the end of all things. God does that, and it will be eternally sweet for the Christian. We ought to be singing Christians, like the saints in heaven pictured for us here in Rev. 15.

What are they singing? They are singing "the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" (3). The song of Moses is recorded for us in Exodus 15. It was sung by Moses and the children of Israel immediately after they had been delivered from Pharaoh, when Pharaoh's chariots had been engulfed in the Red Sea. It was a marvelous deliverance, and the people of God could not help but to respond with singing. But there will be a greater deliverance of which the Exodus was the sign. And just as the deliverance in the Exodus took place after the Passover, even so the deliverance anticipated here take place because of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, because Jesus Christ our Lord died on the cross for our sins. The Exodus points to a greater deliverance and

the Passover to the atoning death of our Lord. So the song of Moses is the song of the Lamb. It is the song of God delivering and saving his people through the atonement of their sins.

Even though the song sung here in heaven is not an exact reduplication of the song of Moses, it does borrow from the wording as well as the spirit of the Exodus celebration. In fact, it is suffused through and through with the language of the OT, coming not only from Exodus 15 but also from passages in Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and the prophesy of Jeremiah.² There is a lesson here for our worship. Though I don't think that the NT teaches exclusive psalmody, the fact that in heaven the saints are singing the song of Moses and the Lamb indicates that NT worship is informed by the worship of the OT. Do our hymns reflect that? We shouldn't sing songs whose content is foreign to the spirit and the letter of OT worship, especially as it is expressed in the book of Psalms. In fact, I think it is good for us to sing Psalms – our hymn book has several of them put to music (Psalms 18, 23, and 42, for example). On the other hand, we need to beware of songs that are completely alien to the kind of worship that you see in the Bible (almost every hymnbook that I've seen has them!). Worship in the Bible is God-centered and full of robust truth rather than centering on sentimentalism and the celebration of the “good old times.” We should want to worship the way heaven worships, shouldn't we?

Worship is so important in terms of maintaining a proper perspective and pattern of life, that what I want to do today is to focus primarily on the content of the saints' worship in verses 2-4, which is God and his attributes and his deeds. We need to be constantly immersed in the vision of God, who he is and what he has done, is doing, and will do. Our spiritual health depends on this. Dan. 11:32 tells us that it is “the people that do know their God” who “shall be strong, and do exploits.” In fact, our Lord in his high-priestly prayer said that it is eternal life to know God and his Son Jesus Christ (Jn. 17:3). Now the problem is that we not only live in a God-denying world, but we also live in a God-

²See, for example, Deut. 28:59; 32:4; Ps. 86:9; 98:2; Jer. 10:7.

disfiguring world. We are either told that God does not exist, or we are told that God is not who the Bible tells us that he is. And if we're not careful we can begin to imbibe some of these ideas in our own hearts and minds. We need therefore to constantly come back to the Scriptures and let them refocus our vision on the one true and living God. It is the pattern of worship that will give us a perspective of hope, especially in trying times.

Our text is a great place to do this. In particular, in verses 2-4, we see truths about who God is and what our response to him ought to be. I want you to notice the logic especially of verse 4: "Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest." Note that a response is called for, and it is the response of worship: "Who shall not fear thee . . . and glorify thy name?" But then this response of worship is based on three realities (note the word "for" repeated three times), all of which are about God. These three realities are first, for thou only art holy; second, for all nations shall come and worship before thee; third, for thy judgments are made manifest. Just as the worship of heaven is based on their vision of God, so ought ours. So I want to focus our thoughts around two things: to help us meditate on the reality of God as he is revealed in these verses, and then to look at the response which this ought to elucidate in each of our hearts. God is spirit, our Lord tells us, and as such he is to be worshiped in spirit and truth. We must have heat and light, not light without heat (the mind without the affections), nor heat without light (the affections without the understanding), but heat and light, a mind full of God creating hearts on fire for God. Let's look first at God's worth, and then his worship.

God's Worth

I love the way the Lord is described in these verses. Each characterization of God is worthy of our strictest attention.

Lord God Almighty

We have actually already come across this title, which is used 9 times in the book of Revelation.³ But it is such a glorious title that it is worthwhile to meditate upon it each time we come across it. To say that God is “Almighty” is to acknowledge his omnipotence. It is to say that he is all-powerful, that there is no power in the universe that equals that of God’s. In fact, we should go further and say that the Biblical picture of God is not only that he is the most powerful, but infinitely powerful. He not only has the most power, but he has all power. God is characterized by none of the limitations that we are characterized by. He is incomparably great. There is no one like God in this way. This is certainly one of his incommunicable attributes. There is a sense in which we can be holy as God is holy, but we cannot be omnipotent as God is omnipotent.

Now someone may argue that God is not omnipotent because he cannot do certain things. The Bible acknowledges this: God cannot lie, for instance. He cannot do what is evil. He cannot sin. But these are not limitations on God’s might – to sin is a weakness, not a strength. To say that God is omnipotent, therefore, does not mean that God can do absolutely everything; it means that God can do whatever pleases him. This is exactly what the Bible affirms. Psalm 135, for example, says, “For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatsoever the Lord pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places” (5-6). Or consider another Psalm, which says, “But our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased” (Ps. 115:3).

³Rev. 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22. The only other time it appears in the NT is in 2 Cor. 6:18.

However, the reality of God's omnipotence has been often disputed. One of the arguments against God, especially in modern times, has been that if God truly is Almighty, then why so much sin? Why so much evil? Why the Holocaust, for example? Why so much senseless evil? Doesn't this argue that God is helpless to prevent such things? Or that God doesn't exist?

The answer is no. To argue that God either doesn't exist or is helpless because there is so much pain and evil is to assume that God cannot have morally sufficient reasons for allowing such things. But how can finite men and women reasonably and confidently arrive at such a conclusion? I think one of the points of the book of Job is to keep us from this kind of obscene hubris. In fact, the apostle Paul indicates in the Roman letter that God does have good reasons for allowing evil and suffering, and he argues that it is wrong for creatures of the dust to arraign the Creator for wrongdoing because he saves one person and not another. Here is what he said:

Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory" (Rom. 9:18-23).

Do you see what the apostle is doing here? He has just been arguing that God is sovereign in salvation. That means that if not everyone is saved it is because, at the end of the day, it is because God willed not

to save them from the judgment they deserve. But this is not because God can't save them. It is because he willed not to do it. In response to the objection that this can't be just because no one can resist God's will, Paul responds that God has the right to endure with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction in order to magnify his holy wrath against sin and to make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy which he afore prepared to glory. In other words, Paul is saying that God has reasons, reasons which are holy and right for bearing long with the wickedness in the world, and one of those reasons is to demonstrate the power and justice of his wrath against sin.

In a significant way, the book of Revelation is about the demonstration of God's holy wrath in the judgment of the wicked. And we see over and over again that the saints are not cringing at it; they are rejoicing in it. They aren't condemning God – how can they? For God in punishing the wicked is doing what is just.

We need to remember that the best thing for God to do is not to magnify human beings. It is to magnify himself. It is to put on display the full panoply of his perfections – not only his love, but also his wrath, not only his compassion and grace but also his power. In heaven, God's people will be able to see more fully, I think, the justice of God in all his ways. We will know then more fully how that God's power could never have been called into question because of the presence of evil men and evil deeds.

It's important for us to remember all this when we either see or experience for ourselves painful things, whether they come from moral evil or natural evil. It does not mean that God is not present, or that he doesn't exist, or that he is powerless to intervene. But here is what it does mean, and the book of Revelation helps us to keep this perspective: it means that no matter what happens to us or around us, or how bad things get, God is omnipotent, he is Almighty, and he is going to make everything right in the end. The perspective of the book of Revelation is not that God's power means that nothing bad will ever happen to the righteous. It tells us about the dragon and the beasts who hate God's

people and persecute them and kill them and make life hard for them. Our Lord didn't tell the church at Smyrna that they were going to be delivered out of suffering, but that some of them would be killed! But then he said this: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

This is what the power of God can do. It can take people who are broken in a broken world and give them a crown of life. It's the same sort of thing our Lord said to his disciples: "And ye shall be betrayed both by parents, and brethren, and kinsfolks, and friends; and some of you shall they cause to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake. But there shall not an hair of your head perish. In your patience possess ye your souls" (Luke 21:16-19). This is the power of God: not to keep us from suffering and death, but that even if we are killed, not a hair of our head will perish.

By the way, I think that sometimes people who respond to the problem of evil by rejecting belief in God, aren't really in fact rejecting belief in God. They are simply very angry at God and part of their anger against him is manifested in refusing to acknowledge his existence. If that describes you, let me plead with you: it doesn't make sense to require that God rule this world the way you want him to or because in your finitude you can't understand how God could be just and allow this or that to happen. Rather, let us who are clay in the hands of the Potter, submit our wills and our lives to him. He promises to make all things right. He promises to turn the valley of Achor into a door of hope. He promises that those who weep will laugh one day.

And the guarantee for this is that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, was himself mistreated, misjudged, and killed on a cross. But he willingly submitted to this because he was doing so, not as a solitary individual but as the Representative of sinful men and women, the Lamb of God bearing the guilt of our sins and bearing our punishment upon himself. And then by the power of God he rose again from the dead, and he

promises that all who trust in him and repent of their sins will rise with him one day. That is the promise of the gospel, a gospel which also described as the power of the omnipotent God for salvation (Rom. 1:16).

Now if God is almighty, then it is no wonder that his works are “great and marvellous.” They are to be wondered and marveled at. He is almighty in his work of creation, in speaking all things into existence by the word of his power. He is almighty in his works of providence, his “most holy, wise, and powerful preserving, and governing all his creatures and all their actions” (Westminster Shorter Catechism). He is almighty in his work of salvation, demonstrated in history in the nation of Israel (especially in the Exodus) and finally in the person of Christ. It is demonstrated every time God takes a sinner who is dead in sin and brings them to life in Christ. It will be finally demonstrated at the end of time when God makes all things new.

King of saints

In verse 3, God is also praised as the King of saints: “just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints.” Now, depending on what version of the Bible that you have, it might instead read either, “King of ages” or “King of the nations.” It turns out that the scholars are divided over which is the best reading. But here’s the thing: they are all true descriptors of God. I point this out because liberal scholars like Bart Ehrman (as well as some KJV-Onlyers) make more of the textual variants in the manuscripts than is warranted. They will say that there are thousands of variants among the ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, and that is true. But here’s the thing: probably close to 98% of all variants don’t even affect the way the text is translated. And the ones that do (like the text we are considering now) don’t affect any doctrine. Here is a case where it just doesn’t matter because all three variants are true. God is the King of saints. He is also the King of the nations. He is also the King eternal!

With that being said, I am going to stick with the reading of the KJV: “King of saints.” God is the King of saints. What might this mean? That he is only the King for the people of God? No. If Revelation teaches anything, it is that God is the God of the whole earth, of all the nations. It means, however, that he exercises his kingly power and sovereignty for his glory on behalf of his people and for their good. When we pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying that because God instructed us to pray it. And he instructed us to pray it because it is not only in this way that God’s name is hallowed, but also in this way that we find our greatest good.

God is the king of saints because the people of God are saints, not in the sense that they are super-holy people, but in the sense that they are sanctified by Christ and belong to him. We are a purchased people. All God’s people are saints, from the least of them to the greatest of them, from the most well-known to the least known. If you belong to Christ, you are a saint. And God is your King, ruling over you and for you. And because the King of the saints is the King of the nations and the King eternal that we can know that we are without doubt on the winning side. This is what the Book of Revelation shows us. In fact, we read in verse 4 that “all nations shall come and worship before you.” They will do so, because God’s universal sovereignty will be recognized, even by his enemies. Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11).

This King of the saints is a King who ways are “just and true.” He never betrays his people. He never promises one thing and then does another. If they are unjustly treated in this world, he will bring justice for their sake. He will work all things for the good of those who love him, for the good of his saints.

God is holy

“For thou only art holy.” We’ve noted in past messages that in Scripture the holiness of God is not just about his moral perfections. More

fundamentally it is a reference to the transcendence of God. What we mean by this is just simply that God is unique in the sense that he is in a category all by himself by being distinct from every created thing. In other words, there are two categories of being: uncreated and created. God is the only uncreated being. He is the only being who is self-existent, self-sufficient, immortal, invisible, God only wise. There is no one even remotely like God. He is the only being who necessarily exists. In other words, we are not like God. As the prophet Isaiah put it, "To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" (Isa. 40:18). The answer of course is, "No one!" It is in this sense then that God only is holy.

In contrast to the presentation of the holiness of God which the Bible gives us, many today in our culture want to argue that there is no one who is Other like God. They argue that all that exists is matter in motion. This idea has consequences, and one of the saddest consequences of humanism is that it cannot rise above dust and ashes. In a humanistic outlook, there is no God to save us; we must save ourselves. Unfortunately, however, we are part of the problem; how then can we save ourselves? This fact is illustrated in that every attempt to create utopia on earth by men inevitably ends in more misery and hopelessness and injustice. Moreover, we cannot save ourselves from death. We cannot save ourselves from our sins. We need someone who is outside the created realm to do this. We need God.

Of course, we also need someone who is like us. We need someone who can come into our world and rescue us. We are like a man who is drowning. The last thing that person needs is to hear someone tell him to save himself. He cannot. He needs someone who is not drowning to jump into the water with him and pull him out. This is what the God who is holy has done. He is other, different from us; but in the person of the Son of God he became a man, took on human nature, and become another like us. He came from out of the water and jumped into the water to rescue drowning sinful men and women. So the holiness of God not only points us to our need for salvation in that he is of purer

eyes than to behold evil and will judge all unpunished sin. But it also points us to the possibility of salvation, for only a holy God is able to save. Only a God who shares none of our limitations could be able to restore us to his favor. This is what he has done in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This is of course more that could be said. But to say that God is Almighty, that he is King and Sovereign, and that he is holy is saying a lot, and if we really see it and feel it, we cannot but be led to worship. Which brings us to our next point.

God's Worship

“Who shall not fear and glorify thy name?” (Rev. 15:4), ask the heavenly choir. What they are saying is that worship is inevitable when you see and feel these realities about God. There is not a moment of worship in heaven that is constrained. There is not a heart in heaven that does not feel in all its intensity the marvel and the glory and awe and the wonder of the holiness and power and sovereignty of God. No one is forced to worship in heaven. There are no hypocrites singing in God's presence. For them, it is impossible not to sing. It is the natural expression as well as the completion of their joy in God.

Brothers and sisters, we are not in heaven yet. Which means that when we come to worship we bring along with us hearts that are not perfect, that are often laden with sins and griefs and weariness. Sometimes, let's be honest with ourselves, it is hard to worship God. But we need to be worshipping people, people who worship God in spirit and in truth. Let us cultivate a spirit of worship. This is so important, for a number of reasons; let me give you at least three.

First, because when we worship God in spirit and truth, which is what God seeks, it means our minds and our hearts have been captured by God. It means that we are not trading God for the creature. It means that we are fleeing idolatry in its most basic manifestation. It means that we are true to God. We are going to be faithful people.

Second, when we worship God in spirit and in truth, we are thankful people. The apostle Paul links idolatry and false worship with ingratitude in Romans 1. It follows, I think, that you cannot separate true worship and gratitude and a spirit of thanksgiving. It is God's will for us to be thankful at all times and for everything.

Third, when we worship God in spirit and in truth, we are going to be hopeful people. Those who worship God are precisely those who hope in him. Psalm 147:11 tells us that "the Lord taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy." To fear God is to worship him and to fear him is to hope in him. I also think that in general hopeful people tend to be joyful people, but this does not necessarily have to be the case. There are times when our worship is mingled with tears. And yet even then we can worship God.

This is the kind of person we want to be: faithful to the Lord, thankful, and hopeful. And if we want to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things and make it most attractive, this is the kind of person we must be. This is what we will be when we cultivate a spirit of worship. To that end, let us meditate upon the vision of God which the Scriptures give to us. Let us not look at ourselves and the world around us in order to interpret God, but rather let us look at God and behold him as he is held out to us in the mirror of his Word and in the revelation of his Son, in order that we may truly glorify him and shine his light in this world.

CHAPTER XXVI

“TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS ARE THY JUDGMENTS” (REV. 16)

IN A CHAPTER ENTITLED, “The Devils,” historian Paul Johnson explains how the Marxists in Russia during the 1930’s under Stalin terrorized their own citizens. One of the ways they did this was by disconnecting crime and punishment. In other words, you didn’t have to be actually guilty of anything to become a victim of the secret police. A Russian agent even admitted to a British newspaper “that innocent people were arrested: naturally – otherwise no one would be frightened. If people, he said, were arrested only for specific misdemeanors, all the others would feel safe and so become ripe for treason.”

An old Bolshevik recounts the case of an energy expert who, over eighteen months, was arrested, sentenced to death, pardoned, sent to a [concentration] camp, released, rehabilitated and finally given a medal, all for no apparent reason.¹

¹Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Nineties* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), p. 274-275.

Unfortunately, all too often human “justice” is flawed, even if not to the extent of Soviet Russia. However, if there is a lesson from Revelation 16, it is surely that this is not the case with God. God is the judge of all the earth who will always do what is right (cf. Gen. 18:25). This means that God only punishes the wicked, and he punishes the wicked exactly as they deserve – no more and no less. The God of the Bible is never guilty of a miscarriage of justice. He never convicts the innocent, and he never terrorizes the righteous. We rightly abominate those who do. And even when God punishes the wicked, he never takes pleasure in it. According to the prophet Ezekiel, “the soul that sinneth, it shall die;” nevertheless, “I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye” (Ezek. 18:4, 32). God rejoices when a single sinner repents (cf. Lk 15); he takes no pleasure in the punishment of any wicked person.

And yet, one of the reasons that people give for nonbelief in the God of the Bible is the fact that God punishes the wicked and, in particular, that he sends people to hell. Some folks might even look at the judgments recorded in the book of Revelation and think that this is overkill on God’s part. All these cycles of judgment: what gives? Is this not an overreaction on God’s part?

However, when we carefully consider this chapter, it will help us to answer questions like that. To do so, I first want us to see how this chapter fits in with the broader narrative in the book of Revelation and take a quick overview of its contents. Then, I want us to look at the prominent themes which emerge from this chapter. We will see that our Lord makes it very clear in his word here that his judgments are just, and that far from being reasons for doubting God’s goodness, it ought to lead us to praise him for his justice and the fact that very soon the God who is Holy will put all things right.

The Cycles of Judgment in Revelation

We've seen that the book of Revelation is broadly structured around three cycles of seven judgments: the judgments associated with the seals of the scroll (chapters 6-8), with the sounding of the angelic trumpets (chapters 8-11), and now with the pouring out of the bowls (vials) of wrath (chapter 16). I believe that the first cycle covers the entire period of time between the first and second comings our Lord, whereas the latter two are associated with the end of the End. The last two certainly share similarities and gives credence to the argument that they deal with roughly the same period of time.

For example, in both the trumpet and bowl judgments, they are poured out successively on the earth, sea, rivers, and the sun (first four judgments). In the fifth trumpet judgment, the bottomless pit is opened, and locusts come on the earth to torture those who are not sealed by God; in the fifth bowl judgment, God's wrath is poured out on the seat of the beast so that those who belong to his kingdom are in terrible pain. Clearly, the objects of God's wrath are the same in both cases, for those who are not sealed by God are those who belong to the kingdom of the beast and who bear the mark of his name. Both the sixth trumpet and bowl judgments involve the Euphrates river and large armies amassing there to attack and destroy. Finally, the seventh judgments of all three cycles involve the end of the End: here we are told that "the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found" (Rev. 16:19-20). (The fall of Babylon will be further elaborated in chapters 17-19.)

However, there are differences. One obvious difference is that whereas the trumpet judgments are limited in their scope to a third of whatever is being judged, the bowl judgments are universal in their scope. There is no limitation here. This is probably because, as we are told in the previous chapter, these judgments are "the seven last plagues; for in them is filled up the wrath of God" (15:1). So I don't think they are recapitulations of each other in the sense that they

repeat exactly the same events from different perspectives (though there obviously is some overlap); rather I think they both belong to the end of history and show that as the end nears, God's judgments upon the wicked and opposers of God and the church will intensify. We will consider why they intensify in a moment. But before we do that, let's look at each of the judgments briefly and in order.

The First Bowl (1-2)

We read, "And I heard a great voice out of the temple saying to the seven angels, Go your ways, and pour out the vials [bowls] of the wrath of God upon the earth. And the first went, and poured out his vial upon the earth; and there fell a noisome and grievous sore upon the men which had the mark of the beast, and upon them which worshipped his image."

The voice from the temple is God's voice since no one was able to enter it until the bowl judgments were fulfilled (15:8). The pouring out of the bowls is therefore rightly called "the wrath of God upon the earth." The first angel pours out his bowl and it causes men whose allegiance they have given to the beast to have terrible sores. There is an appropriateness about this, for those who bear the mark of the beast now bear the marks of God's wrath upon them in the form of bodily wounds.

The Second and Third Bowls (3-7)

"And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea; and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters; and they became blood. And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy. And I

heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.”

Whereas in the second trumpet judgment we are told that a third part of the sea became blood, here we are told that every living thing in the sea dies, indicating the universality of its extent. Just like the trumpet judgments, these are meant to remind us of the plagues in Egypt when God poured out his wrath on Egypt and its gods. And just as the first bowl reminds us of the sixth plague (boils on the skin of the Egyptians, Exod. 9:9-12), so the second and third bowls are meant to remind us of the first plague (turning the water of the Nile to blood, Exod. 7:14-25).

Here we are made to see also the appropriateness of the second and third judgments: just as the blood of saints had been shed by the followers of the beast, so now God has given them blood to drink. Just as Pharaoh had commanded his people to toss the Hebrew children into the Nile river, so it was a mark of just and fit justice when Moses by the power of God turned that river into blood. In other words, we see that these are punishments which fit the crime. We will come back to this theme in a moment.

The Fourth and Fifth Bowls (8-11)

“And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory. And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores and repented not of their deeds.”

Just as the second and third bowls can be considered together since they both deal with water being turned to blood, so the fourth and fifth bowls can be considered together since they both involve the sun and its light. In the fourth bowl judgment, the

wicked followers of the beast are scorched with fire and heat. In the fifth, darkness engulfs the seat of the beast's kingdom. This makes one think of the ninth plague in Egypt when the Egyptians were plunged into a darkness that could be felt whereas the Hebrews had light in their dwellings (see Exod. 10:21-29). It is not clear how darkness itself can cause people to gnaw their tongues out of pain, but one is reminded here of the outer darkness our Lord spoke of: "But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 8:12).

The Sixth Bowl (12-16)

"And the sixth angel poured out his vial upon the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared. And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty. Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame. And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon."

In the first century, those who lived in the cities of Roman Asia (modern Turkey) lived in apprehension of invasion by the Parthian empire which lay beyond the boundary of the Euphrates River. The ancient Israelites often experienced invasion themselves by armies which had to first cross the Euphrates to get to them. The city Babylon lay on the Euphrates River and was conquered by the Persian Cyrus in 539 B.C. when he caused the river to be temporarily diverted giving his armies the ability to march on the riverbed which went right underneath the impregnable walls of Babylon and so right into the city to take it. The reference to the Euphrates being dried up for the kings of the East is

perhaps meant to prepare us for the eventuality that Babylon – the great city and opposer of righteousness in the world – itself will be destroyed.

However that might be, I think all this is clearly a reference to preparations for a final battle, the ultimate battle between good and evil, between the unholy trinity (dragon, beast, false prophet) and the armies of heaven led by the Son of God. This battle is recorded for us in Rev. 19:19-21 (although you have to read in the white space between verses 19 and 20 for the battle, it is so short). We are told here that what motivates people to join the beast in his foolhardy war against Jesus Christ is deception, pictured here by frogs – unclean demons – who come out of the mouths of the devil, beast, and false prophet – and work miracles to deceive the nations. This reminds us of what the apostle Paul says of the Antichrist in his letter to the Thessalonian believers: “And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:8-12).

We are told that the place where this will happen is Armageddon (Rev. 16:16). Most of the authorities think that this is a transliteration of the Hebrew term Har-Megiddo, or Mount Megiddo. Megiddo is a place in Israel, a place where many ancient battles were fought. For example, it was here that Barak and Deborah were victorious over the army of Sisera (recorded in Judges 4 and celebrated in Judges 5). However, the problem with locating the battle between the beast and our Lord in that specific geographic location is that there is no mountain at or around Megiddo – it is a plain located between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean, not a mountain (which is probably what made it such an ideal place for ancient battles).

However, this is another instance where I think too many people end up swallowing camels while choking at a gnat. I think the important point is that wherever this is, it is a real place, and one day there will be a real battle at this location – “the battle of that great day of God Almighty” (14), and God will win, decisively so. For all the times now when evil seems to triumph, we can look forward to a day – The Day – when God will through his Son decisively and gloriously triumph over all his opponents and those of his people.

The Seventh Bowl (17-21)

“And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done. And there were voices, and thunders, and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake, such as was not since men were upon the earth, so mighty an earthquake, and so great. And the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath. And every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And there fell upon men a great hail out of heaven, every stone about the weight of a talent: and men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great.”

The language here is similar to that of the sixth seal judgment (cf. Rev. 6:12-17). All earthly things are being shaken, islands and mountains fleeing away, so “that those things which cannot be shaken may remain,” that is, God’s eternal kingdom (Heb. 12:27-28). The end comes with hundred-pound hail and an earthquake – both which often accompany the judgments of God in the OT – and which causes “great Babylon” and “the cities of the nations” to fall. We should not distinguish too much between Babylon and the cities of the world, for Babylon stands for the power of evil which is manifested through the nations of the world and their rulers. The

point is that the power of evil will one day come to an end. When God says, “It is done,” the story of history as we know it will be finished.

God is Just

What is the Lord seeking to teach us in Revelation’s depiction of the bowls of wrath, and, indeed, in all these cycles of judgment that we see in the book of Revelation? I think the main lesson of this chapter is that God is just. You see this reiterated twice in this chapter, first in verse 5, where the angel that controls the waters says, “Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus.” And then you see it in verse 7, where the altar says, “Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments.” The KJV translates this, “I heard another out of the altar say,” but the Greek text literally says, “And I heard the altar saying...”. This of course is symbolic language and the fact that in Revelation the altar is associated with God’s people and especially their prayers before him indicates that this is an expression of thankful praise on the part of the people of God. They praise him for his righteousness and his justice. We should too!

But as I mentioned before, often this can be a stumbling block to people, and some folks can struggle with God punishing people, especially in hell. So I want to approach this text in such a way so that we can see how it helps us to see the justice of God’s ways so that instead of finding fault with him we praise him with the saints. How then does the unfolding of God’s wrath here in Revelation 16 help us to see the justice of God’s ways? I think you see here it in at least two ways: in that the severity of God’s judgments always matches the crime, and in that the severity of God’s judgments matches the hardness of the human heart.

