

The Book of

# Revelation

## *The Seen and the Unseen*

Sermons by

**Bernard Bell**

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Revelation 1:1-8

First Message

Bernard Bell

July 15th, 2001

# POWER ON EARTH TO STAND IN THE FACE OF HELL

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Four weeks ago, I was on the island of Patmos on the Lord's Day. Patmos is a small, rocky island in the Greek Aegean, not far from the coast of Turkey. When I contacted one travel agent in Greece about my plans to visit Patmos, he asked me, "Why do you go to Patmos? Do you have family there? ... Are you sure that you want to see Patmos???"

Nineteen hundred years ago there was another man on Patmos, of whom scholars have ever since asked, "Why did he go to Patmos?" Four times, a man named John is identified as the author of the Book of Revelation (1:1,4,9; 22:8). From the beginning the tradition of the early church has identified this John with the city of Ephesus, and dated the Book of Revelation to the closing years of the reign of Domitian (ca. AD 95). With a population of 250,000, Ephesus was the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire. It was the capital of the province of Asia, one of the most prosperous provinces in the empire. Ephesus was a major port, and the starting point of the road that led through Asia to the eastern reaches of the empire. Ephesus was famous as the home of one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. But this was far from being the only temple in the city. Ephesus was awarded the coveted title *neokoros*, keeper of the temple. It was a city that was full of temples, but the title *neokoros* was given to those cities awarded the honor of building a temple for the official worship of the Roman Empire. These temples came in two types: temples built for the worship of Roma, the goddess of Rome; and temples built for the worship of the Roman emperor. Cities competed vigorously for the honor of building these temples.

Around AD 90, a new temple was built in Ephesus, a temple to the emperor Domitian, who reigned AD 81-96. The Caesars had been flirting with divinity since the first Caesar, Julius, had encountered the concept of divine kings when he was in Egypt. The wiser emperors were reluctant to claim divinity for themselves. But Domitian was eager to promote himself as a god, and took the title "Lord and God" (*dominus et deus*). The citizens of Ephesus were expected to go to the temple of Domitian and there offer a pinch of incense on the altar, acclaiming Domitian as Lord and God. For most citizens this was no problem. They worshiped a multiplicity of gods, and it required no mental gymnastics to stretch their pantheon to include Domitian. Indeed, the city had clamored for the honor of building this temple, vying with the two other great cities of the province, Smyrna and Pergamon. For the Christian, though, these titles that Domitian arrogated to himself were blasphemous. They were titles that belonged to God alone.

John says that he was on the island "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). This is a phrase that occurs several other times in the book. The most likely explanation is that John continued to bear witness to Jesus, and that witness was that it was Christ, not Domitian, who was Lord, or to put it in Greek, *Christos Kurios*, not *Caesar Kurios*. Fifty years later, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna,

would be killed for just this issue. After his arrest on the charge of atheism, Polycarp was urged to change his mind: "What harm is there in saying Lord Caesar?" Polycarp remained firm to the end; his final words as he faced the crowd in the stadium were, "Eighty-six years have I served Him, and He never did me injury: how then can I blaspheme my king and my Savior?"

John's insistence that Christ not Caesar was Lord was troubling to the authorities, all the more so since he was a leader in the church in Ephesus. John did not share the fate of Polycarp. Instead he was exiled. Patmos is only 40 miles from Ephesus, but it might as well be 1000. Though he is isolated from the church in Ephesus and other churches throughout Asia, John has a passionate concern for the churches back home. How is he to encourage them not to compromise? He receives a revelation, the message of which he sends as the word of God, in the form of a letter to seven churches in the province of Asia.

## A. What is the Book of Revelation?

### 1. A Revelation (1:1-2)

**The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. (1:1-2 NIV)**

Though we frequently call this book The Revelation of John, the book itself identifies it as The Revelation of Jesus Christ. But note that this revelation begins with God. Indeed everything in this book begins with God. This is one of the central messages of the book: all things begin with God. God is rarely described as God. The usual term for him is "the one seated upon the throne." John says more about the nature of God by calling him "the one seated upon the throne" than if he called him simply "God." God gives this revelation to Jesus Christ so that he in turn might show it to his servants. He does so through the intermediary of an angel, whom we encounter several times in the book. John in turn testifies or witnesses to everything that he saw. And he sums this all up as being "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

The revelation is an apocalypse, from the Greek word for revelation. An apocalypse is an uncovering or revealing of things that are otherwise hidden. This revelation concerns what must soon take place. Most people assume therefore that the revelation is of a detailed timetable concerning future events, the events at the end of time. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there is no such detailed timetable in the book. The revelation does indeed concern the events that will soon take place, but we won't understand those events unless we first understand the present. A characteristic of apocalyptic is that the revelation concerns not just what will happen in the unseen future, but what is happening right now in unseen realms.

There are two of these unseen realms that John is shown: heaven and hell. Caught in the middle is the visible realm of earth. Throughout the book, John sees people and things ascending and descending between heaven and earth, and between earth and hell (or the Abyss, as he usually calls it). John sees that nothing on earth is independent. All that happens on earth is dependent either on heaven or on hell. Furthermore, much that happens on earth is a counterfeit of what happens in heaven.