The severity of God’s judgments matches the crime. Justice is not done when the punishment doesn’t fit the crime. And this can happen in one of two ways, can’t it? It can happen when the crime isn’t punished enough, when either the lawbreaker goes free without paying his

debt to society, or when the lawbreaker is gently slapped on the wrist when a harsher punishment is called for. Let's suppose, for example, that a man murders another person in cold blood. He is caught and convicted, but then let go after a couple of hours in jail. Is that really appropriate? Has justice been done there? I think we can probably all agree that in this case justice has not been done and that it is a bad thing when sometimes leniency is shown when sterner measures are called for.

On the other hand, what about cases where the punishment is too severe? There are societies where a thief gets his hand cut off. Now I suppose that the point of that is to provide a deterrent for theft, but one wonders if that is too harsh for that kind of crime. Even if you don't believe that that's too harsh, we can all imagine instances where this is so. Indeed, this is the sticking point when it comes to God's judgments. I think the problem people have is that they think God is being too harsh. The Constitution of our country provides for this very problem: the eighth amendment prevents the government from inflicting "cruel and unusual punishments" upon its citizens.

But is God too harsh? The Biblical answer is no. One of the ways we know this is that God never delights in the death of the wicked. It is his "strange work" (cf. Isa. 28:21). God has just and holy reasons for allowing sin and sinners to exist, but he never takes delight in meting out the punishment.

In the text, we see that God fits the punishment to the crime. This is highlighted in a number of ways in this chapter. First, you see it explicitly in verses 5-6, where we read, "And I heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be, because thou hast judged thus. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink; for they are worthy." Why is God righteous for judging the wicked in this way? Because, for, "they have shed the blood of saints." God turned the seas and the rivers to blood in response to the unjust and wicked shedding of the blood of the people of God. They get blood for blood. You martyr God's peo-

ple by spilling their blood on the ground, and God will give you blood back for a recompense. The punishment is not given because God gets pleasure from crushing his enemies. He gives them exactly what they deserve. This is about justice being fully and completely carried out.

You see this in other ways in this chapter as well. In verse 2 in the first bowl, men who have the beast's mark on their bodies receive judgment on their bodies. Those who have defiled their body by making it an advertisement of allegiance to the enemies of God will be punished with a mark on their bodies from God in the form of sores. In verse 19, we are told that "great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath." Remember it was Babylon which caused the nations to drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication (14:8). She makes people drink from her cup of wrath; now God makes it drink from the cup of his wrath.

We live in a world filled with wicked men who fill this world with infamous deeds. Often they go unpunished in this world. The book of Revelation is a reminder that this will not always be so. Men may escape the justice of men, but they will not escape the justice of God. It would not be a good thing if justice is not done. But if there is no final judgment, if God is not coming to do his work to make all things right in the end, that would be a very bad thing. But God is coming to judge the wicked. And he will so judge them that exactly the right punishment is given for the sins committed.

This leads us to our next consideration.

The severity of God's judgments matches the hardness of the human heart God's judgments ought to lead us to repentance. As we've already seen, that is how they should function. And yet, what we see again and again is that instead of leading men to repentance, they actually serve to harden them. In the fourth plague, we read that instead of repenting, the men who "were scorched with great heat . . . blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory" (9). They should have given him glory, but such was the hardness of their hearts that they blasphemed him instead. They

have the same response to the fifth bowl judgment: “they gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds (10-11).

It actually gets worse: in verses 12-16, we see that instead of repenting of their rebellion and treason against God, they are willingly deceived to join the antichrist in his futile and absurd war against God! Finally, in response to the seventh plague, “men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail; for the plague thereof was exceeding great” (21).

You would think if any kind of punishment could be remedial, God’s would be. But this is to underestimate the power of sin in the heart. We have been told so often that man is at his core “good” that we fail to comprehend that, given the right circumstances, ordinary men and women can end up doing unspeakably cruel and evil things to others. But the heart will out, given the right circumstances. The Bible is realistic when almost every other worldview is Pollyannish: it doesn’t tell us that men are basically good, but that humanity is dead in trespasses and sins, that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, that there is none who understand and seek after God. Such is the corruption of the human heart that instead of judgment leading us to repentance, we will only let it harden our hearts even more.

Pharoah in the Exodus is an example of this. Ten plagues, and every time he hardened his heart. Even when he finally let the Israelites go, he ended up pursuing them after all to his own destruction. And yet Pharoah is not the only instance of this in the record of Biblical history. In Leviticus 26, God warned the Israelites that if they turned from his commandments, he would discipline them. And if they didn’t turn after that, he would intensify his judgments upon them seven times over and keep repeating this process until they were cast out of the land: “And if ye will not yet for all this hearken unto me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins” (Lev. 26:18; cf. 26:21, 24, 28).

This is what you see in the book of Revelation. Three cycles of seven judgments, each time more severe, until the earth itself shakes out its

inhabitants and is replaced by a new heavens and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.

However, despite these points, someone might still object that hell – eternal punishment – has to be excessive. How can sin committed by finite beings committed over a finite period of time warrant eternal punishment? For this is certainly how the Bible speaks of the punishment to come. For example, in Mt. 25:48, we read, “And these [the wicked] shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.” Or Rev. 14:9-11 tells us: “If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.” Now the judgments of God in the bowls of wrath are not, strictly speaking, this final judgment. One way we know this is that they are intended to lead men to repentance (see verses 9 and 11). However, I think it is appropriate here to consider this objection. For how is it helpful to know God’s judgments here fit the crime and yet think that his eternal judgment is excessive?

What we learn from Revelation 16 is that God’s judgments are just because the severity of God’s judgments not only matches the crime but also the hardness of the hearts of those in rebellion against him. We can see that here, can’t we? Now the book of Revelation gives us the right to apply these principles to the doctrine of eternal punishment because Revelation 14 tells us that those who are punished “for ever and ever” in hell are those who have embraced the rule of the antichrist, and these are the same people who are judged in Revelation 16. The bowls of God’s wrath are a preview, so to speak, not only of God’s future and eternal judgment but also of man’s response to that judgment. The implication then is that those who

are punished in hell never repent. As it is in Revelation 16, instead of being softened, they are even more hardened. Instead of worshipping the true and living God, they blaspheme him. What we should not imagine is that hell is a place full of penitent people who are asking for a second chance. They don't want a second chance – a second chance for what? Salvation? But to be saved is to be saved for fellowship with God, and this is precisely the thing they hate the most. We can therefore guess that one reason why the punishment of the wicked never ends is because they never are reconciled to God. They never stop rebelling, they never stop hardening their hearts against him, they never stop hating him. And so the Lord never stops punishing them, and rightly so. Now I'm not saying this is the only reason the punishment of the wicked is eternal, but this seems to be something the Bible itself points us to as a reason for the eternity of God's judgments against the wicked. God is just. We can be sure of that, and know that whatever form of punishment the wicked experience in hell, it will exactly match the crime and hardness of those who are being so punished.

“Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God”

However, this chapter is not just about the severity of God. It is also about the goodness of God. For right in the middle of this chapter is this statement: “Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame” (15). God is not just the God who judges; he is also the God who blesses. He not only is the God who can destroy both body and soul in hell, but he is also the one who gives life, and life abundant.

This is the third of the seven blessings pronounced in this book. It is the word of Christ to his followers. It is the same word he gave his disciples while upon the earth: “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come. But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up. There-

fore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh" (Mt. 24:42-44).

It is the call to vigilance, a call to resist having your heart dulled by the things of this world so that you slip into a kind of spiritual coma and stop resisting the sinful attractions of the world. Here is the way the apostle Paul put it:

For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. (1 Thess. 5:2-10)

What the apostle indicates is that the way to remain awake and vigilant and watchful is to live in light of eternity. It means to live so that if Christ were to suddenly appear like a thief in the night, we would not be ashamed but by ready and eager to receive him. The reference to walking naked is probably meant to make them think of captives taken in war. In ancient times, captives would often be paraded naked behind their captors. Our Lord is saying that those who become entranced with this world in its rebellion against God are taking sides with the beast against the Lord and they will join the beast in his shameful defeat. Hence John's warning: "And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he

shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming” (1 Jn. 2:28).

So what should be our response to the truths of this chapter? First, we should be warned by the end of the wicked. It should make us not want to fall asleep and become spiritually unconscious and unresponsive to the things of God. It should make us want to be sober and self-controlled, who are not enslaved by this world, who use it but do not abuse it.

Second, it should make us aware of how recalcitrant the human heart can be, how wicked we can be, and how hardened we can become. How easily are we deceived by doctrines of demons! And therefore let this make us dependent upon God’s grace which alone can change the human heart. It ought to humble us before him and instead of imagining that we are the next best thing, to depend solely upon his grace through Christ to change us.

We can only escape the wrath to come through the mercy and grace of God through Jesus Christ. This mercy and grace is extended to all who embrace it with the open hand of faith, who put their trust, not in themselves – their goodness, merit, works – but in the perfect life and redemptive death of Jesus Christ for sinners. If you are wondering if this grace is for you, the warrant for faith in Christ and for hope of salvation from sin is not something in you or in something done by you, but only and alone in the promise of God that all who call upon the name of Christ in true faith will be saved. The faith that brings you is itself a gift of the sovereign grace of God, so you can be sure that he will not reject his own gift. May you by God’s grace put your trust in the Lord Jesus even today!

Finally, the truths of this chapter should help us to see that God is just and to see it so that instead of complaining about it, like some of the Israelites in the wilderness did, we praise God for his righteous judgment. God will judge the wicked. Everything will be made right, perfectly right, in the end. This is not something that should make us purse our lips but to open them in praise to Christ.

CHAPTER XXVII

BABYLON AND THE BEAST

(REV. 17)

One of Percy Bysshe Shelley's most famous literary works is the poem "Ozymandias," which is about a monument discovered in the deserts of Africa dedicated to the ancient Pharaoh, Ramesses the Great, who was known by the Greeks as Ozymandias. It goes like this:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

The poem is a moving reminder that power and might do not often survive the years. Once the head of a mighty empire that must have created feelings of panic in the hearts of his enemies, nothing now remains of Ozymandias's empire, just broken monuments surrounded by vast oceans of sand.

You could say that in a sense Rev. 17-18 is a Biblical version of Shelley's "Ozymandias." In Revelation chapter 17, John is in a sense taken to a desert in "an antique land" to imagine a godless empire which, like all the empires before it, will, despite its power and glory and might and influence, be destroyed and wiped off the face of the earth. It is the kingdom of a harlot and a beast, whose vast domain stretches over all the inhabitants of the earth (ver. 8), over all "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues" (ver. 15).

In 17:3, we are told that one of the seven angels with the seven golden vials came to carry John "away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns." We've noted that the book of Revelation is organized around four visions, each of which begins when John is caught up "in the Spirit." The first is the vision of the risen Christ in chapters 1-3 which gives us the letters of Christ to the seven churches; the second the vision from heaven in chapters 4-16 which gives us the three cycles of seven judgments. The third begins here in chapter 17 and goes to 21:8. This section gives us a picture of two women, the harlot Babylon (along with the beast on which she rides) and the Lamb's bride and the future of them both. The last vision will go from 21:9 to almost the end of the book which will give us a picture of the final state in a new heavens and a new earth.

What is the point of this section of Scripture? Well, the point is this: we are meant to be motivated here not to join the beast and Babylon in their godless cause by considering their end. If we're going to do this, though, we need to understand what John says about the identity of the woman (Babylon) and the beast, and what he says about the heads and horns of the beast. Once we do that, we'll come back to ask the

following questions: Why would someone be attracted to Babylon and the Beast in the first place? Then we want to ask: how do we resist the attractions of Babylon and the Beast? So we want to consider three things, then: the important identification of, the deadly attraction to, and the necessary opposition against Babylon and the beast.

The identification of Babylon and the beast

Let's start with the woman. She is identified as a harlot who sits upon many waters (1) which is identified in verse 15 with the nations of the earth. This is the same language the prophet Jeremiah uses of Babylon in Jer. 51:13. Hence, it wouldn't have surprised John's readers when the mystery of the woman is described by the words: "Babylon The Great, The Mother Of Harlots And Abominations Of The Earth" (5). She is decked out in luxurious clothing with a golden goblet in her hands (4). The woman sits on seven mountains (9) and rules over all the kings of the earth (18).

John clearly means his readers to think of Rome, the city which in the first century did in fact rule over much of the known world at the time. Rome was also known in ancient literature as the city built on seven hills. The identification with Babylon, the great city, indicates that Rome in the first century A.D. functioned as Babylon did in the sixth century B.C. Babylon had been the origin of persecution for God's people as well as being a center of idolatrous worship which was a constant temptation for the people of God. In the same way, Rome was the center of emperor worship, and it was the commercial and political center of the world, using its power and influence both to corrupt and to persecute believers. This woman is seen to be drunk with the blood of believers, the martyrs of Jesus (6). If they will not be tempted by its paganism, they will be trampled by its power.

The woman rides a beast, now seen in verse 3 as a scarlet-colored beast (and therefore in color like the red dragon who gave him his power), but which we have already seen in previous chapters (esp. chap. 13). We have

seen that this beast is modeled after imagery in the prophesy of Daniel, and that he is meant to represent antichristian, totalitarian systems and governments in all of history, but which will culminate in the reign of the Antichrist at the end of history.

Now although we have a fuller description of the beast here in chapter 17, John's descriptions have tended to baffle interpreters. The interpretation of the seven heads is in particular difficult. Tom Schreiner, for example, in his commentary on this chapter [ESV Expository Commentary] says, "Here we come face to face with one of the most difficult texts in the entire book." There are three things about the beast that are explained but which in some ways leave us scratching our heads even more. They are first, the description of the beast as the one who was, is not, and is to come; second, the seven heads; and third, the ten horns.

First, we are told that the "beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is" (8). Now some interpreters tend to want to drag Nero into this. There was a conspiracy theory in the first century that Nero was going to come back from the dead at the head of a Parthian army and retake his throne in Rome. So they apply this to Nero as the one who was (during his reign from 54-68), who is not (when John was writing), but who is going to come back (who shall ascend to his throne again). Those who take this interpretative approach also tie it to the meaning of the seven heads and make Nero to be one of the heads of the beast.

There are numerous problems with this, but I think the biggest mistake here is to think that our Lord intended to spread a conspiracy theory about Nero! No, as bad as Nero was, this is bigger than any one particular Roman emperor. Rather, this is probably a reference to the fact that totalitarian regimes tend to come and go, and that as soon as you think one regime has been put down forever, another rises up. The beast has come and gone in many kings and kingdoms throughout

human history, it will keep coming back until the end of history, ultimately and finally in the Antichrist who will be destroyed and “go into perdition.” In other words, the beast keeps rising, but there will be a last time.

What about the seven heads? Well, there have been many attempts to tie this to different lists of Roman emperors and to use it to identify the time when John wrote Revelation. But it seems to me that there are numerous problems with this approach. For example, it’s not clear who you start with: Julius Caesar or Augustus or someone else? Do you include the three emperors whose very brief reigns in the years 68-69 are reasons some give to exclude them from an official list of Roman rulers? It’s not clear. One approach is to start with Augustus, leave out the three Roman emperors in the years 68-69 (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius¹). If you do that, Nero is number five, Titus is the seventh, and Domitian is the eighth (and therefore the beast?). That would also mean that John is writing sometime between 68 and 69 corresponding to the time when the beast is not.

But personally I think this is all a bit much. Any choice of Roman emperors is the end product of a number of what seems to me to be arbitrary decisions, and at the end of the day, there is nothing in the text itself to indicate that this particular reading is the correct one. Furthermore, it is simply incommensurate with what Revelation has to say about the beast to identify him with any one of the Roman emperors.

Again, the problem here is that folks aren’t reading this in light of its OT background in the book of Daniel. In Daniel (see Dan. 7), the beasts are called kings (as the heads of Rev. 17 are, see ver. 10) but it’s clear that Daniel is not just talking about particular rulers but of the kingdoms which they rule. The seven heads of the beast are not meant therefore to point us to individuals who ruled a particular empire; they are meant to point us to kingdoms and the fulness of the beast’s power in antichristian totalitarian states. This is, after all, corresponds to the

¹One should note that Vitellius was officially recognized as a Roman emperor by the Roman senate, so it’s not clear to me why he should be disregarded from any list.

way the number seven is used in Revelation. The fact that five of the heads have fallen, one is, and one is to rule for a short period of time in the future is meant, I think, to teach us that the beast's rule is going to come to an end. His time is running short. It's almost as if John is saying that the beast doesn't have nine lives; he has seven, and he's already used five!

One more puzzling thing said about the beast is that he is one of the seven heads and is an eighth – what does that mean? Again, I think you have a problem here if you try to identify the heads with Roman emperors.² But if this is talking about godless kingdoms, it is simply meant to say that the final antichristian kingdom, the rule of the Antichrist, will be the culmination and end-product of all the previous wicked empires of men. He is one of the seven in the sense that the final reign of the Antichrist will be like its previous manifestations (in terms of its totalitarianism and wickedness), but it will be an eighth in the sense that it will be much worse and more wicked than all the previous ones put together.

The fact that the woman Babylon is Rome and rides the beast indicates that Rome (with all her emperors!) was the current incarnation of the beast's demonic power. But even this will end. And this brings us to the ten kings (again, probably a symbolic number). For we are told of ten horns which are ten kings who will receive their rule at some point in the future from the beast and who will turn with the beast to destroy the harlot Rome (12-17). You see, the wicked, like gangsters, will eventually turn on each other. It is the nature of evil to eat itself. In the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's, the Republican army was composed of two groups of communists who lost the war to the Nationalists under Franco because they attacked and killed each other as much as

²Though I suppose that some could argue that since Domitian was the brother of Titus that would make him "one of the seven," but still an eighth emperor in his own right. However, this still runs into the problem of identifying Domitian with the beast in an absolute sense. Domitian, as bad as he may have been, was not the Antichrist.

they did their common enemy. Hitler and Stalin were officially friends as the Second World War commenced, but it didn't take long before Germany attacked Russia. And so it goes throughout history. So it will go with Babylon and the beast.

The attraction of Babylon and the Beast

It is easy to get caught up in the interpretive difficulties of passages like this and miss the point it is trying to make. Of course you have to interpret it correctly to make the proper application. We can't afford to skip the interpretative part. But we do want to apply it. So let's ask the question: what does this have to do with us?

In John's day, Rome was the political and commercial and religious power through which antichristian and godless forces sought to influence, corrupt, and coerce the church. Rome was to the church in the first century what Babylon was to Israel in the sixth century before Christ. The problem was that professing Christians were in danger of joining forces with Babylon (Rome) and the beast instead of standing against it. We have seen the very real danger of this in the letters to the seven churches. The churches of Thyatira and Pergamum, for example, were clearly compromising with the idolatrous culture with which they were surrounded.

Though there will be a final manifestation of the beast's power in the rule of the end-times Antichrist, we've been arguing all along that the beast represents all the antichristian states and systems throughout all of human history that seek to allure the Christian to abandon the faith or to attach those who won't. It is the perennial problem of worldliness and idolatry, of turning from the worship of God to the worship of the creature.

The imagery of the harlot in this chapter is not just meant to make us think of immorality. In the OT, prostitution was the symbol for idolatry. When the children of Israel transferred their affections and their loyalty from the true God to false gods, it was like a woman leaving

the protection and provision and love of a good husband for the life of a prostitute. The danger presented before here, therefore, in this imagery, is not just sexual sin but idolatry (though the two almost always go together). The danger here is loving other things and putting them in the place of God. The danger here is conformity to the world rather than conformity to Christ.

We need to understand that the danger John is warning against is not just missing out on a few spiritual blessings. Those who apostatize and turn to join themselves with the harlot Babylon and the beast and don't repent will participate in their eternal ruin. So this can be an infinitely and eternally serious issue. And even if a person is a true Christian and doesn't apostatize, they can still suffer serious spiritual damage to their own lives, witness, and homes if they compromise – even temporarily – with the world. The church must be separate from the world, no matter what the earthly cost is.

However, the apostle recognizes that people really are attracted to the things that Babylon offers and this makes the danger of Babylon more perilous. What does Babylon offer? It offers – at the cost of course of abandoning faithfulness to Jesus – worldly power, worldly prosperity, and worldly pleasure. Babylon is powerful, this city which sits on the waters and rules over the nations. The kings of the earth bow to her wishes and drink from her cup. If you want earthly security, if you want to avoid difficulty in this life and persecution, if you just want to go along to get along, you are going to have to kowtow to Rome, to the religious, political, and commercial powers of your day.

Babylon is prosperous. You see that in the clothing of the harlot. She is dressed in luxury, in gold, pearls, and purple. She has a golden cup in her hand. She offers earthly comfort and riches to people who drink from her cup.

Babylon is a purveyor of pleasure; she is a harlot after all. She offers enough wine to get intoxicated on. She says, "Follow me and I'll make you happy."

And the thing is that she offers all these things now. Love this world, she says, for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, belongs to the present order of things, and if you give yourself to it you can have it all now. On the other hand, the world mocks those who hold out for future blessing, for eternal life on the other side of death. It argues, “Why should you risk missing out on so much pleasure and fun now for a future that you might never have?”

These things are like the siren song that can bewitch us and turn our hearts to love this present evil world. John doesn’t just assume that we will say no, and what he does here therefore is to help us say no. How does he do this? How do we avoid the siren song? How do we join John in saying, “No, I am not going to love this world or the things in the world, for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not from the Father but is of this world. And the world passes away along with its lusts, but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (cf. 1 Jn. 2:15-17). We see how by paying attention to the imagery of the vision.

The opposition to Babylon and the beast

Let me give you three strategies to fight the allurements of Babylon and the beast.

Learn to be disgusted by the evil of their perversity.

John wants you to be disgusted by the harlot. She is not a nice woman. She is a prostitute. She is drunk with the blood of the saints. The luxurious clothing is a thin disguise for a filthy woman. She doesn’t ride on a white horse but on a seven-headed beast that takes its cue from Satan himself.

The imagery itself is really enough to turn your stomach, but the Holy Spirit doesn’t want to leave you in any doubt, and so we are told that the “golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of

her fornication” (4). The word “abomination” literally means “something detestable.” The word is used again in verse 5: “And upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon The Great, The Mother Of Harlots And Abominations Of The Earth.”

When we read in verse 6, that John, when he “saw her . . . wondered with great admiration,” we are not meant to think that John actually admired her, as if he saw something positive and wonderful and admirable in her. This is an old seventeenth century use of the word “admiration,” and really is meant to convey the thought that John was taken aback by this. In other words, he was stunned, shocked. We should be too.

I think one of the problems of modern Christianity is that we aren’t as shocked by sin as we ought to be. We’ve lost the “ick” factor. Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not advocating that we look down our noses at sinners or forget that if not for the grace of God there go I. I’m not saying that we don’t have to be respectful to people, even to those who are living in sin. But what I am saying is that something is wrong in us if sin doesn’t make our stomach churn, especially the types of open, in-your-face profligacy that we are seeing literally paraded around in our streets. The prophet warns us, “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa. 5:20). We should not taste what God has forbidden and call it sweet. And woe to us if we taste wickedness and actually think it is sweet!

Rather, let us be disgusted by sin. Some of the imprecatory Psalms can be helpful here. For example: “I have not sat with vain persons, neither will I go in with dissemblers. I have hated the congregation of evil doers; and will not sit with the wicked” (Ps. 26:4-5). Or: “I look at the faithless with disgust, because they do not keep your commands” (Ps. 119:158, ESV). Or: “Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies” (Ps. 139:21-22). Now these passages don’t abrogate the Biblical obligation of the Christian to love their enemies (cf. Mt. 5:43). But they also demonstrate that we can’t

love what God hates. Anytime we see open, unrepentant rebellion in ourselves or others, we ought to hate it. It ought to disgust us.

The reason why this is so important is that you will never be really protected against the deception of sin if you have not learned to hate it in your heart. Disgust with sin, hating what God hates, is a bullet-proof vest against the arrows of evil which want to poison our hearts and turn them against God. “Ye that love the Lord, hate evil” (Ps. 97:10). “Abhor that which is evil; cling to that which is good” (Rom. 12:9). The two go together; you cannot love the Lord or cling to the good if you do not hate and abhor evil.

If you ask me how you become disgusted with evil, I think the first thing is that you have to be born again. When a person is born again in a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, God gives them a new heart. Which means that we are all of us utterly and fundamentally dependent upon the grace of God here. If this is the case, the starting point for any of us is to depend upon the Lord and be always asking for his grace and help.

But I don’t think that means we do nothing. Those who are born again are not automatically immune from the assaults of Satan or the temptation of worldliness. We need to take measures and the first thing is to make sure that we are not drunk on the wine of worldliness and idolatry but that we are seeing things for what they are, that our vision and mind is clear. And of course the way we do that is by having our eyes opened to see God’s word clearly. We need the eyes of our hearts to be constantly calibrated by the eye-glasses of God’s word in the Scripture. Read it, meditate upon it, practice it, memorize it, sing it, tell it to others. Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you. That is the first step: be disgusted by sin by delighting in the Scriptures.

Learn to be disenchanted by the end of their perdition

John wants us not only to be disgusted; he wants us to be disenchanted with Babylon and the beast by considering their end. The reality is that no matter how much power, privilege, prosperity, and

pleasure Babylon and the beast wield now, they will be eternally judged. Fast forward a bit and we see it: “And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). Texts like that ought to make our hearts tremble with horror and to make us realize that it just isn’t worth it to join the beast.

Learn to be discipled by the encouragement of God’s promise

Finally, it’s important that we are discipled by the encouragement of God’s promise. In a world that is cold and hostile against the Christian, we need to learn to live next to the windows of God’s promises that let in the light and heat of God’s love and faithfulness. There are three ways we find that kind of encouragement here, especially in the promise of God’s sovereignty over all things for his glory and the good of his people.

First, you see it in the implied description of God’s people as those whose names are written in the book of life from the foundation of the world (8). Our Lord told his disciples to rejoice, not because the demons were subject to them but because their names were written in heaven (Lk. 10:20). And he told his disciples on another occasion that “there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt. 24:24). In other words, what these texts tell us is that God’s people are ultimately secure from the power of Satan. Their names are known by God, he has chosen them from eternity, and he will keep them. God is the one “that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24). It is good to remember that even though we live in a world that seems to be defined by chaos, where nothing seems to be certain, God’s promise to his people that nothing can separate them from his love is more certain than life itself. That doesn’t mean that there isn’t anything for us to do to resist the devil and the world, but it does mean

that we can fight against it knowing that in Christ we are more than conquerors through him that loves us.

Second, we see it in the description of God's people in verse 14. Though the kings of the earth join to beast to fight with the Lord at Armageddon, they will be defeated. But note this: our Lord defeats them through the army of his people: "These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful." We are called to be faithful but note that the faithful are first the chosen and called. God has elected a people before the foundation of the world, and in time he calls them effectually by the gospel to faith in Christ. These are the people who are faithful, and they are faithful because underneath their faithfulness is the faithfulness of God. Can we not rejoice in that?

Finally, we see it in the description of God's sovereign control even over his enemies in verses 16-17: "And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled." Here we see the enemies of God and his people turn on each other. Why did they do this? "For God hath put it in their hearts to fulfill his will." Can you get a better statement of the sovereignty of God than that? God is in control, not only of the good things, but even over the evil actions of men. This doesn't make God the author of sin. Nor does it take away the responsibility of men for their own actions. But in a mysterious way, God's will rules over the wills of men. God's freedom, not man's, is decisive! Again, in a world that seems to have gone crazy, in a world that seems to be given over to the evil of men, we can rest in God's sovereign plan that will take what men mean for evil and bring about much good, to glorify his name and to do good to his people.

Here in Rev. 17, we see a woman astride a beast. But Revelation 17-19 really ends up presenting us with the picture of two women, not just

one. One woman, in chapters 17-18, is the picture of Babylon as a harlot. But then we see in chapter 19 another woman: it is the bride of the Lamb, clothed in fine linen, clean and white. The book of Revelation puts these two women before us to help us to see that you can either follow the harlot and share her awful end or you can be united to Christ and be part of his church, his bride and share her bright and glorious future. Where are you this morning? Are you following the harlot or are you a member of the bride of Christ? As the prophet put it, don't hesitate between two opinions this morning. Here is how the book of Revelation ends: "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (22:17). Don't go after the harlot; come to Christ, embrace him by faith, and take the water of life freely!

CHAPTER XXVIII

ARE YOU FOR THE CITY OF MAN OR THE CITY OF GOD? (REV. 18)

IN A.D. 410, THE MIGHTY CITY OF ROME fell to a Germanic tribe of Visigoths under the leadership of Alaric. The unthinkable had happened; the eternal city had fallen to barbarians. As Jerome put it, “If Rome can perish, what can be safe?”

Jerome’s response to this catastrophe is ironic, if you think about it in light of what the apostle is saying here in Rev. 17-19. We’ve seen that the harlot Babylon, the city of man, was in John’s time embodied and exemplified by the city and empire of Rome. According to John, Rome was carried by the beast, which we have seen is meant to symbolize the kingdoms of men through whom Satan carries out his rule over the world and will be ultimately epitomized in the kingdom of the Antichrist in the last days.

But by the fourth century, because of the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 312, the Roman empire became Christian almost overnight. Suddenly, Christian pastors and bishops, instead of being persecuted by the state, became implicated in the decisions of the state.

Christendom began to rise, and the city of man became confused with the city of God. Rome became the handmaiden of the faith instead of the oppressor of the people of God.

When Rome was sacked, both pagans and Christian citizens of the empire were surprised and disheartened and disoriented. Pagans blamed the Christians. Christians didn't know what to think. Jerome, the great Christian scholar who translated the Scriptures into Latin and gave us the Vulgate, retreated into the desert, and waited out for what he was sure was the end. His response was mainly one of despair it seems. He wrote:

I was wavering between hope and despair, and was torturing myself with the misfortunes of other people. But when the bright light of all the world was put out, or, rather, when the Roman Empire was decapitated... the whole world perished in one city. Who would believe that Rome, built up by the conquest of the whole world, had collapsed, that the mother of all nations became their tomb?¹

Augustine the bishop of Hippo in North Africa was a contemporary of Jerome's (Jerome would live until 420, Augustine until 430). However, instead of retreating into a state of despair, he wrote *The City of God*, in which he contrasts the character and goals of the city of man and the city of God. For Augustine, Rome was not the city of God. Rome was part of the city of man and would inevitably fall, but the city of God would go on. Whereas Jerome retreated, Augustine took heart and encouraged himself and others to keep on keeping on.

In our day, we need to be careful that we do not tie God's kingdom to any nation of men. The United States, as blessed as she is, is not the kingdom of God. As terrible as it would be for the United States to

¹Qtd. in the article by Kim Riddlebarger, "Jerome, Augustine, and the Fall of Rome," in *Modern Reformation* (Nov/Dec 2009). See <https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/jerome-augustine-and-the-fall-of-rome>. Much of the information in these paragraphs I got from Riddlebarger's article.

fall to another nation, it would not mean the end or the frustration of God's purpose or plans on earth. The city of God is not the city of man. Nations will fall, but God's kingdom will come.

I think Revelation 18 has something to teach us about this. Though I do think it is pointing us to the final dissolution of the city of man and the end of Satan's rule over the kingdoms of men, there have been adumbrations of it throughout history, which are meant to remind us of the instability of the world and its ultimate end. In fact, this chapter is in some sense modeled after the "prophetic dirges"² in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In Isaiah (13-14) and Jeremiah (50-51), the prophets announce the doom of the city of Babylon. In Ezekiel, (26-28) the prophet announces the end of the city of Tyre. Both Tyre and Babylon, like Rome in the first century, were world (in the case of Babylon) or regional (as in the case of Tyre) commercial and political centers. And in both cases, the cities fell. They fell, not primarily because of unforeseen forces at work in the world, but because God brought his judgment upon them for their wickedness. This will be the case with Rome, and in the end it will be the case for the seat of power of the Antichrist.

And yet God's people have lived in the Babylons of history. Daniel the prophet spent much of his life in ancient Babylon. The epistle of Paul to the Romans testifies to a thriving church in the very heart of the empire, the seat of the harlot in the Revelation. Our Lord addressed a letter to the church at Pergamum where Satan's throne was (Rev. 2:19). The perennial question is: how does a Christian who lives in Babylon relate to Babylon? How does a Christian whose citizenship is in heaven, in the city of God (Phil. 3:21), relate to the city of man in which he or she lives?

As I said, I think the eighteenth chapter of the book of Revelation can help us out here. It gives us a perspective to take and a path to walk. It is a reminder of why and how the Christian is to maintain a posture

²G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1972), p. 235.

against worldliness. The chapter begins with the angelic announcement of Babylon's fall (as if it were past, so sure it the divine purpose) and the reasons for its demise (1-8). Then in verses 9-19 those who profited from the wealth and power of Babylon lament her destruction, first the kings of the earth (9-10), followed by the merchants of the earth (11-17a), followed by the merchants of the sea (17b-19). Finally, the saints are called to rejoice over Babylon's judgment as an angel gives a visual demonstration of Babylon's final and irrecoverable destruction by throwing a millstone into the sea (20-24).

What we see here is that there are two fundamental attitudes toward Babylon: one in which you weep in despair over her demise, and one in which you rejoice over her destruction. The Lord wants his people to rejoice, not weep over the annihilation off Babylon, and this chapter is meant to help us do that.

As we begin, I think it is important to step back and remind ourselves again what the city of Babylon is meant to represent. If we just think of this in terms of the end of history, and of some future city ruled from by the Antichrist, we may have a hard time seeing the relevance of this passage. Now I do think that there is something relevant and important here that comes from its connection to the end of history. But the city of Babylon has many incarnations. Babylon, Tyre, Sodom, and Rome are all instances of the rule of the beast. There will be a last incarnation. There will be a time when the final city of man will be destroyed. But just as in John's day it was manifested in Rome, even so in our day it is manifested in the nation-states of the world. And that means that we are just as much in danger of compromising with Babylon today as the believers in Asia Minor were in the first century or as future believers will be in the days of the Antichrist.

For what is Babylon? It is just the world. You see throughout this chapter the universal nature of this city. The chapter begins this way: "All nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her" (3). And it ends in the same way: "for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived.

And in her was found the blood of the prophets and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth” (23-24). Babylon is just the city of man in opposition to the city of God. It is mankind organized in opposition to Christ and his kingdom. It is the kingdom of man in rebellion against God. It is the world under the dominion of Satan.

Sometimes, the word “world” is used in Scripture to refer to the created order. Sometimes it is used to refer to mankind in general. But often it is used to refer to the realities referred to above. When the devil took our Lord to the top of a mountain and showed him “all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them”. . . he said to him, “All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me” (Mt. 4:8-9). In Luke’s account, the devil says, “All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it” (Lk. 4:6). It is not for no reason that the apostle Paul describes Satan and the demons as “the rulers of the darkness of this world” (Eph. 6:12). It is for this reason that the apostle John wrote in another place, “And we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness” (1 Jn. 5:19).

The world rejected Christ when he came into the world (Jn. 1:10) and hates him and his disciples (Jn. 15:18-25). Paul described himself and other Christian ministers in his day as “the filth of the world and are the offscouring of all things unto this day” (1 Cor. 4:13), because that’s the way the world thinks of the ministers of Christ. Hence the apostle James asks us, “know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (Jam. 4:4).

And yet we live in this world. We do commerce in this world. We rub shoulders with the people of this world. How are we to relate to it? How are we to live in this world with the tension of being called out of it and to rejoice over its inevitable destruction?

In particular, what does the exhortation in verse 4 mean for us? “And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her

plagues.” In both Isaiah (48:20; 52:11) and Jeremiah (50:8), the children of Israel are commanded to literally come out of Babylon. But this is not a literal exodus that is meant here. Rather, this is a call to resist conforming to standards of the world. The Lord is telling us to do in Revelation what he is telling us to do in Paul, who was applying the OT passages referred to above: “what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 6:16-7:1).

So what I want to do in this message is to consider what it means to come out of Babylon, and then how this chapter helps us to do that.

What does it mean to come out of Babylon?

Babylon is humanity organized against the kingdom of God. It is worldliness. It is expressed in a way of living that either eliminates the God of the Bible altogether or minimizes him. It is a way of living that is not committed to the principles of God’s word. It is organized around the will of man rather than the will of God.

To come out of Babylon doesn’t necessarily require a change in geographic location; it is simply to refuse to live according to its principles. What are its principles? They are expressed primarily in idolatry. We’ve seen that Babylon is symbolized as a harlot with whom the kings of the earth commit sexual immorality. But this is OT imagery that was meant to underline the wickedness of turning from the worship of the true God to the other gods, from the Creator to the creature. To come out of Babylon is to live in a way that rejects these patterns of thinking and behaving.

First, the idolatry of Babylon, of the world, is expressed in skepticism, by which I mean unbelief in the things of God. Idolatry is exchanging the Creator for the creature, and the primary way this happens is when we exchange faith in God's word for faith in other authorities. Our age is characterized by unbelief in God, unbelief in his Word, the Scriptures. In Rev. 18, we read that "by thy [Babylon's] sorceries were all nations deceived" (23). A big part of the deception is just believing things that are contrary to God's word: "because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:10-12). Of course those who reject the teachings of the Bible claim that there is not enough evidence for its truths, but I strongly suspect that is just a front for their unwillingness to submit to the authority of God over their lives.

I'm not of course saying that you should believe something when the evidence is stacked against it. But this is not the case with the gospel. I know that the culture is stacked against it. I know that the lifestyle people want to live is stacked against it. But that is not the same thing as proving that the evidence against God's word is airtight as some want to believe. The problem is that many of these folks proceed as if they were God and they demand that God meet their requirements for belief. They are like Casey at the bat. God throws them a strike and they let it pass because it's not their style. But it's still a strike right down the middle of the plate. It is still evidence that is going to count against them in the day of judgment.

What is the evidence? Well, I would say that the greatest evidence for the truths of the Bible is in the person of Jesus Christ. The apostle John calls it the testimony that God has given of his Son (1 Jn. 5:8-10). The fact of the matter is that the evidence for the historicity of Jesus is iron-clad. The evidence for the empty tomb is compelling. The evidence for the post-mortem appearances of Jesus is so strong that even atheists like the historian Gerd Ludeman are willing to concede that

the disciplines had such experiences. The best and simplest explanation for this is just that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. But if that is true, everything else follows. It would follow that he is who he said he was, the Son of God and Savior of the world, that he died to save us from our sins. He accepted the OT Bible as authoritative and commissioned his apostles to give us the NT Bible. The reality of God and authority of the gospel and the Scriptures rest upon the evidence of the risen Christ.

A year or so ago I read through a lot of Richard Dawkin's book *The God Delusion*. He is a very well-known and respected scientist. So I was honestly surprised at how weak his case is against God. Then I recently saw a video of him where he was answering a question as to what evidence it would take for him to believe in God. His response stunned me: he frankly claimed that even the Second Coming of Jesus wouldn't be enough for him, that he would just chalk that up to a hallucination. In other words, there isn't any evidence for him, even in theory, that could convince him that God exists. My friends, that's not a rational position, I don't care how famous you are or how smart you are.

I mention that because he illustrates a reality that the Bible itself points to, and that is that there is more going on here than an intellectual assessment of the evidence. The Bible teaches that the human heart is hostile to God. It can be religious and be hostile to God. It can claim to be "open," and be hostile to God. A hostile heart isn't going to accept evidence; it is going to reject it. It is why you have this exchange between Abraham in heaven and the rich man in hell when the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus from the dead to warn his [the rich man's brothers]: "Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Lk. 16:29-31). Dawkins himself has admitted as such; if we are to give credence to what he says about himself, even if a man were to come back from the dead, he wouldn't believe his eyes.

The city of man may claim to be about evidence and reason and science – indeed, to make gods out of these things – but that does not mean they are consistent with evidence and reason and science. But the reason is that the main problem here isn't evidence and reason and science. The main problem here is human pride. We don't want to submit to an authority outside of ourselves. And so we make our feelings and thoughts and desires and wants the final authority. When that comes from a heart that is hostile to God, skepticism is the inevitable result.

If we are going to come out of Babylon, we have to fight the skepticism of our age. Not with fideism, not with blind and irrational faith. Rather, we fight it with genuine humility before God's word. We fight it by having the attitude Isaiah speaks of: "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones" (Isa. 57:15). I am certain that a chief reason for non-belief and for the rejection of the Scriptures is human pride and the refusal to let go of being the ultimate authority. We have to let go of self-sovereignty. We have to humble ourselves before God so that he may raise us up. We cannot come out of Babylon if we are listening to our own voice in the place of God's voice, which we hear through his Son and through his Scriptures.

A clear mark, in other words, of coming out of Babylon is a life humbly submitted to God's word. Those who are born of God hear God's word and those who are not don't. It's what the apostle John said: "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world. They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error" (1 Jn. 4:4-6). It's not just a matter of saying you believe in the Bible: but does your life show it? Do you practice what you preach? Do

you actually obey its precepts and hope in its promises? Are you being conformed to the image of Christ by it?

Second, the spirit of worldliness is expressed in self-righteousness. Another way idolatry is expressed is in the exchange of God's way of salvation for one of our own making. One of the things Babylon says about herself is this: "she hath glorified herself . . . for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow" (7). This is essentially the attitude of self-satisfaction, of self-confidence, and self-righteousness. The city of man is dripping with this attitude. It is the attitude of the original Babel: "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). It is the attitude: "I don't need God. I've got things figured out. I can handle my life on my own. I am the master of my fate and the captain of my soul."

When this is expressed religiously, it becomes self-righteousness. It is going about to establish your own righteousness, even if it is before God, instead of submitting to the righteousness of God that we receive through Christ. It is a refusal to enter in by the strait gate and the narrow way. However, you cannot come to Christ carrying your own righteousness. The gate is too narrow for that. There is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). You cannot come to God and be indifferent to the way of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Those who are saved are saved by faith, and the faith by which we are saved is faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8). Saving faith is the realization that I cannot save myself, that salvation is of the Lord. It is the realization that I am a sinner, that I have sinned against God, and that my sins merit God's eternal disfavor and judgment. But it is also the recognition that God has not left us to rot away in our sins, that he sent his eternal Son to keep the law of God that we couldn't keep and to suffer the penalty and due reward for our sins in our place. Faith recognizes therefore two things: first, that I cannot save myself; second, that Christ is able to save

to the uttermost those who come unto God by him (Heb. 7:25). Or, as John Newton put it, "I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior."

To come out of Babylon is to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. Have you? Is the confidence of your soul not in your own works, not in your own merit, but in the atoning work and saving merit of Jesus Christ? Do you trust in him? Have you received him as Lord and Savior? Have you repented of your sins and turned to Christ? If you haven't, the reality is that you are still in Babylon. Come out of her and come to Christ!

Third, it is expressed in selfishness. You see it expressed in the sentiments of the kings and merchants and sailors who profited by Babylon. They wail and weep over the judgement of Babylon, but they are only sorry for their own loss (see esp. verses 9-19). Babylon rejoices over her own luxuriousness while shedding the blood of the prophets and the saints.

Selfishness is the practical outworking of self-sovereignty. It thinks of oneself as if he or she is God and requires everyone else to bow down. When you exchange the Creator with the creature and that creature is yourself you not only end up worshiping yourself, but you expect everyone else to do so as well. Is someone in your way? Well, give them a piece of your mind. Step over them or on them as you make your way to the top. Is someone an annoyance to you? Well, make sure that they know it! Require others to fit their schedules around your own. Make others do always what you want to do and be angry when they won't.

There are a thousand ways selfishness expresses itself. I think in some ways it is at the bottom of all sins. In Rom. 2:8, the apostle Paul places being contentious or selfish (which is what the word means there) with not obeying the truth and obeying unrighteousness, and he goes on to say that it is precisely this kind of person who will experience God's indignation and wrath and suffer tribulation and anguish. Those who are given over to selfishness are hell-bound people.

Now I know that all of us are selfish on some level and will be until we are no longer carrying about these sinful natures. But if we are redeemed

by Christ and have been renewed and changed by the power of the Spirit of Christ, then our lives ought to be more and more characterized, not be selfishness, but by love, and love, the apostle says, does not seek its own (1 Cor. 13:5). It is to be like Christ: “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:3-8).

Our culture doesn't think this way. In our culture, people use people. People are a means to an end; they are the instruments through which we find our own fulfillment. It should not surprise us when people are this way; this is what it means to be a part of the city of man. This is what it means to be worldly. But it should not characterize the church. The church ought to be a place where people are freed from using people for the pursuit of selfish ends. And the reason why we should be freed from that is because we have already found joy and peace and satisfaction in a relationship with Christ, in fellowship with God. We don't need people to make us happy and so we don't use them to make us happy. Our joy is in God.

Now there are other ways we could talk about what it means to come out of the city of man, out of Babylon. But it does at least mean these three things: we have walked away from skepticism in God's word to humbly submitting to it, away from self-righteousness to submitting to the righteousness of Christ, away from selfishness to Christ-likeness. It means, as our Lord put it, to be in the world (indeed, to be sent into it!) but not of it (Jn. 17:15-18). It means to shine the light in the darkness (Mt. 5:16); not to be part of the darkness but to be light in the darkness.

But how does this chapter encourage us to pursue the virtues of coming out of Babylon? That is our next question.

How Revelation 18 helps us to come out of Babylon

We are helped by being reminded again and again that the present power and prosperity of the city of man is but temporary. One of the things I appreciate about the contribution this chapter makes to that is how it highlights the trade of ancient Rome in detail (much like Ezekiel does for Tyre in Ezek. 27). Why do you think all these things are listed? “And the merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn over her; for no man buyeth their merchandise any more: the merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet, and all thyine wood, and all manner vessels of ivory, and all manner vessels of most precious wood, and of brass, and iron, and marble, and cinnamon, and odours, and ointments, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and beasts, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men” (Rev. 18:11-13). They are listed because they are meant to help you feel, I think, just now impressive and powerful and industrious and organized and extravagant the empire of Rome was. They didn’t dig this stuff up out of their backyards. It came from all over the world: purple from Phoenicia, silk and cinnamon from China, citron wood from North Africa, which became furniture expertly and ornately crafted, and wheat from Egypt.³ From precious metals to jewels to fabrics to wood and ivory to aromatic substances to food to livestock to slaves, Rome had it all. (The slavery shows the darker side of the empire, where humans are put in the same category, basically, as animals.)

Now put yourself in that context. Imagine that you are part of this city and empire. Look all around you and see everything that is being accomplished! You feel like you really are part of something tremen-

³See Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation [Revised]*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 332-334.

dous, amazing, meaningful. And then you look at the church – how pitiful! No-names, no influence, no power! What was the church doing in the world compared to Rome? It is no wonder that early critics of the church, like Celsus, mocked the church as weak and impotent and stupid.

Do not people do the same thing today? Look at the world and its universities and research labs and businesses! Look at the comfort and luxury and technology and wealth that the world produces. And then look at these churches – what are they doing? Look at the stadiums filled to the brim to hear Taylor Swift and then look at these pitiful churches that can barely get a handful on Sunday morning. You can begin to think that the church is pointless, that it is missing something. The world tells you that if you want to be part of something big, be a part of Rome, be a part of the world!

Now I'm not saying that Christians can't produce technology and wealth in the world. We don't go out of Babylon by leaving the city, but by resisting its corrupting influence. The prophet Daniel is such a great example here. He was a positive asset to the political leaders of his day, but he was always first and foremost a follower of God. However, that did not take away from the fact that Babylon was going to be destroyed – in fact, Daniel saw it happen. In the same way, we can and should contribute to our neighborhoods and cities and nations in positive ways. But we need to remind ourselves that at the end of the day, Babylon is still Babylon; the world is still the world. And it will look at believers and the church and try to discredit us. And one way it does this is by putting the seeming impotence and smallness and ineffectiveness of the church up against the power of the world and its economies and militaries and wealth and so on.

Don't buy it, brothers and sisters. And Revelation 18 helps us to see why. All this might and affluence and wealth and comfort and productivity will one day be destroyed. One day, all this wealth will disappear. If Christ tarries, the probability is that one day the United States will be a thing of the past. It will go from being a super-power to become a

thing studied by students of history, like Babylon and Rome. And one day, the world will itself fall before the might of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ when he comes to fully establish his kingdom, when the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. Yes, this is the end of all kingdoms which are not the kingdom of Christ: “and after these things I saw another angel come down from heaven, having great power; and the earth was lightened with his glory. And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. For all nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies” (1-3).

One of the things that you see here is how suddenly and irreversible it will happen. Note the emphasis on the fact that all this will happen in “one hour” (10, 17, 19). It is a stark contrast to the confidence that Rome had in itself, that it would last forever: “she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow” (7). You can hear the disbelief in the words of the kings of the earth as they stand watching Babylon burn: “Alas, alas that great city Babylon, that mighty city! for in one hour is thy judgment come” (10).

My friends, the point is: however stable Babylon seems to be, it will one day be resigned to the dustbin of history. What are you working for? If the world is what you are working for, if your life effort is going into the wealth and power and productivity and luxury of this world, you are laboring in and for a future zoo for demons. Rather, let us remember that the Christian is laboring for something much, much better. We are building something else. John will put this in front of us in future chapters: it is the kingdom of God, a kingdom which cannot be moved, a kingdom which will one day overcome and overtake all the nations of the world. And it will not do it like the empires of this world which come and go, sometimes with breathtaking rapidity – but it will do so with eternal finality and glory. This is what the book of Revelation

reminds us: that it is right and good and meaningful to give yourself to the kingdom of God, because, no matter how small and despised and little and ineffective it seems to be today, it is forever in union with the living and risen Christ, who is sovereign over all things, who will punish his enemies and reward his people. That is something to work for. That is something to give your life to. Seek first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6:33), not the kingdom of men. Brothers and sisters, resist worldliness! If you want to leave a lasting legacy, give yourself to Christ and his church and his cause. The world may despise you, but God will not forget your work and labor of love (Heb. 6:10); because Christ is risen your labor in his name and for his sake cannot and will never be in vain. So, brothers and sisters, with joy and faith and hope be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

CHAPTER XXIX

ANTICIPATING THE WEDDING FEAST OF THE LAMB (REV. 19:1-10)

The Bible calls the believer to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might, to put on the whole armor of God so that we might be able to withstand in the evil day and to stand against the assaults of Satan. We are to stand our ground, not give it up. We are, in other words, to maintain the faith. But the Bible doesn't just exhort us to maintain the faith; it also generously loads us with reasons to do so. One reason I believe and we as a church believe is the reason that all who are truly saved will in fact do this. The Lord prays for his people that their faith fail not. That fact functions, or ought to function, as a motivation to continue in the faith. And we are meant to take seriously the reality that those who abandon the faith and persist in their unbelief will perish. Our Lord warned those who opposed his ministry that if they did not believe that he was the Christ, they would die in their sins – that is to say, unforgiven and unsaved (Jn. 8:24). Those who refuse to come to Christ will not be saved (Jn. 5:20).

Another reason is the futility of living for the world, for the city of man. In other words, it's not just that when the wicked die, they go to hell. It's also that because they lived for the world – for Babylon, as John pictures it – they have lived for nothing. All their labors will end up amounting to nothing. It will go up in smoke. This world will pass away and the lusts thereof, but the one who does the will of God abides forever (1 Jn. 2:15-17). It's not just that the individual rebel will be punished, but that the world in all its pomp and wealth and power and productivity, summed up and culminating in the final city of the Antichrist, will perish. This is what we see in Revelation 17-18. Sinful humanity in rebellion against God has been building a city of its own. Babel in Genesis 11 was in some sense the first incarnation of it. It's been seen in Egypt and Assyria and Babylon and Persia and Greece and Rome, and its current incarnation is seen in the present-day nations and states. What John calls Babylon, the city of the Antichrist at the end of human history, will be the zenith of mankind's effort to make much of his imagination and ingenuity apart from the good constraints of God's holy law. But it will all perish. It will all die, be overthrown, burned up forever: "Her smoke rose up forever and ever."

But we can't be motivated just by the emptiness of the world's promises or the futility of its future. We have to have a positive motivation. We can't just be against something; we must be for something. We can't just hate; we must love. We can't just look forward to the destruction of our enemies; we need a hope for the future. This is what Revelation 19, and the following chapters provide for us. Here we really are at the end of the age. Here we really are looking at the very end of all things. And here we see the surpassing glory of the age to come.

How is the glory to come described here? It is described in terms of a wedding. In and through the fluidity of apocalyptic language the church is described here both in terms of the Lamb's bride (7-8) and in terms of guests invited to the wedding (9). We should not imagine two different groups of people here (as if the bride is the church and the guests are OT saints, or some other type of distinction between groups).

To see two different groups of people here is to forget the nature of symbolic language. Our Lord himself variously described participation in the age to come in terms of guests invited to a wedding (cf. Mt. 9:15; 22:1-14; 25:1-13), but then the apostle Paul describes the church as the bride of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-33). In fact, both are true symbols that depict important truths about our relationship to the Lord.