The book is punctuated with visions into heaven. The central feature of heaven is a throne and the one seated upon the throne. Gathered around the throne are worshipers. This is reproduced on earth: there is a throne, one seated upon the throne, and worshipers: “The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority... Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?’” (Rev 13:2,4). There is a false prophet who deceives the people to worship the beast (Rev 13:14). The beast is the imperial might of Rome, headed by the emperor. Throughout the Roman empire, citizens gave their allegiance to him. But John sees that the beast’s throne is given him by the dragon, elsewhere identified as Satan. The beast is merely a puppet of Satan. Rome, both empire and emperor, is therefore Satanic. John sees that the vast majority of earth is a colony of hell. But there are some who refuse to bow the knee, some who march to the beat of a different drum. These are God’s people, who form a colony of heaven on earth. In the vision of Revelation there are only two colonies. The colony of hell on earth is peopled by “the citizens of the earth.” They live in Babylon, they worship the beast, and they bear the mark of the beast. The colony of heaven on earth is peopled by the faithful witnesses, who worship God, who bear the seal of the Lamb, and whose city is the New Jerusalem.

The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants concerns what must soon take place. What is it that must soon take place? The colony of hell will be revealed as the Great Deception that it is. From heaven God will rain down his judgments upon this colony until it falls. He will rain down his judgments upon the false prophet who deceives the world, upon the beast who occupies the counterfeit throne, and upon the dragon who is the Deceiver behind this Great Deception.

The colony of hell on earth far exceeds the colony of heaven on earth in size and in apparent power. How are the citizens of the colony of heaven to have power on earth to stand in the face of hell? All they need do is hold to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. All they need do is be faithful witnesses. The colony of hell might put them to death, and gain apparent victory over them, but the faithful witnesses will emerge as the victors, for they will enter the heavenly throne room.

Such is the revelation that John receives. But the book is more than just a revelation. It is also a prophecy.

## 2. A Prophecy (1:3)

**Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (1:3)**

A prophecy is not primarily a prediction of future events. It is first and foremost the word of God to people in the present. The revelation that is given to John is the word of God, but it is not intended for John alone. In written form he passes on this word of God to the churches back home. So important is this word from God that

he pronounces a blessing, the first of seven beatitudes in the book (the others are 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). Blessed are both the reader and the hearers. The reading in question is not silent reading in one’s home, but reading aloud to God’s assembled people. Imagine the Christians in Ephesus, gathered together on a Sunday. They are seemingly powerless. But one stands up in their midst and reads them what we know as the Book of Revelation. This is how Revelation was intended to be encountered.

## 3. A Letter (1:4a)

**John,**

**To the seven churches in the province of Asia: (1:4a)**

In addition to being an apocalypse and a prophecy, the book is also a letter, addressed to seven churches in the province of Asia: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11). There were more than seven churches in the province of Asia: the New Testament tells us of churches in Colossae (Col 1:2), Hierapolis (Col 4:13), and Troas (Acts 20:6-12). Like every other number in the book, seven is symbolic. Seven is the complete number of churches; it’s not an exhaustive completeness, but a symbolic completeness. We commonly think that the Book of Revelation contains the seven letters to the churches. But the whole book is a letter. Within the one letter are contained seven messages to seven churches. But each message is to be read by all seven churches. John knew these churches. He knew the struggles they were facing and he knew their successes and failures. The message to each church can be summarized as “Don’t compromise.”

## B. The Trinitarian Theology of Revelation

### 1. Benediction (1:4b-5a)

Following the standard order for a first-century letter, John continues with a greeting. As in the other New Testament letters this greeting takes the form of a benediction:

**Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4b-5a)**

The usual greeting for New Testament letters is “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” In this, the longest greeting of any New Testament letter, John departs from the pattern in two significant ways: he elaborates greatly on the names of God and of Jesus Christ, and he includes the Spirit in this benediction.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not formally worked out until the ecumenical church councils of the fourth century. The word “trinity” never occurs in the Bible. Nevertheless, the Book of Revelation is trinitarian throughout. We are prone to confuse the various members of the trinity. Nowhere is this more evident than in the songs we sing, where we freely substitute one person of the trinity for another. The Bible is careful to distinguish the roles of the godhead. John is careful to distinguish their roles even in this benediction, the only trinitarian greeting in the New Testament.

John first pronounces blessing, not simply from “God our Father,” but from “him who is, and who was, and who is to come.” The Book of Revelation is infused throughout with the language and imagery of the Old Testament. This three-fold reference to God the Father is no exception. The first two parts of the name, “The one who is, and

who was,” are a reference back to Yahweh, God’s personal name in the Old Testament.

When God encountered Moses at the burning bush, Moses asked God what his name was. God replied with the enigmatic statement, “I AM WHO I AM,” which he then shortened to “I AM.” Since Moses needed a name he could refer to in the third person, God re-stated it as “He is” (Exod 3:13-15). But that’s not what you read in your Bibles. Wherever you see the title “The LORD” in small capitals, the Hebrew text reads the four consonants YHWH. Most probably this was pronounced Yahweh, and is derived from the verb “He is.” This is the personal name of God, but Jews came to consider the name of God too holy to speak. They treated the name YHWH as the ineffable tetragrammaton, the unspeakable four-letter word! Instead of pronouncing Yahweh, Jews would say Adonai, meaning “my Lord” or simply “Lord.” This practice has been copied by many translators, including the translators of most English versions. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, God’s name “I AM” is rendered as “the one who is.” This is the name that John uses here.

But God is not simply the one who is. He is also the one who was. There was never a time when God was not. Though Rome called itself The Eternal City, there was a time when Rome was not. Though Domitian called himself “Lord and God,” there was a time when Domitian was not. There was a time when there was no emperor. But there was never a time when God was not.

We would expect John to continue by describing God as “the one who will be.” But instead, he calls God “him...who is to come.” This name also is rich in Old Testament language and imagery. At a time when Israel’s fortunes were low, God revealed to his people through the Old Testament prophets that he would come. It is of this “coming” that we sing in the recent popular song “He will come and save you.” The language is drawn from Isaiah 35:4,

say to those with fearful hearts,  
 “Be strong, do not fear;  
 your God will come,  
 he will come with vengeance;  
 with divine retribution  
 he will come to save you.” (Isa 35:4)

Notice that there are two aspects to God’s coming: judgment and salvation. Notice that they are interrelated. God will come in judgment upon his enemies, and this will be simultaneously his coming in salvation for his people. The day for this coming to take place is described variously as The Day of the LORD, That Day, The Day of the LORD’s wrath, or The Last or Latter Days. When is this day? The overthrow of Babylon by Cyrus in 539 BC, and the subsequent decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem certainly qualified as that day. So did Jesus’ death on the cross whereby God simultaneously judged the greater enemies—sin, death, and Satan—and brought salvation to his people. But neither the return of the captives from exile nor Christ’s death on the cross exhausted the language of the coming of God. We do not yet see evil completely vanquished. We do not yet see God’s salvation of his people complete. There awaits, therefore, a completion to the coming of the Lord. But come he most surely does and come he most surely will. Any divine intervention whereby God simultaneously wreaks judgment on his enemies and works salvation for his people qualifies as the coming of the Lord on the day of the Lord. But a day is coming when God will complete both the judgment of his enemies and the salvation of his people. This is a central message of the Book of Revelation. The Last Days

do not lie in the future. Rather, we have been in the last days for the past 2000 years, throughout which God has been coming in judgment and salvation. What does lie ahead, though, is the completion of the Last Days.

Once you discern the pattern of Revelation, it should be no surprise that there is a counterfeit: “The beast...once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction” (17:8). But in this case, the coming of the beast is to his own destruction.

The second person of the trinitarian greeting is the spirit, described by John as “the seven spirits before his throne.” The role of the Spirit is to execute the will of God. The Spirit, here pictured as sevenfold for completeness, waits before the throne, ready to be sent out into all the earth (5:6).

The third person of the trinitarian greeting is Jesus Christ, who is described with three titles, each of great significance to the themes of the book. Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Witness is a dominant theme of the book. John testifies concerning what he saw, namely the testimony of Jesus (1:2). John calls God’s people to be faithful witnesses. What does it mean to be a faithful witness? In the language of Revelation, it means to hold fast to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” The Word of God is revealed as Jesus himself (19:13), and the testimony of Jesus is to worship God (19:10) and not worship the beast (20:4). Such testimony is costly. It may lead to death. John is on Patmos because of his testimony (1:9). In the city of Pergamum, Antipas has been put to death for his faithful witness (Rev 2:13). The two witnesses are put to death by the beast (11:7). The dragon wages war against God’s people who hold to the testimony of Jesus (12:17). Those who do not worship the beast are beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus (20:4).

In killing the faithful witnesses it seems that the beast is victorious. But it is the slaughtered saints who emerge victorious. How do they conquer? They overcome “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (12:11). They don’t have to overcome through any of their own strength. All they have to do is to be covered by the blood of the Lamb, and hold on to the testimony of Jesus. Their inspiration is Jesus Christ, himself the faithful witness.

Just as in their faithful witness the saints are not alone, so in their death they are not alone. Jesus was killed for his faithful witness. But death could not hold him. God brought him forth from the grave, victorious over sin, death and Satan. Furthermore, he is the firstborn from the dead. Those faithful witnesses who follow him therefore have the hope of resurrection. The faithful witnesses are raised in the first resurrection. At the end of the book a beatitude is pronounced upon them: “Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them” (20:6).

Thirdly, Jesus Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth. The dragon has set the beast up as the apparent ruler. But he is a counterfeit ruler. The Book of Revelation opens our eyes that we might see that it is Jesus Christ who is King of kings and Lord of lords (19:16; 17:14). It is not *Caesar Kurios* but *Christos Kurios*, not Caesar is Lord, but Christ is Lord. And so we sing the Hallelujah Chorus:

**The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord  
 and of his Christ,  
 and he shall reign for ever and ever.  
 King of kings and Lord of lords  
 Hallelujah. (11:15; 19:16,6)**

## 2. Doxology (1:5b-6)

So enraptured is John with the thought of Christ that he moves straight from the benediction to a doxology addressed to Christ:

**To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (1:5b-6)**

Jesus Christ has freed us from our sins by his own shed blood. In chapter 5, John will see in heaven “a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne” (5:6). Through apparent weakness, akin to a lamb prepared for slaughter, Jesus has emerged the victor. His blood is the means whereby the slaughtered saints, the faithful witnesses, emerge victorious despite their apparent weakness (12:11).