I think the fact that the believer is described as a guest to the wedding of the Lamb is meant to point us to the fact that God has by his word and Spirit called and invited us to the joys of the age to come. There are no wedding crashers in the age to come. We are there at the behest of the King of heaven. On the other hand, the fact that the believer is described as a part of the bride of Christ is meant to underscore the reality of the love that Christ has for us. Both are meant to point us to the incredible blessing and joy of the age to come.

It has been observed that though the wedding feast is announced here in Revelation 19, we never actually see it described as taking place. John does see “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). However, this is more likely a description of the new heavens and new earth prepared for the people of God. But the language is appropriate because there is a connection to the marriage supper of the Lamb. According to Mounce,

In biblical times a marriage involved two major events, the betrothal and the wedding. These were normally separated by a period of time during which the two individuals were considered husband and wife and as such were under the obligations of faithfulness. The wedding began with a procession to the bride’s house, which was followed by a return to the house of the groom for the marriage feast. By analogy, the church, espoused to Christ by faith, now awaits the Parousia when the heavenly groom will come

for his bride and return to heaven for the marriage feast that lasts throughout eternity.¹

We will enjoy an eternal wedding feast in a new heavens and new earth. The bride of Christ will enjoy eternal fellowship with her Savior in a city that is itself adorned as a bride dressed for the wedding day. Hence, though the event itself is never specifically described, we should understand the unfolding of the glories of the age to come in the coming chapters as the thing the wedding feast here in Revelation 19 is meant to point us to.

It is at this time that God's kingdom will fully come. It is for this reason that John "heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready" (6-7). The word "alleluia" is instructive: it is a transliteration of the Hebrew for "Praise Yahweh!" Though it is never used in the NT outside of Revelation 19 (where it occurs four times), it occurs multiple times in the OT, especially in what are called the Egyptian Hallel Psalms (because of their connection to the celebration of the Passover) in Ps. 113-118. These were psalms especially associated with the three pilgrim feasts under the law, when the people of God went up to the temple to worship the Lord, to offer sacrifices, and to rejoice in his blessings. But that is a faint picture of what John is seeing here. If there will ever be any occasion to praise the Lord, this is it! For in the age to come, God's people will take the ultimate journey to the temple of God, to be ushered into his immediate presence in the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb.

Those who praise the Lord are probably the angels who surround the throne. They praise the Lord in terms of his rule and reign: "for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth." It is important to point out the fact that the verb "reigneth" is not technically in the present tense. It

¹Mounce, p. 347.

is what language scholars call an inceptive aorist and is probably best translated as, “for the Lord our God omnipotent has begun to rule.” In other words, this is not a description of God’s sovereignty over all the world from the beginning of time. It is true that God has always reigned. As the hymn puts it, “The Son of David holds his throne, and sits in judgment there.” There has never been a time when God did not rule over the nations.

And yet we all recognize that the enemies of Christ have not yet all been put under his feet. But that will happen: “The last enemy that will be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). The nations in rebellion against God, finally culminating in the reign of the Antichrist, will be destroyed. Babylon will burn. This is what we see celebrated in the first five verses of the chapter. The first three “Hallelujahs” are praises to God for the overthrow of the harlot Babylon, the city of man (Rev. 19:1,3,4). But in verse 6, this hallelujah introduces us to the Lamb’s bride and the joy of the age to come. This is when God’s reign takes on a whole new dimension, and this is what is being referred to here in verse 6: “the Lord God omnipotent has begun to reign.” The thing we have been praying for when he say, “Thy kingdom come,” will have come.

So we pray for this, and we long for this. The church, espoused to Christ, is waiting for her bridegroom to come and take her to the wedding feast. As individual believers, invited to the wedding feast, we are eagerly awaiting for it to come. This is what I think this text should do for us. As it celebrates the age to come in terms of a wedding feast, as it celebrates salvation in terms of the marriage of the church to Christ, we are meant to be filled with longing for it and to be encouraged to endure through trials and tribulations for the present. Therefore I want to consider with you what it is about the way salvation is celebrated in this analogy of marriage that helps us to do this. Let me suggest the following.

What the imagery of the marriage feast teaches us about the glory to come

First, it reminds us of the love that God has for the church, and for each and every believer that makes up that church. You know, there are different types of love. We are all called upon to love our neighbor as ourselves. That in itself is a tall order! However, we all understand that a husband does not and should not love the lady next door in the same way his is called to love his wife. In fact, there is a sin that names that sort of thing, and it's called adultery. The love that a husband has for his wife is meant to exceed and to be on a different level altogether for the love he might have for his neighbors and friends, and even his own children. When God wanted to talk to Ezekiel about his wife, he called her "the desire of thine eyes" (Ezek. 24:16). She was the desire of his eyes in the sense that she captured the affections of his heart in the way no other human being did. Marital love, in other words, expresses one of the deepest and richest of human relationships that exists in this world.

It is therefore significant when the Lord uses the marriage relationship to describe his love for his people. It means that God delights in and desires the fellowship and company of the believer. In Isa. 62:5, the prophet describes the love that God has for his people in exactly this way: "For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee."

However, we need to be careful here. God does not love the church the way men generally come to love their wives. God does not love the church because it was beautiful: he loves the church in order to make it beautiful. In other words, God's love to us is a gracious love; we need to remember that. When the apostle Paul exhorts husbands to love their wives, he tells them to love them like Christ loves the church: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church,

not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Eph. 5:25-30). Christ so loved the church that he died for it, so that – and we must never forget the so that – “he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” Think about that: he didn’t die for the church because the church was lovely; he died to make the church lovely. He cares for and cherishes the church (29), but his care and affection does not depend upon our worthiness. It is his worthiness that makes us worthy. His love, in other words, is far greater and better than the love you see among men and women.

And of course the love of the Son is shared by the Father and the Spirit. Our Savior prayed that his disciples would know “thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (Jn. 17:23). The Spirit of Christ communicates the love of God to us by pouring it out, shedding it abroad, in our hearts (Rom. 5:5).

We need to remember this: God loves you, Christ loves you, as a husband loves his wife. It means that he delights in us and that he is always for us. Here is the way Isaiah put it: “For thy Maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called. For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused, saith thy God. For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer” (Isa. 54:5-8). We may feel at times that the Lord has forsaken us. And indeed, there are times when we are disciplined through our trials. There are times when it seems as if God has hidden his face. There are times when it seems as if everything is against us. But God will never forsake us; with everlasting

kindness he will have mercy on us. And because of this, one day the Divine bridegroom will come and take his espoused bride to himself to an eternal wedding feast: “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.’” (Isaiah 25:6–9, ESV).

Believer, God loves you and nothing can separate you from that love. Remember that, rejoice in that, hope in that.

Second, it points us to the love that the church has for Christ. We love him because he first loved us (1 Jn. 4:10, 19). God’s love for us begets our love to him. Hence we are told in verse 7 that “the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.” The bride of Christ has prepared herself for this day because she loves her husband. She is no unwilling bride. There is an eagerness, an anticipation for day of the wedding by the Lamb’s bride. The apostle Peter put it this way: the believer is to be characterized by “looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:12). This is because the people of Christ love him: “Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8).

One of the primary ways the people of God show their love to him is by obedience to his commandments: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15), our Lord told his disciples. Hence, we go on to read, “And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints” (8). Though it is true that we are righteous before God through the righteousness of Christ (cf. Rom. 5:18, where the same word for “righteousness” is used),

and that this is the basis of our relationship with God, that is not the idea here. The “righteousness of the saints” is a reference to their righteous acts, to their obedience to the Lord. We are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. Faith works through love (Gal. 5:6). Good works, though not the basis of our justification before God, are the necessary evidence of it.

Brothers and sisters, it matters little whether a person says they love the Lord. The question is whether or not they are prepared to obey him. If you love him, you will obey him. If you do not obey him, you do not love him: it’s as simple as that. Of course none of us obeys the Lord as we ought. There is not a single one of us who perfectly exemplifies the Beatitudes in his or her life. But the true believer is becoming the Beatitudes, and if that is not the case with you, you probably should do some serious self-examination.

What do I mean by this? Well, let’s march our way through the Beatitudes. Are you becoming more and more poor in spirit or are you becoming more and more characterized by pride and blame-shifting and always defending yourself? Are you seeing more and more clearly the evil of your sins so that instead of making excuses for them you mourn over them? Are you becoming more and more meek, more approachable, more easily entreated, or are you becoming the kind of person who quenches every smoking wick and breaks every bruised reed? Are you more and more hungry and thirsty for righteousness or are you filling yourself up on the things of this world? Are you more and more merciful and kind or are you selfish and cruel? Are you becoming more and more pure in heart or are you giving your heart to the things God hates? Are you more and more of a peacemaker or are you divisive and envious and a stirrer up of strife? Are you becoming the kind of person who can suffer persecution for Christ’s sake, or will you wilt under it and like Demas go running back to the world?

Notice that there is no other bride of Christ. The only bride of Christ is a bride decked out in the fine line of righteous deeds. Holiness is not an option; without holiness no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

But this is not the entire picture, is it? Thank God it is not: “And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints” (8). In other words, our good works do not find their origin in us but in the grace of God. Of course I’m not saying that our good works are not our good works, but that they are the product of the effectual grace of God in us through the Spirit and the word. It’s as the apostle Paul put it: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). God works in the hearts of his elect, writes his law in their hearts, so that they are no longer hostile to God but through the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body that they might live. The righteousness of the saints is nothing they can boast in, for even our good works are the gift of God. The one who glories, let him glory in the Lord (1 Cor. 10:31)!

Third, the imagery points us to the joy that awaits the believer in the age to come. The age to come is pictured for us, not in terms of a school or hospital or training camp or even the shallow and fleeting fun of an amusement park. It is pictured for us in terms of a wedding feast. There is deep, deep joy here and exuberant delight. There is cheer and happiness here. Did you note the way the heavenly hosts praise the triumph of God? “And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him” (6-7). There is a three-fold emphasis upon the volume and exuberance of the praise: it was like the voice of a great multitude, like the voice of many waters, like the voice of mighty thunderings. This is praise that cannot be restrained; this is triumph that must be expressed: “Let us be glad and rejoice and give glory to God!”

My friend, there will be no sorrow in heaven. It will not be because God will make us forget our lives on earth. It is because there is no sorrow that heaven cannot heal. It is because there is no pain that heaven will not swallow up, and in such a way that it will give way to undiluted,

irrepressible, and eternal joy. If there is someone who went through some terrible tragedy and had to endure unimaginable suffering on the earth who is in heaven, they will not be grieving over their earthly suffering, for they will be rejoicing in the experience of the overwhelming wonder of seeing and enjoying the glory of God in Christ.

All this points us to the reality that Paul underlines in Ephesians 5: that marriage in this world is a picture of the union between Christ and the church. One of the things that means is that no one in the age to come who wasn't married in this age is going to be living in regret in the age to come. On the contrary, even those who were the most happily married in this age will in the experience of the marriage supper of the Lamb realize for the first time the overwhelming glory and irrepressible joy and deep delight to which earthly marriage only faintly pointed.

What a contrast to the harlot Babylon! She is burned up; all her glory is fading and temporary. On the other hand, the Lamb's bride, the church will be clothed with fine linen, pure and clean, and enter into an eternal celebration of her salvation in fellowship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

What should be our response?

There are at least two ways we should be responding to the truths revealed to us here in these verses.

The first is to believe God's word concerning the glory of the age to come. At the end of verse 9, the angel who is with John says this to him: "And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God." What is being revealed to John is not the hallucination of some half-starved guru on the top of some remote mountain. It is not the forecast of a politician. It is not the word of a man at all, for "these are the true sayings of God." We must never forget that what the apostle John saw here was not the result of some impressive navel-gazing, but the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1). There is always a reason to doubt the

best of men. It is wicked to doubt the words of God. And it is stupid to do so: the words and promises of God are always true; he cannot lie. They are a pillow upon which the weary Christian can rest his head. This is medicine for the soul.

Sometimes I think we Christians can think that unless we are out there doing something we aren't doing anything. However, the Bible does not equate the pursuit of holiness with activism. I'm not saying of course that we are to retreat into Christian ghettos and do nothing! But I am saying that there is a lot of unappreciated value in meditating upon the truths of God's word. How often do we do that? How often do we really think about and mull over in our mind and fix our affections upon the truths and promises of Scripture? The point of passages like this is to make you think, and it is to make you think about your relationship to Christ and to cause you to anticipate the age to come. Now if you do that, it will make a difference in your life. If you think this way, it's going to inevitably change the choices you make and the paths you go – without someone telling you to! But you have to start with letting the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom. We have to learn to cultivate the art of not just thinking Biblically but of taking God's truths and storing them in our hearts so that we can take them out and apply them at the appropriate times. It's worthwhile doing this because what we are storing up in our hearts is not the cheap sentiments of a Hallmark card but the word of God which is true and without error and therefore trustworthy at all times.

Second, these realities ought to create in us a heart of worship, the worship of the true and living God rather than worship of the creature. In verse 10, we are told that John was so overcome by the sheer wonder of it all, that he fell down and began to worship the angel who was showing it to him, but the angel rebuked him: "And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

At one level, John's response was appropriate: he wanted to worship. But he directed his worship at the wrong thing; hence the rebuke. But the angel didn't tell him to stop worshiping – only to direct his worship at the only one for whom it is worthy – to God: “worship God!” It's an admonition for you and me as well.

We are all worshippers. The tragic thing is that we tend to want to worship all the wrong things. Here again is where the perspective of Revelation helps us. We worship the creature partly because we have small thoughts of God. Revelation helps us to see that God is not small. We are small, infinitely below the God of heaven. God is the Lord God omnipotent, the Alpha and the Omega, the thrice Holy One who sits upon his throne, who brought everything into existence and who rules and presides over all things. He is the one who will bring all the nations to account before his throne. He will bring about the overthrow of Babylon and usher in a new heavens and new earth.

This worship must also include the worship of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Our Lord put it this way: “For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son: that all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him” (Jn. 5:22-23). You see that here in our text. The angel refuses to be worshiped, and places himself right alongside John and his fellow believers. Instead, he directs him to worship God.

Now some like to argue that Jesus is not God, and that the NT doesn't teach that Jesus is God. But this is not true. In the book of Revelation, we see that angels are not to be worshiped (see also 22:9) and that God alone is to be worshiped. However, throughout Revelation, we also see that Jesus is worshiped (for example, chapter 5!). In fact, when the angel talks about the testimony of Jesus and how the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophesy, he seems to be saying that his testimony he has been giving is about Jesus and that therefore John should have directed his praise to Jesus, not to the angel. The angel was not pointing to himself, but to Jesus. The Spirit of prophesy, the Spirit

of God who inspires the prophets and gives them the words of God, is the Spirit who testifies to Jesus. The Scriptures point us to Christ as our Savior and our God (cf. Jn. 20:28), and we should worship him and we should submit to him and we should put our faith in him.

We don't need to point people to ourselves. We need to be like the angel. People need Jesus. We can't save anyone; only Jesus Christ the Lord can save us. We are to carry with us the testimony of Jesus and to point people to him. As the apostle Paul put it, let this also be our motto: "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:5-7).

In fact, let our entire lives be a testimony to Jesus. Let everything we are and do be a living witness to the trustworthiness of Jesus, to his kindness, his glory, his worth, his power, his grace.

CHAPTER XXX

THE TRIUMPHANT SAVIOR

(REV. 19:11-21)

LAST WEEK WHEN WE LOOKED at Matthew 16 together and what it means to follow Christ, we had occasion to consider the Transfiguration of our Lord. This is the moment when the future glory of Christ was revealed to Peter, John, and James, as our Lord's visible appearance for a moment changed so that he radiated like the sun in brilliant splendor. It occurred to me as I thought about it some more that it is surely important that what the disciples saw on the mount was not a preview of their glory but of the glory of Christ. Now it's not that the disciples themselves will not someday be glorified; the word of God assures us that all God's people will participate in the glory to come. And in particular, that we will share, by God's sheer grace and mercy, in the glory of the Son of God. Here is the way the apostle Paul put it to the Philippians: "For our [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:20-21).

But this is not the preview the disciples were granted. Rather, they were granted the preview of the glory of Christ. That is what they needed to see. And the reason they needed to see that is that whatever glory we will enjoy in the age to come, it is only a copy of his. His is the original and ours the copy. Our glory will be given in union with him and in dependence upon him. His glory comes from his own nature, whereas our future glory is a glory gotten by grace as a gift, the culmination of our salvation.

Or here is the way the apostle Paul put it to the Colossians: “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:4). We will only appear in glory if we are in Christ, if we are with Christ, if Christ is our life.

So here is another contrast between the Christian message and the message of our culture. What does the culture say? It is constantly telling you how great you are. As a result, it is constantly telling you outright lies, like you can be whatever you want to be, whether you want to be an animal or an astronaut. It is telling us that our hopes and dreams ought to center around our own ambitions and our own glory. It is telling us to say to ourselves, “My will be done be on earth, and let heaven say yes to that.” It is telling us to look at ourselves and to admire ourselves and to preen over ourselves.

But what has this got us? It has got us to a place where people are actually mutilating themselves and the culture admires them for it. We are truly a nation under the judgment of God, given over to insanity and sin. We need to stop looking at ourselves. We need to stop thinking of ourselves as gods. We need to turn and find salvation and life and glory in Jesus Christ.

This is why the text we are looking at this morning is so helpful. You will notice that the armies of heaven are mentioned in verse 14: “And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean.” It’s not clear whether these are angels or redeemed humanity or both, but the fact of the matter is that Christ is the one who is doing battle here; the army just follows in the wake of his

victory. The final triumph over sin is not got by us; it is accomplished decisively and comprehensively by Christ alone.

One of the things I find almost amusing is the way the narrative almost makes you expect to see a great battle unfold, like Waterloo or Gettysburg, but then in a very anticlimactic fashion it just skips to the ending. John writes: “And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army” (19). Here you have all the enemies of Christ gathered together to do battle with the Lord, this battle which was predicted back in chapter 16 (“For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.” Rev. 16:14), and of which we are reminded in chapter 17 (“These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.” Rev. 17:14), and now finally we are at the moment when it is going to take place. But instead of seeing a great battle unfold, we are simply told the end: “And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh” (19:20-21).

I think the reason that we just see the end is that the battle will be so short. The enemies of Christ are no match for him. It’s like sending horse cavalry against modern tanks or sending up WWI biplanes against F-35s. No matter how much ingenuity and power the forces of evil have, in the end they will not be able to stand up to the Lord. We’ve already seen how that even the power the beast has – remember that the beast is the Antichrist prefigured in the wicked rulers of every age – even it has been given to him. And though it is true that it is given to him by the Dragon, Satan, yet even so ultimately it is power that comes from

heaven itself. The enemies of Christ live on borrowed time. God has allowed their predominance for a limited time, as he did with Pharaoh, in order to make his power and glory known in their utter and complete destruction and ruin in the end.

And note here the complete ruin of the enemies of God and the complete triumph of the Lamb. The beast and the false prophet – the political and religious Antichristian leaders– are “cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.” This is Gehenna, which historically was a valley south and west of Jerusalem, where pagan worship and human sacrifice had been done in Israel’s past. But over time, in Jewish literature Gehenna became the symbol of the final judgment of the wicked. This is not the same as Hades or Sheol (which is also sometimes translated as “hell” in the KJV), which refers to the intermediate state between death and the final judgment, but to the final judgment of God upon the wicked. It is the place that our Lord was speaking when he said, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna]” (Mt. 10:28). This is the place where the wicked are not rehabilitated but ruined and destroyed.

We are told that all the wicked are not yet put here, just the beast and false prophet, whereas “the remnant were slain with the sword.” This is because, I think, the final judgment of all the wicked is yet to come. And yet this does not mean that the victory is not complete. It is; there are no enemies left to stand against Christ on the field of battle. He has vanquished all foes, which is expressed, though rather grimly, in the call to the birds to feast on the flesh of the fallen enemies of God and his people (19:17-18).

Now the reason for the totality of the defeat of the beast and the false prophet and their army and the reason for the victory of God’s people over their enemies, is because it is Jesus Christ who is at the head of the army of heaven. And the reason for this passage of Scripture in Revelation is to help us see that. It is to help us so to see the glory of Christ that we will put our hope in him rather than in other things. As Mounce

puts it, “Nowhere in Revelation is the victorious Christ portrayed in symbols and language more likely to convince the reader that in spite of Satan’s best efforts God and the Lamb will emerge triumphant in the end.” [Mounce, Revelation, p. 351].

So this morning I would like us to consider the extended description of Christ our Lord especially carefully in verses 11-16. And what I hope it does for you and me is to strengthen our confidence in Christ and our love for him and our hope in him and our commitment to him. He is truly the Triumphant Savior and worthy of our trust and devotion. In particular, I would like us to contemplate and meditate for a while on three attributes of our Savior which are highlighted in this text: his appellations, appearance, and acts.

The Appellations (Names) of Christ

There are four names given to our Lord here in this text. Unlike many of the names we give, the names of our Lord don’t just identify him, but they actually describe him. They tell us something about who he is and what he does. Hence we are told in verse 11 that our Lord “was called Faithful and True,” meaning these are names for him which also describe his character. In verse 12, we are told that he has an unknown name. In verse 13, that his name is the Word of God. And, finally, in verse 16, that “he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Faithful and True

These two words are probably synonymous and describe our Lord’s faithfulness. He is true in the sense that he is true to his word. He keeps his promises. He does what he says he will do. He faithfully does his Father’s will in accomplishing the salvation of his people whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world. And this means not only rescuing them from their own sins by bearing the guilt of their sins

upon himself and satisfying the justice of God on their behalf, it also means that he rescues them from all their enemies. This latter reality is probably what is most in focus here, given the context.

One of our problems is that we often judge our Lord's faithfulness to his promise to give us future glory and rest in light of the present suffering we are experiencing. But the NT perspective is to us to do the opposite: we are to interpret our present suffering in the light of the promise of future glory. The pattern is clear all throughout the Bible: suffering now and sweetness later, groaning now and glory later. And just as the former is sure, so is the latter. However, there is a huge difference: the present suffering is very temporary whereas the glory to come is eternal.

One of the points of the book of Revelation is to remind us of this fact. All who belong to Christ will in fact inherit eternal glory in the age to come. This is not because of anything special about us. It is not because we are wise or powerful. It is because Christ always keeps his word. And this is because that is who he is. He is the one who is faithful and true.

How can we be sure of this? Well, there are a couple of reasons. One is that he came the first time, in fulfillment of the many promises made in the OT. Of the two comings, surely we can agree that the first coming for Christ must be the most difficult. The first was a coming in humiliation, whereas this coming, the coming announced here and promised in these verses, is a coming in exaltation. If he has kept the promise of his first coming, we can be sure that he will keep the promise of his second.

But then there is the fact that all who belong to Christ by faith experience his daily faithfulness. He gives us daily grace, and in his providence he has provided for us and guided us, and even put trials in our lives for our good. All things work for the good of those who love God (Rom. 8:28). His Spirit dwells within us even now, sealing us and giving us the earnest of our future inheritance. He grants us at times such comfort and assurance that we cannot doubt. And even in those moments when it feels darkest, even then we know that he is with us.

He has promised it; the saints in every age have experienced it, and our own lives bear witness to his faithfulness that daily bears us up.

The Unknown Name

We are told in verse 12, that “he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.” There is some disagreement among the Biblical scholars as to what this means. But the fact that several times in the OT, the angel of the Lord, that mysterious person who was probably the preincarnate Christ, refused to say his name to those who asked, indicates here not only the mysteriousness of Christ but also his divine status. We are thinking, of course, of the time Jacob wrestled with the man before meeting his brother Esau. Even though the angel changed Jacob’s name to Israel, when Jacob asked him his name, he simply replied, “Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there” (Gen. 32:29). We are told that Jacob’s response to this episode was to call “the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (30). Or one thinks of the time the parents of Samson asked the angel of the Lord his name and he responded by saying, “Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?” (Judg. 13:18). Again, the response of Manoah, Samson’s father, is instructive: “And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God” (22). In both cases, this angel of the Lord with a secret name is identified with God. Even so, when our Lord is identified as having a secret name, we are probably, in light of the OT background of Revelation, to see this as pointing to the divine power and status of Jesus Christ.

Certainly, it points us to the mystery of his person. We must acknowledge this: if Christ is God then there must be mystery to his person. God cannot be found out. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and his ways than our ways. He is holy; he is transcendent. He alone is self-existent, the one who was, and is, and is to come. You cannot exhaustively know God, and you cannot know him at all unless he reveals himself to you. This is just what our Lord said: “All things are

delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (Mt. 11:27).

An implication of this reality is that you cannot control God. You cannot manipulate him. He is sovereign; we are not. We must bow to his will and to submit to him. But thank God for that! I am thankful that we do not serve one of the species of pagan gods who were said to be constantly manipulated by their devotees. Rather, we humbly trust in the one who is highly exalted and sovereign and therefore triumphant over all his enemies.

The Word of God

In verse 13, we read, “And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.” There is some dispute among scholars whether Revelation was written by John the apostle or by another otherwise unknown early Christian by the name of John. I argued at the outset in our series of messages on this book that the John here is John the apostle. The earliest (and, I would say, reliable) attestation to the authorship of this book is to say that it was written by him. But another reason I find this plausible is that the only other books in the NT where our Lord is called the Word of God is in the gospel of John and the first epistle of John, both written by John the apostle. Here in Rev. 19:13, we find it again. So I take it as another piece of evidence for the apostolic authorship of this epistle.

But what does John mean by referring to Christ as the Word of God? Well, when John introduces our Lord by this title in his gospel, there is a very clear allusion to the opening words of Genesis. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (Jn. 1:1-3). In other words, here is the Creator of all things, the one who made the

universe by his own Word: “And God said...” (Gen. 1:3,6,9,11, 14, 20, 24, 26). Jesus is that Word.

But there is more. Not only did he create the world, but he entered into the world by becoming a man, by taking human nature to his divine nature, in order to save the world: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Because he himself is God, he alone is the one who alone can reveal the God the Father to us: “No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (18).

He is the divine person who carries out and effects the Father’s will in creation, providence, and salvation. Because he is the Word of God, we can be sure that what he says and what he does will indeed come to pass. No one can thwart God’s word. No one can overcome or successfully stand against the Lord Jesus.

King of kings and Lord of lords

“And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS” (16). I love this, don’t you? If you don’t love this, you should fear because it means that you are at yet hostile in your heart to Jesus Christ. And if that’s the case, it means that you are on the side of those who are described in verses 17-21. If you are an enemy of Christ, you will not fare well in the end, my friend. You need to repent of your rebellion against Christ, lay down your arms, stop your futile and foolish effort to resist his sovereignty over your life. Because the fact of the matter is that all of us will bow to him, either willingly or unwillingly, but you will bow.