Jesus has shed his blood not just that we might be free from sin, but that we might be the people of God. He has redeemed us from the colony of hell and transferred us into the colony of heaven, the colony of God’s people. Repeatedly throughout the book we are told that this colony is populated “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” This is what the church is: the worldwide family, drawn from every nation, to be God’s people, a colony of heaven on earth. No wonder then that John breaks into praise: to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

## 3. Old Testament Quotation (1:7)

With his mind still on Jesus Christ, John weaves together two Old Testament texts drawn from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10:

**Look, he is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.  
So shall it be! Amen. (1:7)**

In Daniel 7:13, “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven,” approaches the Ancient of Days in the heavenly throne room. God gives him authority, glory and power in an eternal kingdom, which contrasts with the human kingdoms described earlier in the book. Despite their claims to permanence all these earthly kingdoms fall to make way for the kingdom of God given to the son of man, who is none other than Jesus Christ. Rome may boast that it is The Eternal City, but it, too, must give way to the kingdom of God in Christ. So must every other kingdom on earth, for they are all manifestations of the kingdom of hell, not the kingdom of heaven.

## 4. The first and last word belongs to God (1:8)

**“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” (1:8)**

This book is full of God. It contains the revelation of Jesus Christ which originates in God. It is therefore fitting that the last word in this, the Prologue, should go to God.

The Lord God describes himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end. It is fitting that he should be described as such, for he is God. But as the book unfolds, an extraordinary thing happens. These titles are progressively ascribed to Christ also. In the first chapter, God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8), then Jesus says, “I am the first and the last” (1:17). At the end of the book, God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (21:6), then Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (22:13). Throughout the book, God is on the throne receiving the worship of the heavenly choir. Right beside him is the Lamb, also receiving the worship of the heavenly choir. They are distinct and have distinct roles, yet both sit upon the one throne. Both are worshiped with the worship that can properly be given to God alone. Indeed, twice in the book we read the forceful statement, “Worship God” (19:10; 22:9). There is no inconsistency between worshiping God and having the Lamb be within the circle of the worshiped. This is the highest Christology in the New Testament.

God’s last word is that he is the Almighty. The Greek word is *Pantokrator*, which means universality of rule, not universality of power. God is the ruler of all.

Atop a hill in the center of the island of Patmos sits the Monastery of St. John the Theologian, founded in 1088. A highlight of our trip was a personal tour of this monastery by two old monks, twin brothers. Since this was an Orthodox monastery there were many icons, and the monks took their time to explain these. For most of us an icon is a small picture on a computer screen. The icon is a symbol that points to a file or program. Similarly, an icon in the Orthodox church is a symbolic representation of God or Christ that points to some theological truth. At the top of the interior of the dome of the chapel was an icon of the *Pantokrator*. This icon, either painted or in mosaic, can be found at the top of most Orthodox churches. The picture portrays the theological reality that God is on his throne as ruler over all. The clear message of Revelation is that the true throne is in heaven, and that there is one seated upon it. All earthly thrones are counterfeit. All earthly occupants are imposters, and the worship they receive is counterfeit worship. The true worship is taking place in heaven around the true throne.

Why do we gather together on Sundays? We meet to remind ourselves that God and the Lamb are on the throne, and that we are a colony of heaven. During the week we tend to lose sight of that. The colony of hell intrudes into our horizon. The vision of God as *Pantokrator* at the dome of our thinking grows dim. We grow weak in our affirmation that God is the beginning and end of all things. Our vision fades as the great deceiver attempts to ensnare us with the great deception. We gather each Sunday for a revelation. Not a revelation of some personal timetable or a timetable for the world. But a revelation of God. What we need each Sunday morning is as much God as possible.

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Catalog No. 1502

Revelation 1:9-20

Second Message

Bernard Bell

July 22nd, 2001

# THE VISION THAT LEADS TO WORSHIP

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Why are you here today? I asked that question last week, and I ask it again today. It used to be that “going to church” on a Sunday morning was so deeply ingrained that one did it without thinking. But the sanctity of Sunday has been steadily eroded. Many of you face competing demands upon your time. There are other things you could be doing this morning. Taking your children to one or other of the many events that increasingly are scheduled on Sunday morning. Staying home to recover from a hectic week. Enjoying a day at the beach, or a weekend in the mountains. But you are here. Why? Some of you have come to hear the teaching, for PBCC is known as a teaching church. Some of you have come specifically to hear me teach on the Book of Revelation. Others of you are here because you want to worship.

What is worship? It has been observed that a generation ago people chose a church based on the teaching, but now they choose a church based on the worship. Many of you have strong opinions about worship: too many hymns, too few hymns; too loud, not loud enough; too much drums, not enough drums. Each Sunday throughout the world millions of people leave church commenting about their worship experience—whether or not they had a “good worship experience.”