But if Christ’s kingdom has come into your hearts, how this statement thrills the soul! We rejoice that there is no king on this planet (or any other, for that matter) who is not infinitely below Christ. Christ sits on his throne, and his sovereignty, his right and power to rule, extends

over every other sovereign, king, emperor, dictator, president, prime minister, chief, or warlord, or whatever.

He is King of kings and Lord of lords in his right to rule. So many monarchs and political rulers have grasped power that didn't belong to him or her. But Christ is the rightful Lord and King of all men of all times and in every place.

He is King of kings and Lord of lords in his power to rule. There are instances in history where someone may have had the right to rule, but they never got a chance to exercise it. There are kings who have been forced to bow to the power of another king. One thinks, for example, of how Alexander the Great humiliated the Persian emperor Darius in a series of stunning military defeats. But, my friend, no one can topple Christ from his throne. No one can match his power to exercise his reign and rule anywhere he wants, whenever he wants.

Brothers and sisters, this is Jesus Christ. His names are truly wonderful: they tell us he can be totally relied upon, that he cannot be controlled, that he accomplishes the will of God in the world, and that his sovereignty is matchless. He is worthy to be trusted, loved, and obeyed. If you don't trust in him, you should. And if you do, you should trust him more!

The Appearance of Christ

Here the appearance of Christ has as much to tell us about himself as his names. He appears here on a white horse (11), with flaming eyes and crowned with many crowns (12), clothed with a vesture dipped in blood (13), followed by the armies of heaven (14), and a sharp sword coming out of his mouth (15).

Mounted on a white horse

This is the symbol of victory. In ancient Rome, victorious generals were given white horses to ride in the parades that celebrated their con-

quests. Our Lord appears at the very outset of this vision on a white horse. Even before the battle of Armageddon, the great battle of the day of God, has happened, the outcome is certain. I remember reading about a soldier during the American Civil War who, before a great battle, wrote in his diary, "I died today." His dead body was later found on the battlefield. Well, that kind of certainty is fitting for the enemies of God. Our Lord doesn't just ride his white horse after the battle; he rides it into battle, he is that certain.

Brothers and sisters, we need to remember that it is still certain that our Lord will in the end overcome all his and our enemies. We also need to remember that this vision is not written in a Pollyannish type of novel, but in the realism of Scripture. Revelation reminds us that the saints will suffer now. It reminds us that there is a beast and a false prophet and a dragon and that these individuals have real power. There is no promise that if we just keep our nose clean we will avoid pain and trouble in this world. Rather, the promise of Revelation is that God is glorified even in our suffering and that we are more than conquerors through him that loves us, that all who belong to Christ will enjoy, not the fruit of temporary victory, but eternal victory.

When WW2 ended, there was a sense in the West that justice had been done. But that war was followed by the Iron Curtain and for many years the nations of Eastern Europe lived under the oppression of communism and the shadow of the Soviet Union. The reality is that many crimes against humanity were done after the war as before and during it. A Cold War followed that lasted another fifty or so years. Wars in this age never end in everlasting peace. But the victory portrayed here is a lasting one.

With flaming eyes

What does this mean? Well, our Lord has appeared this way at the beginning of this book (1:14). When he rebukes the church of Thyatira for its sin, he does so as one "who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire"

(2:18). It denotes the penetrating gaze of one who is holy, who not only sees the wicked but who will punish those who refuse to repent as well. It means that none of the deeds of the wicked, even those that have been hidden behind seemingly impenetrable barriers of deceit, will be hidden forever. That which has been done in the dark will be brought into the light. On the other hand, it also means that the good deeds of God's people that often go unnoticed and unappreciated have also been seen by Christ and will be rewarded in God's good time.

On his head many crowns

We are told that the dragon has seven crowns (12:3), and that the beast had ten crowns (13:1). But upon the head of our Lord are not a seven or ten, but many crowns, indicating that the sovereignty our Lord exercises infinitely exceeds that of his competitors.

Clothed in a vesture [robe] dipped in blood

This language comes from the book of the prophesy of Isaiah, where we read: "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in his apparel, travelling in the greatness of his strength? I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save. Wherefore art thou red in thine apparel, and thy garments like him that treadeth in the winefat? I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come" (Isa. 63:1-4).

What this means is that the blood in which the robe of Christ is dipped is not his own blood, but the blood of his enemies and the enemies of his people. It may shock some of us to hear our Lord described in these terms. Some just want a gentle Jesus meek and mild. Others

want to believe in a universalism that brings everyone into heaven in the end.

Part of our problem is that we are bombarded with statements all the time that people are ultimately good. If that's the case, why would you want to trample them down like this? But that is wishful thinking at best. God's word is far more realistic. This is what the Bible tells us: "There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Rom. 3:10-18). It should therefore not surprise us that there are some people out there who are evil and who will, given the chance, do unspeakably wicked things. History is replete with examples, and Hitler and Stalin don't even scratch the surface of the multitude of moral monsters who have defiled human history.

The fact of the matter is that if this shocks us, it is probably because we have lived very sheltered lives. If your children were fed to the lions by pagan persecutors, I suspect you would feel differently. This would not only not shock us, it would be the only thing that would make the world we live in make sense. The fact of the matter is that much unspeakable evil has been done and is being done in the world. The wicked often go down to their graves with little or no retribution in this world. But what God's word tells us is that this will not always be the case. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord (Rom. 12:19), and he will repay.

He is followed by the armies of heaven.

The title of King is not an empty title for Jesus. He is followed, willingly, by the armies of heaven. It is said that in WW2, the Russian

armies would have a line of soldiers behind the front lines whose purpose was just to shoot anyone retreating to the rear. The front-line troops were made to advance from fear. But this is not the case with our Lord. The armies of heaven not only follow him, but do so willingly and fearlessly. They too ride on white horses for they share the victory of their King. They are dressed in fine linen, white and clean – their garments are not soiled by the blood of their enemies because Christ does all the fighting for them.

He has a sharp sword coming out of his mouth

Once again, we are reminded that we should not take the imagery of Revelation overly literal. This is a picture that is meant to make a point. And the point is the power of his words. As the author of Hebrews reminds us, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). He does not need to cast about for a weapon, for the fulness of power lies in himself. He need only speak, and all his enemies will be toppled.

The Acts of Christ

In these verses, our Lord is not only described in terms of his appearance, but he is also described in terms of his acts. In these verses, we see him judging and making war (11). He is the one who smites the nations and rules them with a rod of iron, treading the winepress of the wrath of Almighty God (15). What we see here is that our Lord’s acts are consistent with his names and his appearance. He is named King of kings, he is arrayed for war, and that is what we see him actually doing. He smites the nations, conquers them, and rules over them. His garment is dipped in blood because he has been treading the winepress of the wrath of God.

In other words, our Lord is not the kind of person who makes us think he is one thing when he is really something else altogether. He is not a conman. He is faithful and true. He will overcome all his and our enemies and we will by grace enjoy the fruits of his victory of sin, death, and the devil.

So, brothers and sisters, look to Christ. See him not only promised in the OT, see him not only born of a virgin, see him not only hanging on a cross and lying in a tomb. See him not only ascending into heaven. But see him returning again. See him fulfilling all the promises of God to us and for us. See the glory of Christ foretold here in these images and visions. One day we will see that there was never any advantage to embracing the sinful pleasures that the world promises to give us if we just go along, if we just blend in, if we just walk the way everyone else is going. One day Christ will appear in heaven and everyone on earth will see. One day the judgment will come. One day Babylon will fall. One day the beast and the false prophet will be thrown alive in the Lake of Fire. On that day we will be able to say that no matter what we suffered for Christ, it was worth it.

Where are you this morning? Are you trusting and obeying the Lord Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords? Or do you care less? Can it be that you are bored with God? Or do you hate the things of God? My friend, I am here in front of you this morning in the providence of God to tell you, on the basis of God's word, that there is no hope for you beyond the grave if you remain in that condition. You must repent, you must turn from your lifestyle of rebellion against God. Do not think that you can shrug this off like the skeptic who said, when he was about to die, that if the God he had lived denying really existed, he would forgive him anyway since it is the business of God to forgive. But it is not the business of God to forgive. He does not have to forgive anyone, least of all you or me. That's what it means to be saved by grace, which is what the Scriptures teach. If God saves you, it is an act of sovereign grace. And it can only be received in the way therefore that God prescribes. And that way is the way of conviction of sin, repentance of sin, faith

Revelation

in Christ, receiving him as Lord and Savior – in other words, receiving Jesus for who he really is. My prayer and my hope for you is that you will do this today.

And I encourage anyone who wants to follow Jesus but who has not yet been baptized and joined the church, to take the necessary steps to do that today. Put on Christ. Identify with him. Walk with him with us. Talk to Elder Bradley or myself. We welcome all who are welcomed by Christ, all who embrace him with humble faith and repentance.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MILLENNIUM (REV. 20:1-6)

WE COME TODAY to the famous millennium text. I must confess that I come at it with a sense of trepidation, though I must also say that I do not find the interpretation of this text as troublesome as other passages, particularly some of those found in chapter 11 and 17. In the preparation of sermons on those chapters in this series on the book of Revelation, at times I felt a sense of panic rising in me over problems of their interpretation. After all, it's impossible to prepare an expositional sermon when you still aren't sure what the text it is saying, and there were many moments when I was puzzling painfully over these hard-to-understand texts. I am more sure about this passage. However, I still come at it with a sense of fear and trembling because there is so much disagreement over it, and people can tend to get worked up when you disagree with them!

How much disagreement can we allow on issues like the Millennium? First of all, we need to affirm that there are things about the last days that we must believe as a church, that we need to have unity on, that we need to agree upon. We must believe in the future, visible, personal, and glorious Second Coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We must

believe in the bodily resurrection of the just and the unjust. We must believe in the general judgment when every knee will bow before Christ and the Lord will make all things right. We must believe in the future eternal glorious state of the righteous and the future eternal misery of the wicked. We must believe these things because the Scriptures speak so clearly about them.

However, there are other things about the end times that I would argue are okay to disagree about, and I would say disagreements about the millennium belong in this category. In this church we don't require you to affirm a particular position on eschatology (apart from the things just mentioned) in order to be a member of this church. For one thing, you can have serious disagreements about the millennium and still affirm the Second Coming, future resurrection, general judgment, and the eternal happiness of the righteous and misery of the wicked.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to come to a position on it. The Bible does talk about it, and it does so very clearly in the text before us. I've heard that some folks have said that in our denomination, we're not supposed to believe in the Millennium. But that reminds me of those Christians who say they don't believe in predestination. That's a problem because if you believe the Bible, you have to believe in predestination because it's in there. Well, so is the Millennium. Here it is right here in Rev. 20:1-6. It's not a matter of believing in it – we must if we are believers in the Bible – but it's a matter of what we believe about it.

Now some folks say that since the Bible doesn't explicitly speak about the millennium anywhere else, we shouldn't use this passage to expand on what the Bible says about the end times everywhere else. The argument is that you shouldn't base a Biblical doctrine upon a single passage in Scripture. There is some wisdom in this. For example, one thinks of the surely wrong practice of baptizing for the dead among the Mormons, which is a practice based off a single obscure verse in 1 Cor. 15. But it is possible to press this principle too far. For example, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews builds a pretty big case for the priestly

identity of Jesus Christ, as a priest after the order of Melchizedek, based on a single text in the OT (Ps. 110:4). In other words, just because a something isn't mentioned all over the place in the Bible doesn't mean the one or two places it is mentioned can't make a significant contribution to our understanding of theology. The NT use of the OT cautions us against such a view.¹

Actually, the problem with the practice of baptizing for the dead is not that it is found in a single passage. The problem is twofold: that it is (1) relatively obscure (there's no consensus exactly what Paul means there) and (2) that such a practice contradicts the teaching of other clearer passages in the Bible. At the end of the day, it is a sound rule to always interpret the Bible in light of the Bible, the obscure by the clear. The problem is not whether or not this is the only text that explicitly mentions the millennium, but whether or not our understanding of what it says is faithful to the text itself and whether or not it fits with the rest of the Biblical teaching. Certainly, whatever we say about the millennium in this passage, we want to do so in a way that is consistent with the overall message of the Bible on the end times.

Now I must say here at the outset that I am a premillennialist, and I am going to make a case for that. However, I'm not going to blame you if you hold to a different position, such as amillennialism or post-millennialism. There are just too many good and wise people who have held to differing positions on the end times to be dogmatic over the details. We do need to have some humility here. There have been godly men who hold and have held to the premillennial position (among the Baptists, for example, John Gill and C. H. Spurgeon in the past, and John Piper in our day). The Puritans for the most part were postmillennial; so was Jonathan Edwards. A great many in the Reformed faith are amillennial, a point of view that was championed all the way back

¹Another example would be the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. This is the only place in Scripture that tells us about such a place and the happenings connected with it. Yet there is no reason to deny that such a place existed or the events associated with it happened just because it is only reported for us in a single passage in the Bible.

in the fifth century by the great African bishop Augustine of Hippo. A very interesting case was that of James Montgomery Boice, the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian in Philadelphia, who was a dispensationalist Presbyterian! Putting those two words together is almost like putting peanut butter and mayonnaise on the same sandwich. So I just can't get too excited if someone disagrees with me over this. In fact, I for one will be happy no matter how it pans out. You've probably heard some people say that they are panmillennialists – those who believe that it'll all pan out in the end! Well, in some sense that is the correct position to take. And the fact of the matter is that if the amillennialists are right, I'm not going to be disappointed, right? If the postmillennialists are right, praise God! And if the premillennialists are correct that will be wonderful too.

But I think there is another reason we need to have humility here. It is this (I think it was Charles Hodge who pointed this out in the nineteenth century): everyone – and I mean everyone – got the first coming of our Lord wrong. What makes you think that we won't get at least certain aspects of his second coming wrong? I don't think the addition of the NT to the canon of Scripture fixes the problem – I mean, if it did, why are there still so many disagreements over the end times? No, I think you should be wary of those who are absolutely confident that they have it all figured out. Humility and tentativeness are appropriate and needed here.

Why then come at this text at all? We do so because just the fact that we do so says something important. When there are a thousand things competing for our attention at this moment, even things that are very important cultural issues, it says something when we stay true to the path laid out for us in the regular, faithful exposition of Scripture. I am doing this because I want it to be clear that what is determining the subject matter in this pulpit is not the thousand voices around us clamoring to be heard, but the word of God itself. Let God's word itself tell us what is important and relevant, and let us listen. That's not to say that there aren't times when it is appropriate to preach

specific sermons dealing with topics or issues of the day. I agree that there are times when this needs to be done. But generally, it is most appropriate for the church that sits under the authority of God's word to let Scripture itself not only determine what truth is, but also what truths we need to hear, in the order and with the weight given to them in God's word. Expository preaching gives us that, and this is why we are here at this text in Revelation 20 dealing with the Millennium.

An Explanation of Terms

If you don't know what some of these terms mean that I've been using (amillennialist, premillennialist, postmillennialist), before we go on, let me briefly explain them to you. First of all, it might be appropriate to start by saying a word about the word millennium itself. "Millennium" comes from the Latin (*mille annis*) for a thousand years, and it is a reference in this case to the fact that here the saints "lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (20:4). The millennium is the time when God's people will reign with Christ.

Now a premillennialist is someone who believes that the millennium will follow the Second Coming, or that the return of our Lord precedes (hence the prefix *pre-*) the millennium. The premillennialist believes that Christ will return to earth, raise his people (the elect) from the dead, and set up his kingdom on the earth in its fulness. They believe that during this period of time ("thousand" is probably figurative but certainly indicates some lengthy period of time, whatever the specific length is) there will be unprecedented peace and justice and prosperity on the earth as the elect reign with Christ. Following this period of time, the devil will be allowed to deceive the non-elect who are still living, and they will engage in one last final battle with God. After being overthrown, there will be a general judgment and the millennium will merge into the eternal state in a new heavens and new earth.

On the other hand, an amillennialist is someone who believes that we are in currently in the millennium. Probably many of them don't like

the term itself because it's not as if they don't believe in the millennium (which the a- prefix meaning "not" or "no" might seem to indicate) but rather that they believe that it began to be realized when Christ rose from the dead, and that the believer even now reigns with Christ who is already seated at the Father's right hand and is reigning over all things for the good of his church. They thus believe that the millennium precedes the Second Coming and the eternal state.

The postmillennialist also believes that the millennium precedes the Second Coming, or that the return of our Lord happens after or is posterior to the Millennium (hence the prefix post-). However, they differ from amillennialists because they believe it is yet future. In particular, they argue that before the return of our Lord, the gospel will not only go to all the earth but that it will have success in the sense that through the gospel all the nations will turn to Christ and be converted. When the nations have been converted, then the Lord will return, raise the dead, judge all men in a final judgment, and inaugurate the eternal state.

One added perspective that needs to be mentioned is that of the dispensationalist. This is a species of premillennialism which, in addition to the points made above, makes a hard and fast distinction between Israel and the church, and argues that the millennium is an earthly rule of Christ during which the nation of Israel will enjoy the literal fulfillment of many of the OT promises to Israel in an earthly kingdom. They also believe that there will be a secret rapture of the church before the tribulation of the last days; hence, there are two "second" comings of Christ – the first secret and the second visible.

I am personally not a dispensationalist and don't affirm these added distinctives in my understanding of the end times. This position to which I hold is sometimes called historic premillennialism which is distinguished from the later accretions of the system developed in dispensationalism which really doesn't have a history before the nineteenth century. However, although dispensationalism as such is of recent origin, premillennialism is very old, going back to the early church fathers. For example, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Papias, and Tertullian were pre-

millennialists. So we are not being novel or eccentric or independent for embracing such a view. Nor are we being unbaptistic, for some of the earliest Baptist theologians and pastors were also premillennial in their eschatology. In fact, the formation of my thinking on this subject was very early on influenced by the eighteenth-century Baptist theologian John Gill in his teaching on this in his *Body of Divinity*.

In what follows, I plan to give arguments for both the amillennial and the premillennial positions. I apologize for those of you who subscribe to some other position, but I am limited in time here, and I think that the cases for the amillennial and premillennial views are the strongest. I will, however, be arguing ultimately for the premillennial position and try to show why I think the case for amillennialism is weaker overall. We will then end with a word about the nature of the millennium. Of course, fundamentally our task in all of this is to give a faithful exposition of the Biblical text of Revelation 20:1-6.

The Case for Amillennialism

The real test of course is this: what does the Bible say? What does this passage here in Revelation 20 say? What we will see is that the main question in deciding between the amillennial and the premillennial positions here is whether or not this chapter is in temporal sequence with the previous chapter or whether it is a recapitulation – that is to say, an overall repetition of the same basic events from a slightly different perspective – of the events of the previous chapter. This is not a stretch because we've seen that the book of Revelation several times over recapitulates the same events from different perspectives. Thus, those who are amillennialists argue that this chapter recapitulates the events of the previous chapter. For example, they argue that the battle of 20:8-9 recapitulates the battle of 19:19-20.

One of the main reasons given for this is the problem of the origin of the devil's army in chapter 20 when the army of the beast in chapter 19 was completely decimated. The argument is this: they argue that

the army against the Lord in chapter 19 is said to include every non-believer on the earth. Those who take the amillennialist position point especially to 19:18 to make their point: “That ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great.” They would argue that this list includes everyone on earth who is not following Christ. If that is the case, then the only people left on earth in chapter 20 are the righteous who are raised from the dead in verse 4. The problem and the question then is this: Where then do the wicked come from who are deceived by Satan in 20:8? They can’t come from other wicked people because they were all killed. And they can’t come from the resurrected righteous because our Lord makes it very clear that those who are raised from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven – and this almost certainly means they don’t have children (see Mt. 22:30). This would strongly imply that the two battles really have to be the same and therefore that the millennium mentioned several verses before the battle in 20:8-9 is not referring to something that is inaugurated after the Second Coming of our Lord but before it.

How then would they interpret the dead coming to life in 20:4? What is the “first resurrection” (20:5)? They would argue that it is either a reference to the new birth (as in Jn. 5:24), or a reference to the intermediate state. That is, to “live” in the sense of Rev. 20:4 means: (1) to be made spiritually alive in Christ, or (2) to be alive in heaven in a yet disembodied state.

They would also argue that the rest of the Biblical teaching seems to put the resurrection of the righteous and unrighteous together, whereas, if we take Rev. 20 to be referring to a literal millennium that would mean the righteous are raised at the beginning and the wicked at the end of the millennium, separating them by the duration of the millennial reign of Christ. They will point to verses like this one in John 5:28-29 where our Lord says, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth;

they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.” They would argue that this is a reference to a single resurrection, rather than to multiple resurrections, which is required by the premillennialist position.

One more argument for the recapitulation position is the claim that the sealing of Satan in the abyss in 20:1-3 is parallel to the fall of Satan in chapter 12, where he is thrown from heaven, no longer able to accuse the brethren in the presence of God. This is clearly something that happens at the beginning, rather than the ending, of the story of the church, for it is after the devil is cast out that he attacks the woman who had given birth to the Messiah and her seed (the church). They would argue then that the sealing of Satan in the abyss no longer able to deceive the nations is therefore coordinate with the history of the church between the first and second comings of our Lord. Hence, the devil’s inability to deceive the nations in chapter 20 should also be interpreted in light of the history of the church in all of the period of time between the first and second comings of our Lord. At least some of them would say that this is a reference to the fact that the gospel has gone into all the nations and that Satan can’t deceive the nations in the sense that he is no longer able to keep the gospel from them. So the millennium is not something in the future, but something we are experiencing right now.

There are other points that they make, but it seems to me that these are some of their most powerful arguments. What are we to say to these points?

The Case for Premillennialism

First of all, let’s come to the objections raised against this by the amillennialists. The objection that the army in chapter 19 includes every unsaved human being seems to me to be unnecessarily literalistic, especially when you consider that this is an apocalyptic book written in symbolic language. I find it a bit ironic to say it this way because this is the very charge which amillennialists cast against the premillennial

position. For example, they say that by insisting the millennium to be a real period of time after the return of Christ we are being too literal in a book full of symbolism, especially in regards to the apparent order of things in the narrative. Well, I say that what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

In fact, I don't think we need to assume that the army of the beast in chapter 19 included the entire population of unbelievers on the planet. The language of chapter 19 is meant of course to convey the broad base of support for the beast in his war against Christ, and that it included people from the highest to the lowest classes. But to imagine that every single human being on the planet is in the same battle is a bit much.

What about verses like those in John 5 that seem to imply a single resurrection event instead of two separated by the millennium? Well, the answer is that, strictly speaking, our Lord's words are fully consistent with two resurrections: one a resurrection of the righteous – which we have in Rev. 20:4 – and the other a resurrection of the wicked – which we have in Rev. 20:5. There is no inconsistency here as far as I can tell.

What about the supposed parallel between Rev. 12 and 20? I'm sorry, but I just don't see it. That may be entirely my fault, but there it is. There seem to be just too many differences between the two accounts for me to be able to believe that they are parallel accounts of the same thing. For instance, in chapter 12, the devil being thrown from heaven explains the persecution of the church – whereas in chapter 20, the devil being sealed in the abyss explains the peace of the church! Not quite the same thing, I think.

But what about the positive case for the premillennial position? Let me give you three reasons why I think we should understand the millennium of Revelation 20 to refer to a period of time, inaugurated by the Second Coming of our Lord, when the elect will reign with him upon the earth before the Final Judgment and the eternal state.

Reason 1: Chapters 18-20 are in sequence rather than being recapitulations of each other.

Let me give you two arguments for this. First, in these chapters, we see that the judgments of God upon the Harlot, the Beast and False Prophet, and the Dragon are different events because they are different characters with different roles. These characters are introduced in Revelation in the following order: the dragon (chapter 12), the beast and false prophet (chapter 13, though alluded to in chapter 11), and finally the harlot (chapter 17). The dragon is the devil, of this there is no doubt. He is further referred to here in chapter 20 as “the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan” (20:2). He is the original enemy of God and of the people of God, a murderer who murders with his lies (Jn. 8:44). He is the inspiration behind the beast and false prophet, who together represent the Antichristian kingdom at the end in its political and religious aspects. The devil gives his power to the beast (13:2). The city Babylon is the harlot, the commercial and political center of the world in rebellion against God and the seat of the beast. It was prefigured by Rome in John’s day, but will almost certainly be fulfilled in a future capitol city of the Antichrist, wherever that will be.

What we then see is that these enemies of the Lord and his people are toppled in the reverse order that they were introduced. First the city of Babylon falls, the harlot, in chapter 18. This is followed by the fall of the beast and false prophet in chapter 19, followed by the fall of Satan himself in chapter 20. One of the implications of this is that each fall is distinct from the next because these characters, though connected, are still distinct. And that implies, in my mind at least, that each of the events in chapters 18-20 are distinct events, rather than recapitulations of each other.

Second, we see that the events of chapters 18-20 depend upon each other in a certain order, rather than recapitulating each other. What we have in these chapters are not events that tell the same story from different vantage points. What we have are events in one chapter that

must happen before the events in the next chapter can happen. This strongly implies a sequence of events, even if that sequence is told in highly symbolic language.

For example, one reason I find it incredibly hard to accept that the battle in chapter 20 is a retelling of the battle in chapter 19 is that in chapter 19 the beast and the false prophet are captured and thrown alive into the lake of fire. But then the outcome in the battle in chapter 20 is this: “And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (10). In other words, something had already happened before this battle took place; and what had already happened is that the beast and false prophet had been cast into the lake of fire. They were already there, and Satan joins them there at the end of the battle in chapter 20; he doesn’t recapitulate or reprise their being cast into the lake of fire. One thing had happened (the beast and false prophet were thrown into hell) followed by another thing (the dragon is then cast into hell). This is not the same story from different perspectives, like a football play which is replayed from various vantage points. Rather, these are like two different football games altogether, where one had to be played before the next could be played.

If this is the case, then the sequence we have here in these chapters is this: there is the personal, visible return of Christ in glory to earth to destroy the persecutors of the church (19:11-21). This is what we looked at a few Sundays ago. Then there is the arrest and imprisonment of Satan and his being cast into the abyss where he is able no more to deceive the nations (20:1-3). This is associated with the First Resurrection when the saints who had died are raised from the dead and they rule and reign with Christ upon the earth for a thousand years (20:4-6). This is followed by the release of Satan who stirs up the nations to one last, final battle, when he is decisively defeated and cast into hell (20:7-10). This is followed by the resurrection of the wicked and their final judgment before the throne of God

(20:11-15), and this is followed by a new heavens and new earth (21:1-22:7).

Reason 2: It's very hard to see how the cessation of the deception of Satan in 20:3 can be harmonized with the present condition of the church.

We read in verses 1-3: "And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season." To say that this is a reference to the results of the world-wide evangelism of the nations is to stretch things a bit, in my opinion. The reason for the world-wide evangelism of the nations had nothing in fact to do with Satan; it had everything to do with the purpose of God in salvation history.