What is good worship? No topic excites more comment at PBCC than worship. Throughout much of its history, PBC (whether Palo Alto or Cupertino) has devoted most of its energy to teaching. But, at least here at PBCC, times are changing. Over the past few years no topic has been discussed more in staff meetings than worship. It may not look like we know what we are doing, and we would be the first to admit that that’s often how we feel.

Over the past four years I have thought a great deal about the topic of worship. My primary textbook has been the Book of Revelation. Nothing has done more to stimulate my thinking about, and understanding of, worship than this book. How can this be, you ask? Isn’t Revelation all about the Great Tribulation, the Rapture, the Millennium, and Armageddon? No, Revelation is all about worship. More accurately, this book is all about God and about his Christ; about the one seated upon the throne, and the Lamb enthroned beside him. Everyone in the book worships; everyone that is except the Trinity in heaven, Father, Son and Spirit; and the counterfeit trinity on earth, dragon, beast and false prophet. Not everyone worships correctly, but everyone worships. It’s not a question of who are the worshipers and who the non-worshippers, but of who are the true worshipers and who are the false worshipers. It’s the same today. Everyone worships someone or something.

Our text this morning has a lot to teach us about worship, even though you will not find the word “worship” in the text.

**I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard be-**

**hind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.” (1:9-II NIV)**

Neither John nor his audience is in a setting we would consider conducive to worship. John is on the island of Patmos, 40 miles from his home town Ephesus. But he continues to identify with those back home, describing himself as their brother and companion. John and his readers share in three things: “the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.”

They share in the suffering in Jesus. The word translated “suffering” can also be rendered “tribulation.” The Great Tribulation doesn’t lie in the future. The tribulation is now, and it has been now for a long time. The New Testament epistles repeatedly tell us that we should not be surprised at suffering. In the Book of Revelation it will not be until chapter 12 that we are given an explanation for this suffering. The dragon, Satan, rages against God and his people. He cannot harm Christ, and he cannot harm the Church, so the only thing left is to make war against the individual believers. There is nothing that Satan can do that will undo the work of Christ. There is nothing that Satan can do that will undo the Church. But God does allow Satan limited power to attack the saints. In the visible realm, Satan will seem to be victorious over many of these saints, as the beast kills the faithful witnesses.

John and his readers share in the kingdom in Jesus. In Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum, temples heralded the kingdom of the beast. It is this kingdom of the beast that is the visible kingdom on earth. But those with faith see that there is another kingdom, for Christ “has made us to be a kingdom...to serve his God and Father” (1:6). John and his readers are citizens of this kingdom; though on earth, they are a colony of this heavenly kingdom. They have been transferred out of the other kingdom, the Satanic kingdom of which the “citizens of the earth” are a colony.

John and his readers share in the patient endurance in Jesus. They are not called to rise up in arms and try to defeat Satan. That would be to play right into Satan’s kingdom. They are called to endure, which is to say, they are called to be faithful. If they are covered by the blood of the Lamb and if they hold fast to the testimony of Jesus, then they will emerge victorious.

John’s share in this suffering and kingdom and endurance is to be in exile on the island of Patmos. He is there “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). Most probably, the proconsul (governor) of Asia deported him to the small, rocky island of Patmos because of his troublesome insistence that Christ, not Caesar, is Lord. On the Lord’s day John finds himself in the Spirit. Most probably he is caught up into a prophetic trance. Four times this happens (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). I consider these four instances to be the main structural indicators, dividing the book into major sections. John is caught up in the Spirit on the Lord’s day and given

the messages to the seven churches (1:10-3:22). He is caught up in the Spirit and taken up into heaven, where he is shown the visions that form the central portion of the book (4:1-16:21). This is followed by two appendices in each of which he is shown a city personified as a woman. He is caught up in the Spirit into a desert where he is shown Babylon the prostitute (17:1-19:10). He is caught up in the Spirit onto a high mountain where he is shown the new Jerusalem, the bride (21:9-22:9). Recognition of this structure is a great help in understanding the book.

In this prophetic trance, John hears a voice instructing him, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea" (1:11). These seven churches are located in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia. As we saw last week, they are not the only churches in Asia; the New Testament tells us of churches also in Troas, Colossae, Hierapolis. These seven are listed in the order that a messenger might visit them, traveling clockwise from Ephesus, the port at which he would have disembarked from Patmos.

John wants to see the one who speaks to him thus.

**I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. (1:12-16)**

When John turns, he sees seven golden lampstands, and someone among them. In the Old Testament, lampstands were placed in both the Tabernacle and the Temple, where they blazed continually in the presence of the Lord. John will be given the meaning of these lampstands later, but for now his attention is focused entirely on the one in the midst of the lampstands. The figure he sees is a composite image, drawn from two texts in the book of Daniel.