Now some will argue that our Lord referred to this in the parable of the strong man in Mt. 12:29. But this had a very specific reference: it referred to the exorcism of demons by the personal ministry of our Lord. It was not meant to act as a description of the entire period of church history between the first and second comings of our Lord.

The fact of the matter is that the devil has never been bound at any point in church history in terms of his ability to deceive to deceive the nations. The apostles taught the opposite, didn't they? Here is what the apostle Paul said about the devil's prowess to deceive: "such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). Or, to the Ephesians, he warns them of "the wiles of the devil," and goes on to say, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places"

(Eph. 6:11-12). Or, the apostle Peter has this to say about the present danger of the devil: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). What about Paul’s words to Timothy about the last times: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron” (1 Tim. 4:1-2). Does this sound like a devil who has been bound so that he can’t deceive the nations any longer? Really?²

Rather, we ought to say what the text says. Even taking into consideration the symbolism of the passage (we don’t, for example, have to affirm a literal chain and a literal bottomless pit), the very least this means is that the kinds of things the apostles warn us against in the passages just cited will no longer be worries for God’s people on earth during the millennium. The very things the devil is allowed to do in Revelation chapter 12 will no longer be possibilities. God’s kingdom will have come. Praise the Lord!

Reason 3: The coming to life in Rev. 20:4 can only refer in this context to physical resurrection.

We read: “And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded

²I agree here with John MacArthur on this. He says, “And . . . how in the world can Satan be bound when Acts 5:3 says Satan entered the heart of Ananias and Sapphira and made them lie? And how can Satan be bound when 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that he is blinding the minds of those who do not believe? And how can Satan be bound when Peter says he goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour in 1 Peter 5:8? And how can he be bound when 1 Thessalonians 2:18 says that the devil hinders the ministers of God? And how can he be bound when it says he goes around disguised as an angel of light along with all the rest of his ministers? And if he’s bound, then the binding is useless.” See <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/66-73/the-coming-earthly-kingdom-of-the-lord-jesus-christ-part-1> [accessed 1/22/24].

for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection” (4-5).

“They lived” is translated in some versions as “came to life” (ESV), and I think that is a good translation. The fact is that it is called a resurrection in verse 5, an *anastasis*. In the NT, this word means physical, bodily resurrection, and even when it is used in a metaphorical sense (as, perhaps, in Luke 2:34) the metaphor is taken from physical, bodily resurrection. We should therefore take it to mean this unless we have overwhelming reasons to do otherwise. I don’t think such reasons exist here. Those who say that “first” resurrection is meant to place it in the order of the current age, as opposed to the age to come (in order to make it a spiritual resurrection of some sort), do so, it seems to me, by downplaying key elements in the context. It is the first resurrection because there is yet a resurrection to come when the rest of the dead will be raised and stand before God in the general judgment (5, 12-13). Note that the same word is used for both resurrections: in verse 4, those who participate in the first resurrection come to life (*zao*) and in the second resurrection the rest of the dead come to life (same word, *zao*). If the second resurrection is a physical one, so is the first one.

That it is physical resurrection is also seen in the description of those who are raised. They “souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus” – these are the one who “came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” Thus, resurrection can’t mean living in heaven in a disembodied state, nor can it mean regeneration. For this coming to life happened to people who had already been regenerated (i.e., born again, given spiritual life) and who had already died and gone to heaven. These are the ones who came to life.

Frankly, to say that resurrection means to die and go to heaven is practically to equate resurrection with death. This is not just paradoxical, as

one scholar put it; it is impossible. It is to join together things that God has put asunder.

There is some disagreement as to the identity of the group that experiences the first resurrection. Our translation (KJV) makes it sound like this is one group of people, described in two different ways. However, it's possible that this is a description of two groups of people: the first being the martyrs and the second being the more general category of those who did not worship the beast.

Regardless, I don't think we should read this as if it were to say that only martyrs participate in the life which is here granted. The reason is that throughout the book of Revelation, the promise to participate in the reign and rule of Christ is not just reserved for martyrs but to all who faithfully serve the Lord. Thus, our Lord himself makes this promise to the church in Thyatira: "And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father" (Rev. 2:26-27). This is a promise to all the faithful, that is, to all the elect.

By the way, some argue that the placement of thrones in verse 4 indicates that this is happening in heaven (in light of Revelation 4:4 and Daniel 7:9-10), and make this another argument for a spiritual interpretation of the first resurrection. However, a comparison with chapter 5 points in a different direction. There, our Lord is being praised for redeeming a people: "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9-10). Those who are redeemed by God are all believers of every age, and the promise is that they "shall reign." Where will they reign? – "on the earth." So this shows that thrones are just another pointer to the future earthly, millennial reign of all believers with Christ.

The Millennium in other passages of Scripture?

These are the reasons from the text of Revelation 20 that I think point strongly in the direction of a premillennial interpretation. However, one of the things that is often said against the premillennial interpretation is that it is found nowhere else in the OT or NT. However, though it is true that this is the only explicit place in Scripture where the idea of a millennium is found, there are passages elsewhere that seem to strongly hint at it.

One such place is 1 Cor. 15:22-26. There the apostle Paul writes, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” Notice that there is an order here: first Christ comes and those who belong to Christ are raised. Also note that this is not a general resurrection here: it is only the resurrection of the righteous. It is only after this that the end comes. I agree that this text doesn’t prove the premillennial position; I’m not arguing that. What I am arguing, however, is that it is consistent with it. According to Paul, it is after the resurrection of the righteous that Christ puts down all his enemies, the last of which is death. This is perfectly consistent with the premillennial timeline: first the Second Coming of our Lord, when the righteous are raised from the dead, then the overthrow of all Christ’s and our enemies in the millennial reign, then the general judgment when death itself will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14).

I would also argue that promises like that in Rev. 2:26-27, where the believer is promised that he or she will rule the nations with a rod of iron is more consistent with a millennial interpretation than the amillennial. Who are these nations that we are to rule over? If the general judgment happens right away and the wicked are immediately

cast into hell, precisely whom are the saints ruling over? One possibility is that these nations are the unrighteous who are left on the earth who will eventually comprise Gog and Magog with whom our Lord will fight in the battle preceding the white throne judgment (20:8-15). This again is most consistent with the premillennial position.

The Nature of the Millennium

What will the millennium be like? Well, there is not a lot of detail here. And though we might try to dip into some OT prophesies to flesh out what it might be like, I am personally content to abide by the brevity of verse 6: “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.” Here is another one of the seven blessings of the book of Revelation, and the fact that it is reserved for the millennium shows us that this is no little matter. The nature of the Millennium is summed up in three ways. First, “on such death hath no power.” A parallel passage to this can be seen in our Lord’s words to Martha when her brother Lazarus had died: “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?” (Jn. 11:25-26). Wait a minute... what? Lazarus had already died! What then does Jesus mean? I agree with James Hamilton, who, in his commentary on John, writes: “Those who believe in Jesus may experience physical death, but it will not be permanent, and those who believe will not undergo the second death (cf. Rev. 20:6). This is what Jesus means in John 11:26 when he says that those who believe in him will never die.” And this is what John means here. It does not mean that these people didn’t die, but that they didn’t remain dead but were resurrected and that they would not be subject to the second death, spoken of in verse 14.

This means that those who are raised from the dead and enter into the blessedness of the Millennium will never be in danger of losing this

blessedness. There is no way from heaven to hell. Those whom God saves, he saves for good.

Second, we are told that “they shall be priests of God and of Christ.” In other words, they will have direct access to God and of Christ. Priests minister and serve in the presence of God. That will be the privilege of the people of God in the Millennial state. Finally, they will “reign with him a thousand years.” Right now, the righteous live in a world dominated by the wicked. The whole world, John tells us, lies under the power of the wicked one. We have to live with that. And though we are to shine our lights in the midst of the surrounding darkness, and though we should expect to see the gospel embraced by others with whom we share it, the reality is that until Christ returns this world will always have wicked men ruling over the godly. There will be persecution until the meek inherit the earth. But there is coming a day, my friends, when the meek will inherit the earth. There will come a day when the reverse of things will come about, when the righteous will rule over the nations, when the godly will exercise dominion over the earth. And whereas we have to bear the brunt of the iniquity of the wicked during a short span in this life, in the Millennium, we will be able to enjoy this wonderful turn of affairs for a very long time.

Brothers and sisters, regardless of where you fall on the continuum of options as regards the theology of last things, surely we can rejoice together that, however the details work out, there is coming a time when Babylon will no longer rule over the nations of the earth. There is coming a day when the beast and false prophet will be cast into the lake of fire. And there will come a day when even the devil himself will join them in eternal punishment. There is coming a time when all the enemies of God and of his people will be overcome. Death will be dead, and there will be no more sin, no more opposition to the people of God! Yes, the Millennium ends, but it ends in a final battle and a final judgment that then merges into the eternal state, a new heavens and new earth. If you belong to Jesus by faith through the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart, this is your inheritance. If we really believed that

it would enable us to do what Paul commands us to do in his epistle to the Philippians: “Rejoice evermore!” Place your problems in the perspective of the wonderful and eternal blessedness of the people of God in Christ.

Recently, we partook of the Lord’s Supper together as a church. I am so thankful for this means of grace. In Communion, we are reminded of the words of our Lord to his disciples the night he instituted the supper for the church: “As oft as ye eat this bread and drink this wine, ye do show the Lord’s death till he come.” Every time we take the Lord’s Supper, we are not just looking back to the death of Christ that brought us pardon before God, but we are looking forward to the final victory when he returns. The book of Revelation is helping us to do that, too. Brothers and sisters, let this passage and this Supper help us to anticipate and wait with eagerness the return of the Lord and the everlasting victory of the people of God.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE DEFEAT OF SATAN AND THE GENERAL JUDGMENT (REV. 20:7-15)

WHY DO YOU THINK GOD HAS GIVEN the church the book of Revelation? Why should we read it and study it? Is it because God wants us to know the details of the end times, down to the minutest point? No, I don't think so. I think the NT Scholar G. E. Ladd was correct when he commented, "Scripture is not primarily interested in what concerns many students of the Bible, viz., in a scheme or chronology of prophetic events."¹ Rather, the book of Revelation was given to us so that we would have hope and that our hope would be in the promise that the faithful follower of Jesus Christ will participate in the victory of the Lord at the end of history as we know it. What we've seen is that again and again, the book of Revelation brings us to the end of all things and the victory of Jesus over all his and our enemies, and this is where the book ends. This is where we are at in the 20th chapter of the book of Revelation.

¹G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972), p. 271."

We must not miss how massively important this is. This book is meant to function to give you hope. And the hope it is meant to give you is not the hope that if you have enough faith and get really busy in the kingdom of God, then God will reward you by giving you a better job or give you better health or success in whatever it is you are currently aiming at (though that's not to say God can't do that!). The hope the Bible gives us is that the saint will be raised from the dead and will share in the glory of the Son of God forever in a new heavens and a new earth.

Of course this is supposed to make a difference now. Yes, this is about the future, and for most if not all of us this will mean the future on the other side of the grave, but the knowledge that the Bible gives us of God's plan for the future is supposed to change your life in the here and now. How so? It does so, not by promising to take away our trials, but by putting them in perspective. Hope in our participation in Christ's future and eternal victory over all evil ought to make us persevering saints in the present. I think the apostle Paul shows us how this operates in something he said to the Roman believers. He tells them (and us) that we ought to be "rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). The question is this: how do you remain patient in tribulation? Especially when the trial, whatever it is, gets harder and harder? When the pain seems unrelenting? When there seems to be no end in sight to the thorn in the flesh? How do you remain faithful when God doesn't answer our earnest pleas and cries for relief with the relief we are asking for? When all we get seems to be silence, how can our faith remain strong?

Well, brothers and sisters, God is not silent. He has spoken in his word, and he instructs us there. And what he tells us is that he hears our prayers and that he will give us grace for our trials. But what he also tells us is that his love for us is not to be measured only or even primarily in terms of temporal blessing but in terms of eternal glory. This is why just before the apostle tells us to be "patient in tribulation," he first says that we are to be "rejoicing in hope." Hope in what? Hope that the cerebral palsy will suddenly be healed? Now don't get me wrong: I do believe

God can and does do things like that. I've prayed that God would do that for my daughter. But I also know that God does not have to do things like that, and that it very well might be his will that the cerebral palsy doesn't go away this side of heaven. Rather, my hope ultimately is that through Jesus one day my daughter will receive a resurrection body that is free of all the ravages of cerebral palsy. And whatever your tribulation is, if you are rejoicing in the hope of future glory, it will enable you – or it ought to – to persevere in a long march through difficulty and suffering. We can do this because, as Paul had put it earlier to the Romans, “For the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

That doesn't mean, of course, that we're on our own till we get to heaven. That's why on the other side of “be patient in tribulation” you have “continuing instant in prayer.” Prayer may not get rid of the cancer or the pain or whatever the difficulty may be. But it does bring down God's grace upon us. God is in fact a very present help in time of trouble (Ps. 46:1).

If the Bible is true, and we believe with all our hearts and minds that it is, then this reality of future glory ought to enable us to live totally differently from the people around us who have no such hope. Do we? Are we different in this way, or do we live in such a way that people around you can't distinguish you from the pagan who lives next door? Do we react to the trials of life the same way people who have no Revelation-informed hope do? My friends, let's not just read this book and hear sermons on it. Let's live in light of its realities. Believe what it has to say about your future in Christ, and it will enable you to be an overcomer who will reign with the Lord in glory forever.

But I think the book of Revelation does something else. It not only gives us hope but it also opens our eyes to the reality of future judgment. We are so ready on the one hand to forget the glory of the righteous and give in to despair and on the other to become bloated with heart-numbing worldliness and forget the end of the wicked. We need both. We need the comfort of the promise of eternal life and we need the

clarity of the warning of eternal judgment. Revelation gives us both the comfort and the clarity.

Now in the text before us we have two massive hope and clarity giving realities that are presented to us: that of the defeat of Satan (7-10) and the final judgment (11-15). My prayer is that as we consider these two realities together we would come out more hopeful with respect to God's promise and endowed with greater Biblical clarity with respect to God's judgment.

The Defeat of Satan

Last time, in looking at verses 1-6, we learned that when our Lord returns, Satan will be shut away, unable to deceive the nations (2). During this time, the Millennium, the martyrs and those who did not receive the mark of the beast will be resurrected and reign with Christ on the earth. But this is not the end of Satan. After the thousand years, he is allowed, we are told in verses 7-8, out of his prison. Once out, the devil does what the devil does and he begins again to deceive the nations, gathering them for a final, suicidal battle with Christ and his people. However, they are decisively defeated (9), and the devil "is cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (10).

You will notice the mention of Gog and Magog in verse 8, which is meant to describe the nations of the earth led into deception by Satan. What this tells us is that the vision John is seeing unfold here is roughly the same thing the prophet Ezekiel saw in his prophesy. The last part of the book of Ezekiel goes from chapter 36 to the end of the book in chapter 48 and is more or less parallel with Revelation 20-22. The structure of his vision is basically this: in chapters 36-37 we see God's people restored to the land, which I believe parallels the Millennial kingdom of our Lord described in Rev. 20:1-6. Then in chapters 38-39 of Ezekiel's prophesy, we have a climactic battle between Israel and Gog and Magog, culminating in the defeat of Israel's enemies. This corresponds to

what we are seeing here in Revelation 20:7-15. Then the final chapters of Ezekiel (40-48) portray for us the new heavens and new earth in terms of new temple. This corresponds to the final chapters of Revelation (21-22).

People have tried to identify Gog and Magog and have come up with some far-fetched theories, including the supposition that Gog and Magog refer to Russia! However, this is highly unlikely, and I think we should not try to read too much into this. John is simply using the language of the OT, as he often does, to identify the enemies of God's people in terms of Ezekiel's vision. It doesn't really matter where they come from; when the time comes it will be obvious who belongs to Christ and who is following Satan.

Now the lesson we need to learn from this is the beautiful truth that evil has an end. Evil is not eternal like God. Rebellion against God had a beginning, and it will have an end. The Bible begins by telling us that God made everything in the universe, the heavens and the earth, and that he made it all very good. But then Genesis goes on to tell us that in this universe a sinister being existed. This being, who became Satan, was created by God. He too was created good, but eventually he fell from his righteous state into evil. Again, we don't know when exactly he was created with reference to the rest of the universe, or when he fell. But we do know that it was before the fall of Adam and Eve for he is the one who tempted them to sin. This is the point of the identification of verse 3: "that old serpent," referring us back to the Garden of Eden when Eve was led astray by Satan under the guise of a serpent. Adam and Eve, made in God's image, holy and upright, were tempted into sin and rebellion against God by Satan. The result is what theologians call the Fall of man into sin. With this fall has come all the evil that has ever entered into the human experience. Death, guilt, and condemnation came into the world because of Adam's sin (Rom. 5:12-19).

But though God could have right then and there destroyed everything and started over, instead God set about undoing what Satan had done. And so God made a promise to Adam and Eve. Here is the way

he put it, speaking to the serpent: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). God made a promise that a son of Eve would be born who would crush Satan and undo the evil that he had brought into the world. Jesus is that son of Eve. He came into the world and defeated sin and death on the cross, and now because of his victory over sin he is able to crush the head of the serpent and undo death itself and make new all things. This is what the apostle Paul was referring to when he told the Roman believers, “And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom. 16:20). What Paul said was going to take place shortly is taking place here in Revelation 20. Here is where we see the promise at the dawn of human history fulfilled. When Satan is cast into the lake of fire, his head is being crushed forever.

My friends, though he is not the author of sin, God is sovereign even over evil. Sin does not exist independently of God. That is to say, God allows evil for good purposes. Sin didn't enter into the world by taking God by surprise or by God having his hands tied so that he couldn't prevent it. He allowed the devil to fall, and he allowed the devil to tempt Adam and Eve into sin. He didn't make them fall of course; but he did allow them to fall. All the terrible effects of that sin, all the seemingly senseless tragedy that has followed, has a good purpose in the eternal plan of God. That does not mean that sin is good in itself. That doesn't mean that evil is good in itself. Evil in itself is loathsome. Sin in itself is awful. But God is able to bring good out of the most awful evil. He will do it. And one of the reasons we know this is that Satan, that original perpetrator of wickedness, the father of lies, will be finally and decisively defeated when and how God chooses. There is coming a day when Satan will forever be bound in eternal judgment in the lake of fire.

Think about that: there is coming a day when there will no longer be the possibility of sin and rebellion against God in the new heaven and new earth. Evil will be finally and completely destroyed. Satan and all who follow him will be judged. Let that reality fill you with

hope, especially in a day when it seems like wicked men and women are becoming more and more brazen in their sin and more and more hostile in the opposition to and persecution of the cause of God and truth.

The White Throne Judgment

Once Satan is cast into the lake of fire, we go on to read about the judgment before the throne of God: “And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works” (11-12). Now some say this is just a judgment of the wicked. But surely there were people who were born during the Millennium and then saved, but who, because they were not resurrected yet went on to die. These children of God will certainly participate in this judgment. In fact, I think all humanity, even those who participated in the Millennium will stand in the judgment, just as we see in Matthew 25 and other places, to receive judgment and reward and entrance either to eternal destruction or to eternal reward in the new heavens and new earth.

How will the judgment go? What we see here is that there are “books” and then there is the “book of life” (12). Let’s take the “books” first. This language almost certainly comes from the book of Daniel, chapter 7: “I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened” (9-10). It’s clear that the books in Daniel’s vision are connected to God’s judgment. This is what we see here.

In particular, the books contain the record of our works, what we have done with our lives, and this record becomes the standard of God's judgment. Judgment will be passed according to one's works. And since God is the one doing the judging, we know that he will reward the righteous and punish the wicked.

Now sometimes people have a hard time with this because they know the Bible teaches that we are saved by grace, and not by works (cf. Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 4:5; 11:6). However, there is no contradiction between being saved by God's grace and being judged by our works. It is no contradiction because the Bible teaches that those who are saved go on to produce good works (Eph. 2:10). In other words, the fact that God judges according to one's works doesn't mean that our good deeds are what get us into heaven, but that our good works are the evidence of our being saved by grace. God takes rotten people who only by nature produce bad fruit and remakes them so that they love God and Christ and seek to serve him. They produce good fruit in their lives now, but the fact that they do so is owing entirely to God's grace in the first place. Works are not the root but the fruit of our salvation. They are the evidence that we are saved. It is in this sense that even God's people are judged according to their works.

Of course the Bible teaches this everywhere. Let me give you a couple of examples. First of all, consider Paul's words in Romans 2. There the apostle says that God "will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: but unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: for there is no respect of persons with God" (Rom. 2:6-11). Note that God does not just judge the wicked, but also the righteous, and he renders to every man (not just some) according to their deeds. The idea that a person can live in utter rebellion against God from begin-

ning to end and yet go to heaven is utterly repugnant to the testimony of Scripture.

Occasionally you will hear some object to this with the example of the thief on the cross. And it is true that he did apparently live almost his entire life in sin. But the fact of the matter is that he did have a conversion experience when he was dying; he did come to see his sin and to embrace the Lordship of Christ. He appealed to him for salvation – “Remember me when you come into your kingdom” – which is evidence of faith. In other words, we have all the elements here of someone who was genuinely converted. And we thank God for that. We thank God that judgment according to works is not a matter of having more good works than bad ones. We are saved on the basis of Christ’s perfect righteousness, not our own. Nevertheless, God’s word makes it clear that those are saved who have been changed by grace. This happened to the thief on the cross, even though it was at the end of his life. We have to be careful that we don’t draw the wrong conclusions from this. That you can live and die in sin and still go to heaven would be a wrong conclusion. And the words of J. C. Ryle are appropriate here: “There is one thief on the cross that none may despair. Yet there is but one thief on the cross that none may presume.”

Our Lord himself taught this, didn’t he? “For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works” (Mt. 16:27). When the Son of man comes he will reward every man according to his works. Our choices matter. What you do with your life matters. Grace is not an excuse for sin. Those who live in sin and die in sin will perish in their sin. Those who are not willing to bow the knees to King Jesus will not receive forgiveness. As Matthew Henry put it, those who will not come to Christ to be saved must depart from him to be damned.

But there is another book: “another book was opened, which is the book of life . . . And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:12, 15). What is this “book of life”? There are seven instances where this book is mentioned in Revelation

(3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; 22:19). This is clearly the record of the saved. Now some make a big deal out of 3:5 and being blotted out of the book of life and make this to say that this is not a fixed record. They argue that people's names go in and out of this book. However, all Rev. 3:5 says is that those who overcome will not have their names blotted out of the book of life. That is not the same thing as saying that you can be saved and then lose it. Rather it is simply a promise that those who are saved will not lose their salvation.

In other words, I take this to be God's eternal register of the elect. This is the book that records the purpose of God in election before the foundation of the world. God chose, out of the mass of sinful humanity, a people to save through Jesus Christ. These names are recorded in the book of life. It is what our Lord was referring to when he told his disciples, "Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). This book determines who will be saved. Those whose names are not in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire, into eternal destruction.

Now we know that God's election is all of grace. So which is it? Are we judged according to our works or according to the grace of God in election? The answer is both. Again, the connection is this: those who are saved by grace are changed by grace. The books which record our works as the result of God's gracious change of us and the book of life which records our names as the result of God's gracious choice of us agree with one another. And they agree because God's grace changes people, moves us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son, opens our eyes, turns us from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God (cf. Col. 1:13; Acts 26:18).

Friends, there are so many things that are not inevitable, that are uncertain. You young people, with your life all ahead of you, this is one of the things that makes it exciting, right? You just don't know what will happen. But one thing is certain: all of you, all of us, will stand before the judgment seat of God. There is no avoiding that. This is the point,

I think, of verse 13: “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.” It doesn’t matter where you died or how you died or where you ended up, whether in the sea or on land, you will be raised to stand before God. All who inhabit “death and hell,” that is, the realm of the dead, will come out of their graves to stand before the judge of all the earth and have judgment rendered over them. Nothing can hide you from this God, for he is the one “from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them” (11). You simply cannot run from God. All of history is like a river running in a single direction, and it ends at the white throne judgment seat of the God of heaven and earth. You, young man and you, young woman, will stand before it. You, the middle aged and the elderly, you will stand before it. Men and women, boys and girls will stand before it. Just as sure as you are sitting before me, you will stand before God.

Now ask yourself: what will you have to say for yourself at that moment? What will you do? You won’t be able to hide, and you won’t be able to deceive God. You won’t be able to talk your way out of it, for “every mouth will be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God” (Rom. 3:19). He knows your heart and your life, the hidden and secret things. Paul talks about “the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel” (Rom. 2:16). Will you be able to stand?

This is of eternal moment – we are not talking about 20 or 30 years that are at stake, but eternity. And the consequences are infinitely more serious than anything you could possibly compare it to: “the lake of fire,” the “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt. 25:41). John goes on to call it “the second death” (Rev. 20:14). It is a death after death involving not only the ruin of the body but of the soul forever (Mt. 10:28).

My friends, the Bible doesn’t just reveal this awful reality to us so we can rejoice in the destruction of our enemies. It is revealed to us be-

cause apart from grace we are all the enemies of God, and we need to understand just how serious sin is. This is how serious sin is: unrepentant, unbelieving sinners will be cast into this lake of fire and justly so, forever.

What this ought to do is to make us hate our sin and to turn from it. Or, to use Biblical language, to flee from the wrath to come (Mt. 3:8). And it ought to make us run, not to our own efforts of self-improvement, but to Jesus Christ who alone can cleanse us from our sin and give us new hearts and make us new people. My friend, renounce your sins and put your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Here is the promise to those who do so: “But what saith it? [that is, what does the gospel say?]. The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom. 10:8-13).

What is the hope that is placed before us in Rev. 20:7-15? It is the hope that sin and death will be finally destroyed and that all will be put right in the end. But of course this hope only makes sense if your name is in the book of life. And the only way that happens is if you belong to Jesus, because the book of life is “the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8). Apart from him we have no lasting hope, but in him we have everlasting hope through grace.

And that means that the trials or problems or discouragements we are currently facing cannot define our future and our destiny. Sometimes they do seem to consume our lives. But they will end if we belong to God through Christ. Our trials are temporary. Our suffering is momentary. But not the glory to come. This glory which is not just a lessening

of trials and sufferings, but a life without any pain, any suffering, any discouragement, any cloud in the sky, forever and ever.

Do you believe that? Then let it do for you what it did for Paul: “For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Do you feel like fainting? Do you feel weary and worn? Let your inward man be renewed by the hope that God is working even in your affliction a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THREE THINGS TO SEE

(REV. 21:1-8)

WE HAVE SEEN THAT THE BOOK OF REVELATION is a multifaceted book that is partly epistle, partly apocalypse, and partly prophesy. We've seen that there is definite structure to this book, and part of this is seen in the cycles that have kept reoccurring in this book that bring us again and again to the end of history as we know it and into the eternal state.