He is one "like a son of man," a reference to Daniel 7, where one like a son of man comes into the presence of the Ancient of Days, enthroned in his heavenly throne room. He is given an eternal kingdom in which he has authority, glory and sovereign power. This contrasts with the four earthly kingdoms presented earlier in the chapter. Each of those kingdoms is ruled by a beast; each seems more invincible than its predecessor, yet each passes away. In the end these beastly, earthly kingdoms are replaced by a heavenly kingdom ruled not by a beast, but by a true human. This figure that John sees is the King, the true King who will later be revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords.

But this figure is more than just the son of man. "His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow." In Daniel 7, it is the Ancient of Days whose hair is as white as wool (Dan 7:9). How is it possible for one like a son of man to be given an eternal kingdom? In Daniel 7 that is not clear. But in Revelation we find that it is because the one like the son of man who receives the kingdom is scarcely distinguishable from the Ancient of Days who gives the kingdom.

What of the robe, the sash, the eyes, the feet, and the voice? These refer to a man who appeared to Daniel, "a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold round his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs

like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude" (Dan 10:5-6). It becomes clear that this is no ordinary man. Later in the chapter we find that he is superior even to Michael, one of the archangels. Both the man in Daniel 10 and the figure that John sees here in Revelation 1 bear the robe and sash of a priest. But not even Aaron, the first high priest, came close to matching the glorious radiance of these figures. These can be no ordinary priests.

John does not yet know who this figure is. But the effect of the vision is overwhelming.

**When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. (1:17a)**

John is overcome by the vision of this composite figure. He is undone, and falls down as though dead. This, or similar, has been the automatic response of those who have been confronted with the presence of God. When God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, "Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look on God" (Exod 3:6). Three times Ezekiel fell face down when confronted with the glory of the Lord (Ezek 1:28; 3:22-23; 43:1-3). When Isaiah "saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted," he cried out "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty" (Isa 6:5). This is biblical worship.

Both Hebrew and Greek use two different words that are often translated into English as the one word, "worship." One verb means to do obeisance; the other means to serve. English versions are often inconsistent in how they translate these two verbs.

Obeisance is a word that has fallen out of use, but throughout most of human history it has been a behavior understood by most people. When an inferior comes into the presence of a superior, he kneels down, touches his forehead to the ground, and pays homage to the one that he acknowledges as his superior, as the one to whom homage is due. In the Bible the verb often occurs in conjunction with such expressions as "he fell on his face" and "his nose to the ground." In the Bible homage is sometimes paid by one human to another, but most frequently it is given by a human to God. We do not give homage to one who is our equal; we give homage to one who is superior. In the case of God, the gulf is enormous: He is our Creator and we are his creatures.

A. W. Tozer, often called a twentieth-century prophet, had a profound understanding of worship. His last series of sermons was on the topic of worship; they were collected and published as the book, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* Here's what he wrote concerning Isaiah's response to seeing the Holy God:

To Isaiah...the violent contrast between that which is God and that which is not God was such that his very language suffered under the effort to express it. ...the living God, in the space of a short second of time, can reveal Himself to the willing spirit of a man...The man whom God will use must be undone. He must be a man who has seen the King in His beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Rudolf Otto, in his classic book, *The Idea of the Holy*, describes the one who is holy as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that causes trembling and fascination.<sup>2</sup> Because there is such a gulf between us and God, because we are on opposite sides of the Creator/creature divide, God must necessarily be mysterious. We can know him only as he has chosen to reveal himself to us. And this revelation of himself to us is necessarily limited in the interests of our own survival. But it is because God is mysterious that we worship him. If there were no mystery we would not worship. Here's Tozer again:

If there is no wonder, no experience of mystery, our efforts to worship will be futile... I will never bend my knees and say 'Holy, holy, holy' to that which I have been able to decipher and figure out in my own mind! That which I can understand will never bring me to the place of awe. It can never fill me with astonishment or wonder or admiration... In some circles, God has been abridged, reduced, modified, edited, changed and amended until He is no longer the God whom Isaiah saw, high and lifted up.<sup>3</sup>

But God is also a *mysterium fascinans*, a mystery that fascinates. Though we tremble when confronted with this Holy One who is mysterious, we are also fascinated and drawn to him. In the children's book *The Wind in the Willows*, Mole and Rat experience this mystery that both terrifies and fascinates them when they are confronted with an august Presence:

Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy—but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend, and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently. And still there was utter silence in the populous bird-haunted branches around them; and still the light grew and grew...

"Rat!" he found breath to whisper, shaking. "Are you afraid?"

"Afraid?" murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. "Afraid! Of HIM? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O, Mole, I am afraid!"

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.<sup>4</sup>

I have said before, and I will keep on saying, that Revelation is a book about worship. Everyone in the book worships, everyone that is except the trinity in heaven and the counterfeit trinity on earth. Throughout the book John is given visions into heaven. There he sees a throne, one seated upon the throne, and the Lamb enthroned beside him. Gathered around this throne are several sets of creatures, all of whom are worshiping the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. The four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, the angels, the redeemed saints, all fall down and worship (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). And they all sing songs in response to what they have seen or heard. Revelation is filled with songs, songs being sung in heaven. Since we are a colony of heaven on earth, called to live according to heaven's pattern, we, the redeemed, can join in singing those songs as well.

But on earth most worship the wrong person. They worship the counterfeit. In the Book of Revelation this worship is given to the beast, who sits on the counterfeit throne (13:4, 8; 14:9; 16:2; 19:20). They worship the beast because they have been deceived into doing so by the false prophet (13:12).

Even John is not immune from this tendency to worship the wrong person. Twice he falls down before the interpreting angel to worship him. Twice the interpreting angel tells him, "Do not do it! Worship God!" (19:9; 22:8-9).

Though the "citizens of the earth," the residents of the colony of hell, are facing and worshiping the wrong thing, all must eventually be brought face to face with God. To face God is the destiny of everyone in the book. For some that will be a terrifying destiny; for others it is a glorious destiny. It is terrifying to those upon whom God pours out his judgments; they cry out to the very mountains

and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits and the throne" (6:16). But for the saints, one of the most glorious features of the new heavens and new earth is that "they will see his face" (22:4). In his sermon, "The Weight of Glory," C. S. Lewis writes,

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.<sup>5</sup>

The other verb that is often translated "worship" is the verb more frequently translated "serve." This is also the usual Hebrew verb for "work," an idea that to us seems very far removed from worship. And yet we use the word "service" for the assembly of God's people on Sunday. Many worshipers on Sunday follow a liturgy, which means "the work of the people." Here we are gathered for a service. But whom are we serving? Are we serving you so that you can leave having had "a good worship experience"? Are we serving unbelievers, offering a service that will entice them to come to church? In both cases, No! We are here to serve God. All of our lives are to be lived in service to God, for that is our "spiritual worship" (lit. our logical service, Rom 12:1). But on Sundays we assemble together before God as his people to bring him our corporate service. We bring our offerings to him: offerings in the form of praise, prayer, money. We listen to his word, and we take that word from here out into the world. Much that happens on Sunday mornings really falls under the category of service. There is nothing wrong with that. Service started before the Fall and it will continue after the Fall is reversed and Creation is complete. The first human served God in the garden (Gen 2:15). In the New Jerusalem we will serve God (22:3), for Jesus Christ "has made us to be...priests to serve his God and Father" (1:6).

But these two words, service and worship, are not the same, though ideally they do occur together. As we gather each Sunday to bring our service to God, we should ask that God be pleased to reveal himself to us in a way that leaves us floored, either literally or metaphorically. Then we will better be able to serve him.

The vision that John sees had this effect on him: it floored him. But he is not left on the floor. He is floored so that he might be commissioned to service:

**Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.**

**"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." (1:17b-20)**

This awesome figure, this august Presence, puts his right hand on John and says, "Do not be afraid." This is the most frequent command in Scripture. It has to be repeated so many times because the natural response of humans in the presence of God is to be afraid. He is the *mysterium tremendum*, the mystery that makes us tremble. We are to fear God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov 1:7) and of wisdom (Prov 9:10). We are to have a proper measure of reverence of God, the reverence that comes from being aware of the "violent contrast" between us and him. Yet we are not to be terrified of him, for his intentions toward us are kind.

The figure reveals himself to John as the First and the Last, the Living One. This is language used elsewhere for God alone. Three

times in Isaiah God reveals himself as the First and the Last (Isa 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). He is also the Living God (Josh 3:10). The title “First and Last” is a virtual synonym of the title God has already used for himself, “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8). Who is this one who dare apply to himself titles that are due God alone?

The figure reveals himself further as the one who was dead but is now alive for ever. It is now clear that this is Jesus Christ, already described as the faithful witness, and firstborn from the dead (1:5). Here as throughout Revelation, we find being applied to Jesus language that had been reserved for God alone. Jesus was killed for being a faithful witness. It seemed that he had been conquered. But he emerged the conqueror, victorious over death. He therefore holds the keys of death and Hades. They are not independent powers beyond the control of Christ.

This overwhelming vision serves as John’s commissioning to service. Many of the Old Testament prophets had a similar commissioning. John’s service is to write to the seven churches a description of what he has seen. He does not write them an explanation of what he has seen. If he had done so, the world would have been spared a lot of books. John merely presents his visions. These visions concern both what is now and what will take place later. What is now? True worship is being given in heaven; false worship is being given on earth. What will take place later? The counterfeit objects of worship on earth will be removed together with their worshipers, so that true worship can become universal in a conjoined heaven and earth.

Only now is John given an explanation of the seven stars that Jesus holds in his hand and the seven lampstands among whom he stands. The stars are the angels of the churches. The lampstands are the churches themselves. They are the lights burning in the presence of God. John cannot be present with these churches for which he cares so deeply. But that’s all right, for Jesus stands among them.

What is good worship? When you understand worship as falling down in the presence of the one who is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that causes trembling and fascination, “good worship” seems hopelessly inadequate language. It’s like coming out of the movie theater after watching *Schindler’s List* and saying, “That was a good movie.” If that’s what you say, the movie has had no impact on you. Similarly, if you come out of a service saying, “That was good worship,” you have not really worshiped.