A kind of broad division of the book of Revelation is to see it divided into four visions. The first vision encompasses chapters 1-3, and in them we see our Lord revealed to John and giving him detailed and personalized messages to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. What we see is that these churches are encouraged by Christ in areas where they are faithful and warned by him in areas where they have sinned. Overall, they are encouraged to be overcomers, and this gives us a clue as to the purpose of the remaining chapters of the book.

The rest of the book, the prophetic part, is meant to help these believers to be overcomers in the faith and not to give in to the world that is pressing them to turn from Jesus and serve the world. And they are encouraged to faithfulness is by being reminded of the end of the wicked

and the glory of the righteous when our Lord returns and makes all things new. In other words, they are pointed to future glory to encourage them to present faithfulness.

The second vision is contained in chapters 4-16, in which we have three cycles of seven judgments: the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls. The first cycle describes life in a fallen world between the first and second comings of our Lord, but the final two cycles of judgments are only on the wicked and remind us that though the wicked triumph now, it will not always be that way. During this vision, we are also introduced to the persecutors of God's people: the devil (dragon), the beast and false prophet who represent the political and religious aspects of the final antichrist, and Babylon, the seat of the beast's power and influence in the world.

The third vision runs from chapter 17 to 21:8. In this vision, we see the culmination of history as the enemies of God and his people fall and are destroyed, first Babylon, then the beast and false prophet, and finally the devil. We are then introduced in the first part of chapter 21 to the new order of things that will come about in a new heaven and new earth.

The final vision, to which we will turn (Lord-willing) in the coming weeks, runs from 21:9 to the end of the book.

So here we are at the end of the third vision. We want to consider the first eight verses of chapter 21. These are glorious verses and worthy of our full attention. In particular, there are three things here in this text that demand our attention. First, there is something to be perceived; second, there is something to be believed; third, there is something to be received.

Something to perceive (1-4)

First, there is something we must see. How you see your life and the world around you will determine how you live. The devil wants nothing more than for you to see this world in terms of a godless or anti-god

mentality. He wants you to look at the world around you and make you thoughtless when it comes to the things of God, or he wants you to look at the world around you and make you think less of God.

So, for example, to tempt Eve into disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit, Satan cast doubts in her mind: “And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” (Gen. 3:1). Then he outright contradicted what God said: “And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (4-5). It was then that the woman began to look at the fruit differently: “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (6). It was seeing the fruit through the lens of Satanic deception that led to the fall of man into sin and all the evils that has come from that.

Here’s another example. In Psalm 73, Asaph confesses, “But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (2-3). Asaph saw the prosperity of the wicked, and when he compared it with his own life – which was not so prosperous (14) – it caused him to stumble in his faith. But his seeing the wicked in this way was not correct; he was not looking at them through the right lens, the lens of God’s truth. He was interpreting what he saw through the lens of deceit and falsehood. It was only when he went to the Temple of the Lord, where God’s truth was proclaimed, that this changed: “When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end” (16-17). It was the truth about the end of the wicked that made their present prosperity less appealing and less a stumbling block for his faith.

That is one of the reasons we need the book of Revelation. It helps us to see things rightly. And the way it does this is the way Asaph was helped: by helping us to see the end of the wicked and the end of the

righteous, and to show us that the former is terrifyingly bitter while the latter is tremendously blessed. So you see how John begins: “I saw a new heavens and a new earth. . . . And I John saw the holy city” (Rev. 21:1-2). We too need to see these things. We too need to have our imagination fired by the prospect of the future unending blessedness of God’s people.

Last time we saw the hope that is offered the Christian in the defeat of Satan. We also saw the clarity that is given in the vision of the final judgment of the wicked. But here we turn to the hope that is given in the positive happiness of the righteous. Not only will their enemies be defeated, not only will God take away the troublers of God’s people, but God himself will grant them joy beyond their wildest dreams.

My friends, if you are tempted to doubt God’s goodness toward you, remember what we are reading here. God has promised unimaginable happiness for all who trust and have put their hope in Jesus Christ. And he has let you know it; indeed, he wants you to know it. He wants you to know that whatever suffering he is leading you through – which is for your good (Rom. 8:28) – on the other side of that is unending, ever-increasing joy and peace and happiness and rest.

What is it that is promised? Well, there are three things to be seen here. The first is a new heaven and a new earth: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea” (1). Now by “passed away” is either meant that God will totally dispose of the present material creation and start over, or it means that God will renew the present material creation. I tend toward the latter, that this is describing God’s cleansing and purging the present order of all the vestiges of sin and restoring it to a sinless and good state.

And the reason why I think this is talking about a renewing instead of a do-over is what Paul says in Romans 8. Here is what he says: “For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the

glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Rom. 8:20-22). The creature there is the physical creation, and Paul says that it too (along with the people of God) “shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” It is groaning to be delivered. Now being delivered and groaning and travailing in path like a woman in childbirth are not good metaphors for a world awaiting to be annihilated, but they are good metaphors for a world that is waiting to be remade and restored.

Now I know that Peter says that the world will be burned up and dissolved (2 Pet. 3:10-12). However, it is possible to read this, especially in light of what Paul says, to mean that God will with fire purge all the discordant elements of this universe and remake it into a new heavens and new earth (13). In other words, what is dissolved is not the physical creation itself, but the evil elements of it, so that what is left is a “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (13).

Either way, what will emerge will be a new universe without sin and without the possibility of sin and death. Scholars have puzzled over the fact that “there was no more sea” in verse 1, but most recognize that in the ancient world the sea was associated with chaos and disorder, and it is possible that the Lord is telling us by this that there will never again be the chaos which comes of evil in the new heavens and new earth. It was from the sea that the beast came (13:1). There being no sea means there will never again be a beast who must first rise from the sea. So I’m not sure it’s saying there won’t be any large bodies of water in the new world; it is at least saying that in the new world there will no longer be any possibility of disorder and chaos and sin and antichristian opposers of God and his people.

Before we move onto the next thing to be seen, I think it is important for us to grasp the significance of the fact that the eternal state is situated in a physical universe. And it is called a new heaven and a new earth, which means there will be continuity between the present heaven and earth and the new heaven and earth. It would, after all, be pointless to

call it a new earth if it wasn't anything like this earth. The reason why this is important is that it helps us visualize – even if faintly – what life will be like in the age to come. It will not be some kind of unimaginable ethereal exitance, but it will be a real, physical existence in a real, physical world – but without sin and its effects. I don't hesitate to imagine that many (though not all) of the things we enjoy in this world we will enjoy in the next, but without the interference and disruption of sin. Being able to visualize our hope in this way I think makes our hope more robust precisely because it is something we can imagine and visualize.

The next thing John sees is a new city: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (2). Tom Schreiner asks the question whether this is place or a people, and he settles for both. I think he is probably right. In chapter 19, we saw that God's people were likened to a bride. The church is the bride of Christ. However, God's people need a place to dwell. Indeed, we are longing for a city, as Abraham and the patriarchs were: “By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:9-10). It is this city that I think John is seeing. It is appropriate that it is also called the bride, the Lamb's wife (9), since it is the place where God's people will dwell.

We will see more details about this city in the following verses (9,ff). But for now I just want to make the observation that this is just heaven coming to earth. Here is what Paul says to the Galatians: “But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:26). The Jerusalem above (heaven) to which God's people belong will come to earth. Any attempt to turn this world into heaven always ends in disaster. It cannot be done. But it will be done by God himself when the end comes.

Then John sees a new temple. Now I know that in verse 22 we are told that “I saw no temple therein.” But the reason for this is that “the

Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.” In other words, there will not be a need for a physical structure in the New Jerusalem like a temple that only symbolizes the presence of God. And the reason there will be no need for it is that God himself will actually dwell there. The very last verse of Ezekiel, in which the prophet sees the new world in terms of a new temple, says this: “And the name of the city from that day shall be, The Lord is there” (Ezek. 48:35). So John is seeing a new temple, not in the sense of a separate structure, but in the sense that God has made the new city into a temple by dwelling there.

Here again is what John saw: “And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (3-4). My friends, this is a wonderful thing to imagine and see. The fulfillment of all God’s promises to his people are summarized in the statement that “God himself shall be with them, and be their God.” God is the summit and pinnacle of all blessings. Indeed, he is the blessing to which all other blessings faintly point. To have God, to be in his presence, the presence not of his wrath but of his blessing, is to have the purest joy, free from all taint of impurity, free from any hint of worry, free from any hint of anxiety and stress, free from all sin and iniquity. This is what God promises. This is the place of lasting peace and comfort.

Here is how this will play out in the new world: no more weeping, for there will be no cause to weep. Sometimes folks ask if God wiping our tears away means that we will cry, but this is to misinterpret the symbolism here. It just means that God himself will guarantee that we will never again have a reason to be upset, stressed, worried, angry, depressed, or sad. No more tears! No more longing for something we do not have because we have everything we need. Our cups are full to the brim.

There will be no more death. No more funerals because there is no more sin. Death is the fruit of sin, but sin has been vanquished once and forever by Christ. At this point, death and hell will have been in fact cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14). There is finality in that. So there will be nothing tending toward death, which is why he goes on to say that there will be “neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.”

I know that some of you live with sorrow in your hearts day in and day out. It makes your heart heavy and life wearisome. But my friend, hold on, for God has promised an end to your sorrow. I know that some of you live with pain everyday of your life. But my friend there is coming a day when you will wake up and you will no longer be in pain. And you will never be in danger of pain again. In time it will become a faint memory and you will perhaps have trouble even remembering it. There is an end to pain. That is the promise of God!

“For the former things are passed away.” Anything associated with disease and death and depravity will be gone forever.

So, brothers and sisters, let’s see these three things: a new world, a new city, and a new temple. And let these realities change the way you see the world around you. Don’t let false thinking creep in and make you think that God has given you a raw deal, or that he doesn’t love you, or that he doesn’t care for you. Surely, these realities ought to convince us otherwise. Whatever our suffering now, it is incomparable with the glory to come.

Something to believe (5)

Second, there is something we must believe. John goes on to write: “And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful” (5). I think even a Christian could hear all the wonderful things about a new world, and a new city, and a new temple, and yet if they are suffering enough still wonder if it could really be true. I mean, if God is allowing

me to suffer now, why would I think that he will glorify me later? The answer to that question goes back to God's promises. In his word God has promised two things to those who are united by faith to his Son and his redemptive work: that we will suffer now and that we will be glorified later. If you never suffer, that is actually a problem. Suffering is good for us, and God knows that. If we didn't suffer, we would sin heedlessly and endlessly. As the psalmist put it, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Ps. 119:71). Suffering is the way that sin gets strained out of our lives. But suffering is not the whole story for the same God who promised suffering has also promised glory.

How can we know that is true? Well, for two reasons. First, because God is sovereign. He is the one who sits on the throne. This is not just any throne. It is the throne of the God of heaven and earth, the throne of the one who does whatever he pleases anywhere he pleases whenever he pleases. God is not someone who is well-meaning and yet just can't get it done. The presence of suffering is no indicator that he is not in control, because as we've been arguing suffering is a part of God's plan for, just as it was a part of his plan for his Son.

Second, we can know that God will keep his promise because of his character. The one who makes all things new is the one who is faithful and true. And again we know he is true and faithful because he has demonstrated it once and for all in the sending of his Son. Christ came in fulfillment of the promises of God, and he will come again in fulfillment of the promises of God. You can bank on it.

So, brothers and sisters, believe what you are reading here about the new heaven and new earth. Anticipate it, long for it, look for it and hasten unto it. We need to do this, not just because this is something to believe in order to be orthodox. This is something to believe in order to be holy. I will tell you that one of the best ways to battle the lust of the eyes and the lust of the flesh and the pride of life is to battle it by seeing what John saw. If your heart is longing for this new heaven and new earth, if you are longing for being in the very presence of God,

you are not going to want to view pornography on your phone – and you are going to be willing to do whatever it takes to keep yourself from viewing porn on your phone. You are not going to want to dwell on how someone has wronged you. You are not going to want to hurt someone else and take revenge for yourself. You are not going to want to make much of yourself. You are not going to want to put the things of this world in the place of God. Rather, you are going to want to please the God whom you love and long for. You are going to be a holy person. This is practical stuff, folks!

Something to receive (6-8)

Third, we see here that there is something to be received. John writes, “And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death” (6-8).

The question these verses answer is this: “For whom is this blessing? Who can expect to be glorified in the end?” And this question is answered both positively and negatively. In other words, we are shown who will and who will not inherit the new heaven and the new earth.

Positively, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, God himself promises, “I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely” (6). Here the blessings of the future age are pictured in terms of “the fountain of the water of life.” In the prophesy of Ezekiel (chapter 47), we are told of waters which issue from the very throne of God, and which become a river on either side of which grow trees with fruit that brings healing to the nations. You see the same thing here in Revelation, in chapter 22, and it is called the water of life there

in verse 1. So this is just another metaphor for eternal life in the age to come.

This is promised to “him that is athirst.” What does that mean? Who are the thirsty ones? These are the ones who realize that they don’t have it in themselves to save themselves. They understand that the water of life is not found by looking within themselves. In themselves they are a desert. They are a dried-up tree. They have looked to the world to get fulfillment and they have come up dry again and again. These are people who know that they are sinners before God almighty and who know that because of their sin they don’t deserve eternal life. In fact, they know they deserve God’s judgment. And yet, these are also the people who realize that they need it, they want it. They may not even think it is possible for them to receive this water of life and to be reconciled to God, but they know that they need it.

And what the word of God says to them is this: this water is not for buying or selling. It is free. It is a gift of grace. You can have it for nothing. It’s just like the prophet Isaiah put it: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David” (Isa. 55:1-3).

The reason why we can have it for free is because it has already been paid for. Jesus paid for it when he died on the cross to bear the punishment for our sins. It’s why he tells us, as he told the woman at the well in Samaria, “Whosoever drinketh of this water [from the wells of the world] shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (Jn. 4:13-14).

It's the reason why he said, "he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (Jn. 6:35).

My friend, if this morning you see yourself as condemned before God and utterly and hopelessly lost, I have good news for you. The good news is that the water of life is being offered here. And it is offered without money and without cost to you. You can have it for free. You simply receive it by faith, the empty hand of faith that receives the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

And this faith is itself a gift of God, a faith that not only receives the free gift but endures and overcomes. That's why we go on to read, "He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (7).

But then we are shown who will not inherit the kingdom of God and eternal life. Let this be a warning to us. Just as we should believe God's promises, we should also believe his warning. Well, here is a definite warning: "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (8).

Don't skip over the things in this list. Of course, this list is not saying that if you've ever committed one of these sins, you will end up in the lake of fire. But it is saying that if you don't embrace the water of life in Christ and overcome the world through faith in him, you will. In particular, the "fearful" here are the cowardly, cowardly not in a general sense but in the sense that they were not willing to be persecuted for Christ and instead chose to serve the beast and the false prophet in order to avoid the pain and the ostracism resulting from being identified with Jesus. These are the unbelieving ones who do not believe the gospel, who chose to drink from the muddy and poisonous wells of this world over the fountain of the water of life. The "abominable" remind us that all sin is detestable to God. "Murderers" are those who take life instead of protecting it, whether it is killing someone out of vengeance, or it is killing someone because they are an inconvenience to us. "Whoremongers"

gers” is just a reference to all who reject God’s plan for sexuality, and this would include all homosexual acts as well as all sexual acts outside of marriage between one man and one woman. “Sorcerers” are those who think they can by magic manipulate the universe instead of submitting to the God who rules over all. “Idolators” are all who worship anyone or anything in the place of the God who is revealed to us in the pages of Scripture. Finally, “all liars.” I think this is particularly a reference to those who lie about God and the gospel, who chose to believe such lies and to propagate such lies. But of course it is surely also a reference to all who choose to live lives of deceit. God, who is a God truth and faithfulness, hates all lies and lying.

All such “shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.” There is nothing really more fearful and terrible than this. It is horrible in terms of the judgment itself, but even more so that there is not going back from this. It is a second death. There is nothing that can or will redeem a person from this death. This is eternal separation from God’s blessing. It is the antithesis of the blessings we read about in verses 1-4.

So we have an invitation and a warning: an invitation to those who are thirsty to take the water of life and a warning to those who are self-satisfied to flee from the wrath to come, to awaken from their blindness to God’s glory and their own sin.

My friends, here we see not just the end of the wicked, but more importantly, the blessedness of the righteous. Meditate upon these things, and let them have the effect upon you that it did upon Asaph. Let us remember that, on the one hand, when it comes to the wicked, “Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image” (Ps. 73:18-20). On the other hand, let us remember that God’s people can always say this to God: “Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and

there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever” (24-26). Indeed, “it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works” (28).

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE NEW JERUSALEM AND THE NEW EDEN (REV.

21:9-22:5)

One of my favorite scenes in the movie *The Longest Day* is that of a British commando who has been given the task of holding an important bridge until the tanks from the landings on D-Day can get there. At the briefing prior to being dropped behind enemy lines to attack and take the bridge from the Germans, he was told, “Hold until relieved.” Throughout the mission, and especially from the time they capture the bridge and then begin to have to defend it against successive, brutal counterattacks, those words ring in his ears: “Hold until relieved.” Finally, he hears the British tanks coming, and he realizes his mission has succeeded. To be honest, it’s hard for me to watch that and not get a bit emotional. Given the odds, it was remarkable and a feat of incredible bravery that he and his command were able to hold until relieved.

In a similar way our Lord has given each and every Christian the same marching orders. We are to “withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand” (Eph. 6:13). We too are to hold until relieved. In fact, the

Lord Jesus gives almost identical instructions to the church at Thyatira: “that which ye have already hold fast till I come” (Rev. 2:25).

Just like the British commando, these are not pointless instructions. We too have an enemy who walks about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8). It can be difficult as we live by faith and not by sight, as we withstand the assaults of the flesh, the world, and the devil. It can be difficult when we lose those we love, when our dreams die, when life doesn’t turn out the way we wanted. What motivation then do we have to hold until relieved? What motivation, especially when the world offers immediate gratification if we let go of the life of a disciple of Christ and do what it tells us to do? What motivation when the world is calling out for us to love it?

Well, I think these last chapters in Revelation are important motivators for a life of faith. They remind us that the world to come is worth waiting for. They tell us that it is worth waiting for because it is incomparably better than anything this world can offer. To sell out your soul for this world over Jesus, to be like Demas and forsake the gospel for the love of the world, is idiocy. It is really stupid because despite what we suffer now, the glory of the age to come is just infinitely better and worth waiting for. “Hold until relieved!”

Let’s see how this passage helps us to do that. This is all about the New Jerusalem, the city of God, that descends from heaven to earth, the city of the redeemed, and the New Eden, the paradise of God. There are three things I want us to look at here as we study these verses together. First, what the New Jerusalem and the New Eden point us to; second, what they picture; and third, what they propose.

What the New Jerusalem and the New Eden point us to.

The first thing we really need to come to grips with is the referent of this vision. What does the New Jerusalem point us to? I argued last time that the city of God is both a place and a people. But at this point we need to think about this a bit more. Some argue that this is just an

extended metaphor for the people of God and that we shouldn't think this gives us any information about a physical place in the new heaven and new earth where God's people dwell.

Now, I can see where they get that, because this city is called the Lamb's bride (ver. 9) and back in 19:7-9, God's people are called the Lamb's bride. Also, we see that this city is a temple where God dwells, and very often in Scripture temple language is used to describe God's people. When Paul tells the Ephesian believers that they have been incorporated into the people of God, he uses this language: "And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:20-21). In a similar vein, the city of God described here is also built upon the foundation of the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:14).

But I really do think this is pointing us to the city of God, the place where God's people will dwell. Here are the reasons I think that. First of all, the fact of the matter is that part of the Biblical vision of hope which is offered the believer throughout Scripture is a heavenly place. We are not just promised to be a part of a people; we are promised a place to dwell. Here is the way our Lord put it: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (Jn. 14:2-3). Notice the emphasis here that our Lord puts upon a place to live. I think it is part of our humanness to want to have a place where we belong, as well as a people to whom we belong. The New Jerusalem provides both for us.

Or here is the way the apostle Peter put it: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the

last time” (1 Pet. 1:3-5). Again, I think we are making a mistake if we just interpret this in terms of a people to whom we are ordained to belong. God has given us a place, and this place is incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading. It is true that we do now belong to a people, the people of God, but we are not yet home. Interestingly, Peter throughout his epistle describes believers as sojourners – that is, people without a place (1:1, 17; 2:11). But we are journeying to a place, and that place is a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). This place is what Revelation points us to.

Another reason I believe this is referring to a real city is that the OT background to this vision practically demands it. If you read Isaiah 60, for example, you come away realizing that John is not the only one who saw this vision. Isaiah saw it, too. Ezekiel saw it in the final chapters of his prophesy. For example, compare what John saw with this passage in Isaiah 60:

The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended. Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified. (Isa. 60:19-21)

But it’s also pretty clear, and I think would have been clear to Isaiah and his audience, that this promise here was not just a description of the future people of God, but of a future place for the people of God. The people inherit the land. The people have a place. The same is true of Ezekiel’s prophesy as well. So the OT helps us to see that the hope offered us is that those who believe in Jesus have a sort of triple belonging: they belong first and foremost to God, then to his people, and then to his place, the New Jerusalem.

Finally, the fact that the vision of the New Jerusalem is followed in 22:1-5 by a picture of heaven as the New Eden shows that this is a place. Eden was the paradise where God put Adam and Eve. It was the perfect place, a place that not only had the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but also the Tree of Life.

Why do I say that 22:1-5 is a picture of the new Eden? I say that because you also have the tree of life in this place as well (2). Another prominent feature of this place is the river of life (1); just as Eden featured a river that watered it which split up into four other rivers (Gen. 2:10). But the great key here is the announcement that there is no curse (Rev. 22:3). This functions as a great bookend for the Bible. The Bible tells us about the beginning of the curse in Genesis 3. In Revelation 22 it tells us how it ends. It ends in the new Eden, in the new heaven and new earth, in the New Jerusalem.

Now that doesn't mean we have to go to the opposite extreme and take everything literally here. Surely there is a path between the extreme, on the one hand, of taking everything literally, and, on the other, of seeing everything as a metaphor for a purely spiritual reality. I think a more balanced position, and the right one, is to see this as pointing us, even if in symbols, to a very real place.

Of course the question is: why the use of symbols? If this is a real place, why use symbols to describe it? I think the reason is that we cannot in our current state fathom the glory of the age to come, of the glory of the new heaven and new earth. Yes, there will be continuity between our present existence and our experience in the new world, but the differences will be so great that we are not yet able to put words to it. I mean, think about what the apostle Paul said when he had his vision of heaven, how he "heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2 Cor. 12:4, ESV). If this is heaven coming to earth then it would be impossible to speak about that which in our current sinfulness and limitations is unspeakable. In other words, given what the Bible elsewhere says about our current condition in a fallen world with fallen bodies and fallen minds, we should expect that any description

of heaven would be in symbols. It would have been impossible to do otherwise. And yet . . . that emphatically does not mean that behind these symbols is not a real place or that these symbols don't give us real information about our place in the age to come.

Now I do think many of the descriptors here are symbolic. The multiples of 12, for example, in the dimensions of the city are probably symbolic. The references to gold like transparent glass or to pearls big enough for a city gate seem to be clear examples of symbolic language. But again, the point of the symbols here is to try to say something about the very real glory and the beauty of this city. To this we now turn.

What the New Jerusalem and the New Eden picture for us.

When then do these symbols tell us? There are a number of things the portrayal of the New Jerusalem and New Eden tell us about the age to come. First of all, we see the origin of the city of God. John writes, "And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:10). Some people say, "I don't want to spend eternity on the earth, even if it is new. I want to be in heaven!" I understand. I want to be in heaven too. But the point of this verse is that in the age to come, heaven comes to earth. If you want to be in heaven, you will want to be where heaven is, and heaven has come to earth.

I don't think this means heaven gets degraded when it comes to earth. Heaven was not five stars before it came to earth and now it's three stars. This is the point of the first earth passing away. This earth is new, renewed, so that there is no longer any curse, or anything defiling. Do you know what Eden was before the fall of man into sin? It was paradise. Where did our Lord promise to take the thief on the cross? To paradise. The point is that paradise was once on earth; now it is in heaven. When our Lord returns, paradise returns to earth. Heaven has come to the earth.

Second, we see the beauty and glory of this city. We read that this city came down, “Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal” (11). Throughout this passage the emphasis is on the radiance of the New Jerusalem, on the brilliance and beauty of the city. One of the ways this is portrayed is by the many different kinds of precious stones that bejewel the New Jerusalem. This is a city of light. We are told that the wall of the city was bedecked with jasper (18) and the city and even its streets were of pure gold, the purest gold (18, 21). The foundations of the city were either completely made of or at least bejeweled with twelve precious stones: “the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst” (19-20). It’s hard to know exactly what these stones were, because of the lack of precision in ancient descriptions using the words for these jewels. But they clearly show the beauty and the value of this city. Also, scholars often comment that this probably reflects the breastplate that the high priest wore, which also had twelve precious stones in them, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, as he went into the presence of God. The overall picture is of breathtaking beauty and brilliance. As Robert Mounce put it, “The city is magnificent beyond description.”¹

I think that is just the point. This is unimaginable beauty. There is no such thing now as gold so pure that it is transparent. There are no pearls here so big they can function as gates for a city (21). The point is that this world, as beautiful as it might be, can’t compare to the beauty of the world to come. As wonderful as some of our cities might be, architecturally speaking, they won’t be able to hold a candle to the city of God.

¹Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, revised (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998), p. 395.

Sometimes you get the impression that Christians shouldn't care about appearance, beauty, or even be able to enjoy such things. You get the impression that holiness requires a kind of austerity that can't enjoy beautiful things. But surely the picture of the new world shows the folly of that kind of thinking. Beauty exists because God exists. All the ugliness of this world is not due to God but to the corruption of sin. We can and should care about beauty and order in this world and our hope for the new world should reinforce that. However, our hope also warns us against wanting too much out of this world. As beautiful as this world can be, it cannot compare to the beauty and glory of the age to come.

Third, we see the security of this city. In ancient times, walls were necessary for protection. You see this expressed in Proverbs 25:28, which reads, "He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls." But this city, the city of God, is totally secure, represented by the walls which surround it, which were "great and high" (Rev. 21:12) with an angel stationed on guard at every gate. In verse 17, we are told that "he [the angel] measured the wall thereof, an hundred and forty and four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of the angel." Scholars aren't sure whether this represents the height or the width of the city walls, but either way the point is that these walls are impregnable (144 cubits is over 200 feet).

Of course, this is symbolic, clearly, since there won't be any enemies left! We are told in verse 27, "And there shall in no wise enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life." The point is that in the age to come God's people will have no cause for anxiety of any kind. We live with threats from various sources, but in the age to come there will be no more threats. And that's one of the things that these walls are meant to teach us. In fact, though this city has walls, such is the security that the gates are never closed by day or night (25). We also see the blessedness of the city. The blessedness, or happiness, of the inhabitants of the city lies in the reality that it is the

temple of the living God. No longer, like ancient Jerusalem, in a symbolic sense, but in a very real sense. John writes: “And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it” (22-26).

The wonder of this city is that God himself will dwell there. If you ask what heaven is, I would say that heaven is the place where God manifests his presence most fully to bless.² Paul said that he would rather depart this life and be with Christ (Phil. 1:23). Heaven is not primarily to be anticipated for its golden streets or pearly gates, all of which may just be symbolic anyway. It is to be anticipated because that is where our Savior is. And this is where we will forever bask in the light of his presence. This is where we will understand what joy really is. This is where we will really learn what it means to be satisfied. It will be here that the reality of the psalmist’s hope will be fully realized: “One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4).

I want you to notice, by the way, the close association of the Lamb with God. The temple is the place of God’s presence, and we are told in verse 22 that both the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple. The Lord Jesus is not just in the temple; he is what makes the city the temple of God. Also, we are told that the glory and light of the city comes jointly from God and the Lamb (23). In 22:1, we see that the throne of God is the throne of God and of the Lamb. Since God does not share his glory with another, we must conclude that the Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is God himself. For this is just impossible

²This is the definition Wayne Grudem uses in his systematic theology.

language if Jesus Christ is not God, if he does not fully share in the nature of God with the Father.

I think though that the blessedness of the new world, the New Jerusalem and the New Eden is most remarkably portrayed for us in Rev. 22:1-5. Eden was paradise. Man's sin drove paradise from the earth into heaven. Now heaven has come to the new earth, and it becomes paradise again. For in the New Jerusalem which has become a new Eden, we see "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1). This harkens back to the language of Ezekiel in chapter 47, where waters issue from the temple that becomes a river. This is water that brings life, for it is on either side of the river that the Tree of Life grows for the healing of the nations (2). What became barred for man is now open to him.

Above all, we are told that "there shall be no more curse" (3). Everything that is bad and disappointing and discouraging and hard about this world is due to the curse from sin. But in the world to come there will be no more curse. No more hard labor. No more sin. No more pain and crying. Rather, there will be undiluted and unending blessing in the presence of God: "but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him" (3).

The summit of blessing is there in verse 4: "And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads." To see God's face is what is often called the Beatific Vision. No one has ever seen God in this way here in this sin-cursed earth. Even Moses, of whom it was said, "there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10), even he was not allowed to see God's face. When he asked to see God's glory, the response was, "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live" (33:20). Indeed, the apostle John writes, "No man hath seen God at any time" (Jn. 1:18).

But in the world to come, we will see God's face. Of course this is metaphorical language in some sense since God is everywhere present and nowhere absent. But it signifies the immediacy and nearness to the presence of God to bless. There is nothing better than this. There

is nothing that could possibly come close to the sense of fulness and satisfaction and joy and happiness that will result from this vision.

The amazing thing is that as we see God, “his name shall be in their foreheads.” In other words, as we behold God, creatures though we are, and sinful though we were, in need of grace and mercy, God will own us. This is not a sight that destroys for the enjoyment of God here is that which he welcomes and encourages.

Finally, the blessings that characterize the New Eden characterize the New Jerusalem because they are one and the same place: “And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever” (5).

What is this about the nations bringing their glory and riches into the city of God at the end of chapter 21? This again is OT language, especially from Isaiah 60:

And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. (Isa. 60:3-7)

This points us to the fact that the New Jerusalem is not just the dwelling place of physical Israel, but that the Gentiles have been in Christ grafted

into the one people of God. In other words, this is language that is celebrating the fact that it is not the keeping of the law that makes one a member of God's family; it is faith alone in Christ alone, for we become the children of Abraham on the basis of faith, not works.

Finally, the symbolism of the city says something about the unity of the people of God in the city of God. I mean unity here in terms of OT and NT. Notice that the gates of the city are inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (12), and the foundations of the city are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles (14). The salvation that the gospel promises us is the same salvation that was promised in the OT. In other words, what we are seeing here in these verses is the fulfillment of all God's promises, going back to the Garden of Eden, through the covenants that God made with Abraham, David, and the prophets. It is the same salvation preached in the gospel. It again reminds us that God keeps his word. Bank on that.

What the New Jerusalem and the New Eden propose to us.

There is a point to all this, isn't there? We've already said it, but I think it bears saying again. The point is that the hope that the gospel points us to is infinitely better than anything the world is offering you. I think that is the point of the introduction of this section in verse 9. Notice what John says: "And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife." That is almost identical language to the way the harlot Babylon was introduced: "And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters" (17:1). One is a whore that serves the beast, the other is a bride married to the Lamb. In other words, there is a deliberate contrast being made here between Babylon and the New Jerusalem. John wants

to you to put them side by side in your mind. He wants you to think about the contrast between the two.

As we pointed out in our consideration of chapter 18, Babylon the seat of the antichrist will be a force to be contended with. Babylon is foreshadowed in the world of man today, with all his power and pomp and pleasure. Babylon was foreshadowed in John's day in ancient Rome and in our day in the nation-states of the world. The world today wants you to drown God out in the busyness of business. It wants to make God seem irrelevant by giving you everything you need for physical sustenance. It wants to entice you with its offers of pleasure and prestige. It wants to make righteousness look strange and sin look normal.

But Babylon will have an end. And all its glories will go up in smoke. That is the point of chapter 18. Babylon is a future zoo for demons. Is that what you want to give your life up to? On the other hand, as glorious as Babylon is, it is nothing compared to the city of God. Here is what the world offers you: temporary, sinful pleasures that will burn up in hell. Here is what God gives his people: to belong to him, his people, and to give us a place forever in a new heaven and new earth which will be infinitely more beautiful, more blessed than anything this world in rebellion against God can give you. How in the world does it make sense to trash the gospel for the garbage of the world?

My friends, the reason why we can know that this is attainable is because Jesus bought it for us. He did it 2000 years ago on the cross. He paid the debt, he fully satisfied God's justice on behalf of sinners when he took their place and suffered in their stead. And he proved that he had really done this when he rose from the dead. Who attains the world to come? "And there shall in no wise enter into it anything . . . but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life" (27). Those who are written in the Lamb's book of life are those for whom the Lamb suffered in their place as a sacrifice to God for them. How do you know that you are in that book? Do you trust in him, that is the question. Do you trust in him as Lord and Savior? Do you thirst for the water of life that he gives? Take it, for it is free. Receive it from his hand. "I am the

way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh to the Father, except by me”
(Jn. 14:6). Come to the Father today through Jesus Christ his Son!

CHAPTER XXXV

SEVEN REASONS YOU SHOULD KEEP COMING BACK TO THE BOOK OF REVELATION (REV. 22:6-21)

THE BOOK OF REVELATION is about the coming of Christ. Of course, it is more than that, but it is ultimately about that. All the book strains towards this end. All the stuff about the conflict between the people of God and the enemies of God are set in the context of the coming of Jesus who will return to set all things right and finally destroy all his and our enemies. The promises to the churches in chapters 2-3 are predicated upon his return and the full establishment of his kingdom. The scroll that Jesus receives from the Father in chapter 5 as the Lion-Lamb is the scroll that contains God's purposes for the end of history, an end that culminates in the return of Christ. You see this in the cycles of judgment in chapters 6-16 – the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls of wrath. They all end either right before or in the Second Coming of

our Lord. The persecution that you see waged by the dragon, the beasts, and Babylon against the people of God in chapters 17-19 is overturned in the Second Coming. And then in chapters 20-22 we see the fruit of the Second Coming: the Millennium, the final battle and Final Judgment, and the eternal state in a new heaven and new earth.

Revelation begins with a prologue in 1:1-8 and it ends in an epilogue in 22:6-21. This epilogue reminds us that this book is again about the Coming of our Lord and how all of life is to be lived in light of this reality. Reminders of the coming of Jesus punctuate this passage, often unexpectedly. So, for example, in verse 7, our Lord interjects: "Behold, I come quickly." Then again in verse 12: "And, behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be." And the book ends with a promise of his coming and a prayer for his coming: "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (20).

As John brings the book of Revelation to a close, he reminds us not only about the main theme (the coming of our Lord) but also why we should listen to a book about the coming of Christ. In the final verses of this book, he gives us at least seven reasons why the church in every age should hear the book of Revelation, listen to it, believe it, obey it, be inspired by it, receive encouragement and hope in its pages.

You might think this is something you would do at the beginning of a book. But here John does this at the end! Why? I think he does so because, unlike many other kinds of books, this is not one that is meant to be read once and then laid aside. I think he means for the church in every age and in every place to keep picking this book up to read it. Well, we are at an end of our exposition. But I hope you don't think to yourself, "Well, I've heard these series on Revelation; now it's time to move on!" I hope you don't do that. Rather, my hope is that this series of messages has helped you to understand the book, even if only a little better, and to encourage you to keep interacting with it. I hope that this will inspire you to read it and meditate on it and be built up in your faith by it. I hope it isn't as mysterious as it once was or as opaque as it

might have seemed. Of course I know that I haven't made everything clear. I haven't removed all difficulties. But I hope what we have done in this series of expositions is to clear a path for you to engage this book more frequently and more deeply and more meaningfully.

Revelation is meant to be read and believed. Seven blessings are uttered throughout this book to remind us that this is not just about the duty of the Christian but about blessedness of the Christian. Revelation is meant to promote our holiness before God and our happiness in Jesus Christ. John begins, "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand" (1:3). And he ends in much the same way: "Blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (22:7). We are to read it and keep it, to understand it and obey its message to us.

So as we end this series of messages on Revelation, let's end as John does: with an invitation to keep coming back. Let's consider the seven reasons he gives us to love this book and take it seriously.

Reason 1: Because this is a God-given book (6-7).

"And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book" (6-7). It's not clear whether it is an angel speaking here or whether it is our Lord himself, But it really doesn't matter because the angels simply communicate the message of our Lord. The Lord gives it to his angel who gives it to John who gives it to the church. So whether directly or indirectly, our Lord is speaking here. What does he say? Well, I think you could summarize these two verses in this way: To hear this book is to hear God in Christ.

"These sayings," that is, the book of Revelation, "are faithful and true." They are not mixtures of truth and error. They are not merely

human attempts to tell us something about the transcendent. They are faithful and true because they are the words of God. We are reminded that this book is a prophecy and as such it shares the same characteristic as the rest of Scripture: “We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:19-21).

Why should you keep picking this book up and reading it? You should do so because the words of this book are the words of God. To hear the book of Revelation is to hear the voice of God. It is the word of God whether you perceive it as such or not. But what a blessing it is when we do in fact receive it this way! Do you want to hear Jesus speak to you? Well, open Revelation and read! The “servants” to whom this prophecy is directed includes every believer in every age (Rev. 22:6). Our Lord didn’t just deposit this word for a few NT scholars. He gave it for you. In it you hear his word to you. You hear him encouraging you to press on for the prize. You hear him warning you of giving in to the devil, the beast, and Babylon. “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (3:20). What a precious promise! Brother and sister, hear this book because to hear it is to hear the voice of God in Christ.

Reason 2: Because this is a God-centered book (8-9).

We see the next reason in the next two verses: “And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings

of this book: worship God” (8-9). John was so overcome with the glory of what he had seen that he fell down and worshiped the messenger who showed him these things. The amazing thing is that this had happened before (19:10). But John falls down again and worships the angel who then promptly (again) rebukes him, telling him that he is just another fellow servant, and that he should worship only God.

Now we know that in John’s day the worship of angels was prevalent, so much so that Paul had to warn the Colossians against it (Col. 2:18). But this angel does what a faithful servant of Christ ought to do: he points away from himself to the worship of God. This little snapshot, this event, points us to one of the chief purposes of the book: it is to promote the worship of God alone. It is to cause us, not to admire John or angels, but to admire God in Christ. This book is valuable because it glorifies the Triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit. We should hear the book of Revelation because to hear this book is to know God in Christ.

I want us to note again the implication here for the divinity of Christ. You cannot worship God if you do not worship Christ. We say that Christ is God. Some people say that the Bible doesn’t say that. That of course is false because it does directly do exactly that in a few places (like Jn. 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:1). However, the reason why the NT doesn’t often call Christ God in a direct way is that it primarily retains this title for the Father. We have to remember that the NT authors didn’t have the precision of later Trinitarian language. So how could you teach that the Father is God and the Son is God without confusing the persons of the Father and the Son? The way the NT does this is to primarily call the Father God and to call the Son Lord. Paul does this, for example, in 1 Cor. 8:6 when he says, “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.” Lord is not a title for someone below God; to be Lord in the sense Paul is speaking of here is to share the very nature of God with the Father.

But you also see the divinity of Christ emphasized in other ways. You see it here throughout this book in that Christ is worshiped over and

over and over again. But as the angel reminds John, worship is only for God, not even for angels, however exalted. What do we learn from this? It at least means that Christ is not an angel. It means that he is God with the Father and the Spirit. The Book of Revelation is a very Trinitarian book.

You also see the divinity of our Lord in that statement in verse 13, where the one who is coming quickly (ver. 12) – clearly Jesus – also then declares himself to be Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last (ver. 13). But this is language that God the Father uses for himself in chapter 1! To worship God we must worship Christ, not as a lesser sort of deity but as coequal and coeternal with the Father and the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, I want you to come again and again to this book, for it is a God-centered book that leads us to worship him. We need that, especially in our day when man is worshiped, and the creature has displaced the Creator in our culture. We need to see man knocked off his pedestal and to see God on his throne. We need to see that God is God and we are not. Revelation is amazingly helpful in creating worshipful hearts and lives.

Reason 3: Because this is a priority-shaping book (10-12).

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the text and of this message. Here is what John sees and hears next: “And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be” (10-12).

At the end of the book of Daniel, the prophet was told to do the very opposite of what John is told to do here: “And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end” (Dan. 12:9). However, the sayings in Revelation are not sealed, and the

reason we are told they are not sealed is because “the time is at hand.” What does that mean?

Well, the implication is that the time of the end is in fact at hand. But what do you do with the fact that 2000 years has passed since John wrote this book? Does it mean that John got it wrong? Does this mean that this is not, in fact, a book from God?

Some folks try to avoid such an implication by arguing that the “end times” pretty much ended around A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem and that all this talk in the Bible about the coming of Jesus was just about his coming to judge the Jews for their rejection of the Messiah. Though this does relieve the tension that comes from arguing the end has not come yet, there are massive problems with this view. For one thing, it’s almost certain that John wrote this at the end of the first century, around 20 years after the destruction of Jerusalem, so he’s not predicting something that has already happened. But even if you don’t buy that, to say that the coming of Christ is just his coming (invisibly) to judge Jerusalem is to deny the visible, bodily, glorious appearing of our Lord which is everywhere predicted in the New Testament, not just to judge his enemies but to bring about the fruit of his redemption for his people.

I think there are two reasons why John says the time is at hand, and it’s not because the destruction of Jerusalem is right around the corner. First of all, the “end times” were inaugurated by the first coming of Jesus (which was visible and bodily, leaving in a visible and bodily way, which is how he is coming again, Acts 1:11). This means that in terms of God’s redemptive schedule, the next big event is the Second Coming. We are in the last times because there is nothing that needs to happen on God’s part for the Second Coming to happen. The next thing to happen in God’s redemptive schedule is in fact the last thing.

It is also appropriate to call the entire period between the first and second comings of our Lord the last times because, as John Piper argues in his helpful book on the Second Coming, once the events of the end

begin to take place, it will not take long for everything to happen.¹ It will not take long for the Antichrist to arise and do his terrible things, and for the final tribulation to take place before Jesus comes. In other words, we are always, in a sense, within a generation of the return of our Lord. We are therefore to live always with a sense that the end is at hand – a sense, by the way, that is impossible if Jesus came in A.D. 70. In other words, if the preterists are right, all this talk about being ready and watchful and so on because the Lord is coming back doesn't apply to the church anymore and hasn't for almost 2000 years. Frankly, I find that incredibly hard to believe.

Another thing to consider is that, since this is God's book, the timing is God's timing, and a thousand years are with the Lord as a day and a day as a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). Even for us, relative to eternity, it is a short time to the end when our Lord returns.

But the point is that we are to be always ready to meet the Lord. And that is one of the great functions of Revelation: to hear this book is to be prepared to meet God in Christ. You cannot read a book like this and not think of your life in light of our Lord's return and the final judgment and the eternal state. And that is good and healthy for us. This is reality. Our culture presses in on us to forget and to think entirely in terms of present passing things, to load our hearts with the cares of this world. But then the message of Revelation comes and reminds us that the things that seem so important now will seem utterly trivial in light of eternity. In other words, this is a priority-shaping book. We need to live in light of the coming of our Lord. As Jonathan Edwards prayed, so we need to pray: "Lord, stamp eternity on my eyeballs!" This book is an urgent book; urgent not in the sense of making temporal things urgent, but urgent in the sense of making eternal things so, and that is so needed for us.

What does John mean, though, when he says, "He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and

¹John Piper, *Come, Lord Jesus: Meditations on the Second Coming of Christ* (Crossway: Wheaton, 2023).

he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still” (11)? Does he mean that it doesn’t matter whether a person repents or not? No, of course not. God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 16:30). I think the point is that when the end does come it will come with such breathtaking rapidity that there will not be time to fix your life. When the events that immediately precede the Second Coming truly begin to happen, there’s not going to be time to turn your life around. Those who are unholy when the dominos begin to fall will be unholy when the last one falls and those who are holy will be holy when the last one falls. This is just another way of saying that the end, when it comes, will come very quickly. Not in the sense that it was going to happen a few years from when John wrote this, but in the sense that the events of the end will not take long to play out. We need to be ready; we need to live ready.

Reason 4: Because this is a cautionary book (13-15).

“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie” (13-15). Throughout history, some folks who claim to believe in the teachings of Scripture want to also argue that in the end everyone will be saved. But this is not what the Scriptures teach. The Bible doesn’t just contain promises of blessing. It also contains warnings of judgment. God will not only be glorified by the salvation of his people; he will also be glorified in the just destruction of his enemies. We need to hear this book because to hear this book is to be warned of the terrible dangers of sin and apostasy away from God in Christ.

And these warnings are given to us so that we will see that it just isn’t worth it to abandon the path of costly obedience for a few years of pleasing the flesh. Now the path of obedience is hard. Let’s be honest

about that. Jesus never promised us that we will be tip-toeing through the tulips all the way to heaven. But they are blessed who keep his commandments, whatever the earthly cost, because those who obey Christ have a right to the tree of life, and enter through the gates of the New Jerusalem (14). I will tell you, it won't matter what the journey looked like that brought you to the eternal gates. When you pass through them, you will say, "It was worth it all!"

On the other hand, it won't matter how much you were able to feed and please your flesh on earth if your end is the one described in verse 15. There are some who argue that one of the things that makes hell to be hell is the company there. There is no common grace in hell. There is no restraining mercy in hell. Just "dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie." William Jay's words are fitting here: "The covetous and the cruel, the hypocrite and the profligate, the scoffer and the formalist, the swearer and the slanderer, are all in various directions going the downward road, and will meet in the same place of torment. There is something inexpressibly dreadful in the thought of mixing with such society. And when we consider the number of the damned, their malignity, their mutual accusations, their hatred of each other, their freedom from all the restraints which check the bad and vile while here, their power to curse and tear each other, under the empire too of the devil and his angels — who would not cry, 'Gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with bloody men.'"²

My friends, we need to keep coming back to hear this. As the puritan Thomas Brooks put it, the devil loves to present the bait and hide the hook. But Revelation shows us the hook. We ought to thank God for that.

Reason 5 Because this is an inviting book (16-17).

²William Jay, Evening Exercises. This is from his March 7 evening devotional.

But the Bible not only warns, but it also warmly invites us to fellowship with God in Christ. We need to hear this book because to hear this book is to be drawn to God in Christ. We need that. Here is what we read next: “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star. And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (16-17).

There are some Christians who have imbibed the notion that to have a warm assurance of their salvation is somehow presumptuous and sinful. They have been brought to believe that part of godliness is to be in doubt all the time when it comes to the assurance of God’s love for them. But here’s the answer to that; it’s right here in these verses. Christ revealed these things to the churches. He wants us to know about the future glorious state because he has told us about them. Why? So we would view them like a starving person looking on others sitting at a table enjoying a sumptuous feast? Has he put food in front of us only to tie our hands so we can’t partake? No! He has revealed these to us so that we would taste and see that the Lord is good. He has revealed them to us so that we would believe his promise and enjoy the assurance of his love to us which these promises assert. Surely we cannot believe that God has laid up these things for us and yet believe he does not truly love us. Surely we cannot believe that God has revealed the future glory and then think that he won’t get us there. No, let us with Paul say, “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:12).

We know that he will do this for us for he is “the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star.” He is the one promised as far back through the prophesy of Balaam and then in the covenant with David. He came, he lived for us and died for us and rose from the dead for us, and we can be sure that he will come again.

What if you are not a Christian? What if you are outside and you want in? What if you are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for

peace with God? Well listen to verse 17: “And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” What are the Spirit and the bride (the church) saying? They are saying to you, “Come to Christ.” The one who hears the gospel is supposed to tell others: “Come! Come and take that water of life freely!” So I just want to do that right now. Is the Lord dealing with you? Have you come to see yourself as a sinner and worthy of God’s judgment aren’t sure he will receive you? Well, the answer is here, isn’t it? These are not my words; they are God’s words, and his word to you is to come and take the water of life freely. “Freely” means you don’t buy it, you don’t earn it, you don’t become worthy of it. Christ was worthy for us. We are not accepted because we are acceptable; we are accepted in Christ alone by faith alone on the basis of grace alone. Come to him and find life!

Reason 6: Because this is a sufficient book (18-19).

John goes on to give us yet another reason to give our attention to this book. We should do so because it is a sufficient book. Here’s what he says next: “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (18-19). Here is how we can summarize the content of these two verses: to hear this book is to hear exactly what you need to hear about the coming of God in Christ.

Now before I go on, I need to correct a misapplication of these verses that is often made by King James Only advocates. (I used to be one, so I know about these arguments.) They will take these verses and use them to argue that any translation that omits a word or phrase or verse that is in the King James version is violating the principle of this passage (and

in danger of the warning here). But that is not true. The reason why another English version might differ from the KJV has nothing to do with what John is talking about here. The fact of the matter is that every translator or translation team has to do textual criticism; that is, they have to decide when there are variants among the Greek or Hebrew manuscripts which reading is correct. And some people just come to different decisions about which reading is correct. No one is trying to omit or add to God's word here; in every case they have just come to a different decision as to which reading is authentic. Even the KJV translators had to do this. Desiderius Erasmus, the Roman Catholic scholar who gave us the Textus Receptus on which the NT of the KJV is based, had to do textual criticism (some of it quite sloppy, by the way). This text is not about textual criticism which is just a fact of life when you are dealing with the manuscripts behind the Bible and the NT in particular.

Rather, this is about a much more serious thing. It is a warning against those who refuse to obey the words of Scripture, whether Revelation or Genesis or whatever. When we reject God's word for our own path, we are doing one of two things. We are either adding to God's word or we are taking away from God's word. Sin comes from a heart that does not want to accept what God has written and so it adds to it – like the Pharisees in Jesus' day who put burdens on people that were hard to bear, legalism. Or sin comes from a heart that doesn't like what God's word says and so it deletes it: like a person who says, "I don't like what the Bible says about adultery and so I'm just going to delete that from my moral consciousness; I'm just going to ignore it." That is a very serious thing.

It is living in rebellion against the sufficiency and authority of God's word. It is a life that rejects the attitude that Paul taught Timothy to cultivate: "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ

Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

This is serious because those who reject God’s word by adding to it or taking from it will find that “God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” Oh, my friends, that is incomparably serious. My friends, we need to read this book because it reminds us that God’s word is true and sufficient for our faith and obedience and that it is a serious thing when we tamper with it out of unbelief and disobedience.

Reason 7: Because this is a prayer-creating book (20-21).

Finally, we should read this book because it is such an inspiration to prayer, and because it helps us to pray for the right things. You can’t read this book and take it seriously and spend your days drooling over a Bentley. You can’t read this book and take it seriously and hunger and thirst after human fame and popularity. Rather, to hear this book is to create a heart of prayer to God in Christ.

So here are the final verses, not only in Revelation, but also in the Bible: “He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen” (20-21).

On what do you base your prayers? What ought to encourage us to pray? Should not God’s promises be that encouragement? And do not we see that here? “He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen.” There is God’s promise. “Even so, come, Lord Jesus.” There is the godly man’s plea.

This prayer is important because embedded in this prayer is every other prayer. To want the Lord Jesus to come is to want his kingdom to come in his fulness. But you can’t pray that and not want his kingdom even now to take more root in your own heart through growth in god-

liness and in the hearts of others through conversion and sanctification. To want the Lord to come is to want him to be glorified by all, but you can't want that and not desire for his glory to be published even now. To want the Lord to come is to desire his fellowship but you can't want that and not seek it even now. To want the Lord to come is to want the vindication and full blessing of the church, but you can't want that and not want to see the church prosper even now.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this prayer is that it expresses – when we pray it sincerely – our love for Christ. We want him to come because we love him. We love him because he is worthy of our love and affection and devotion. We love him because he is our Savior and Lord, our Shepherd and our King.

Brothers and sisters, this is the kind of heart that we need. We need to be people who are animated by this burning desire to see our Lord return. He has promised it. Let us long for it.

The final words are another prayer: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.” I am so thankful that this is the way the Bible ends. How does it end? It ends with a prayer for the presence of Christ. What we need he gives. More than anything else, we need the grace of our Lord. He will give it and he will be with us.

This is why we need to read this book. Because it is an God-given book, and it gives us God's truth. Because it is a God-centered book, and it gives us what we most need, which is a proper view of God. Because it is a priority-shaping book and gives us a God-centered perspective, showing that what is most urgent are not the claims of this world but of the next. Because it is a cautionary book and gives us needed warnings, warnings that we might be tempted to ignore without it. Because it is an inviting book, bringing us into fellowship with the Lord, which is where our ultimate joy is to be found. Because it is a sufficient book that tells us what we need to know for faith and obedience so that we can live a life that pleases God. Because it is a prayer-creating book that actually brings us into the presence of God. We need all these things.

Jeremiah Bass

We need to hear its truth and promises and warnings and invitations.
So, brothers and sisters, let's keep coming back to this book.