Why are we here this morning? We are here in need of a revelation. We need a vision of God and a vision of ourselves. A “vision of ourselves that will devalue us to the point of total devaluation.”<sup>6</sup> A vision of God that will overwhelm us, a vision that will provoke both trembling and fascination. And we need the reassurance, “Do not be afraid.” “God has saved us to be worshipers.” It is from the prostrate position that God “can raise us up to worship Him and to praise Him and to witness.”<sup>7</sup>

**The LORD bless you  
and keep you;  
the LORD make his face shine upon you  
and be gracious to you;  
the LORD turn his face towards you  
and give you peace. (Num 6:24-26)**

1. A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* (Camp Hill, Penn.: Christian Publications, 1985), 70, 78.
2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), chapters 4-6.
3. Tozer, *Whatever Happened*, 85-86.
4. Kenneth Grahame, chapter 7, “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn,” *The Wind in the Willows* (1908).
5. C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.
6. Tozer, *Whatever Happened*, 78.
7. Tozer, *Whatever Happened*, 78.

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Revelation 2:1-7

Third Message

Bernard Bell

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# PRESERVING PASSION

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

We return to the Book of Revelation after a hiatus of five months, five months in which much has changed. On September 11th, the priorities and passions of this nation changed. We became passionate about the flag. We found new heroes. We rallied behind the president as he launched a war on terrorism. And yet this same president urged us to carry on life as normal. Last week the pundits were watching to see if we would do just that, to see if we would shop with the same intensity as last year. But many have found that their world has changed too much, that the combination of the economic downturn and the terrorist attacks have reoriented their priorities. What are your passions and priorities?

I have been given the next three weeks to continue my series in the Book of Revelation. Today we reach the seven messages to the churches. Most preachers would devote one week to each of the messages, but since I have only a few weeks per year it would take a couple of years at that pace to cover these. So, instead I am going to devote just these three weeks to the seven messages, looking at the first three messages, those to Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum.

## A. The Common Structure of the Seven Messages

Before I launch into the message to Ephesus, I first want to look at the seven messages as a whole, showing the overall structure of them, and how they are integrated into the structure and message of the whole book. This is the most carefully structured book in the whole New Testament, perhaps in the whole Bible. Each of the seven messages is carefully structured, and the seven messages are carefully integrated into the whole.

The seven messages are very similar. There is a common template for each, with much of the language already filled in—boilerplate as it were. Each message contains four major sections.

### 1. Command to write

Each message commences with a command addressed by Jesus to John, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write.” John is given the addresses of seven churches. Most people think that these are the seven letters to the churches. But the whole book is a letter, addressed to “the seven churches in the province of Asia” (1:4). Jesus has already instructed John to “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea” (1:11). The province of Asia occupied the western end of what is today Turkey. It was one of the most prosperous provinces in the entire Roman Empire. We know that it contained more than seven churches, for the NT mentions several that are not in this list: Troas, Colossae, Hierapolis. But the book of Revelation is full of symbolic numbers, the most common of them being seven, a number that occurs 55 times. Seven is symbolic of perfection or completion. By writing to these seven churches, John is writing to all churches both then and through the ages.

The address John is given is not “the church in Ephesus” but “the angel of the church in Ephesus.” John has just been given a vision of the risen and exalted Jesus, walking among seven lampstands and holding seven stars. Jesus himself explains that the seven lampstands are the seven churches and the seven stars are the angels of these seven churches (1:20). The lampstands are clear enough. In the OT, both the tabernacle and the temple contained lampstands, blazing away in the presence of God, who himself is unapproachable light. The tabernacle and the temple have both been destroyed. Where then is the light that testifies to the God who is Light? It is these seven little churches in the Roman province of Asia. They are the lights now blazing away in the presence of God. President Bush Sr. called for a thousand points of light. That is what the churches are. This is what PBCC is, a lampstand, a point of light, shining in the world, testifying to the God who is Light.

Who are the angels of the churches? Some interpret these as the pastors of the churches, but this does not fit the imagery of the book. Revelation is full of angels: of the 175 references to angels in the NT, 67 are here. An angel is a messenger; in just six instances elsewhere in the NT, angels are human messengers. Otherwise they are always residents of the two unseen realms into which John is given a revelation. Satan’s angels come from the Abyss; God’s angels come from heaven. The churches have angels because they are colonies of heaven planted on earth. The Church is not an earthly institution, but a heavenly one.

### 2. Introductory Formula

The message proper begins with an introductory formula, in which Jesus declares, “These are the words.” John, writing the words of Jesus, uses a deliberately archaic expression, the Greek words *tade legei*. No Greek speaker at the end of the first century would ever actually say that. But Jesus and John are using the language of the OT, where *tade legei* is the usual Greek translation of the phrase *koh amar*, which the KJV renders as “thus saith.” This is most frequently used by the prophets in the phrase “Thus saith the Lord.” The book of Revelation is filled with the language and imagery of the OT. John uses this archaic Greek to ensure that his hearers hear these messages as prophetic oracles from God.

But these oracles are predicated not of God but of Jesus. The second part of each declaration contains a self-description of the one making the declaration. Here, as throughout the book, is John ascribing to Jesus language that in the OT was appropriate for God alone. Again, I say, this book has an extraordinarily high Christology, that is a highly exalted view of who Jesus is. For the first six messages, the self-description of Jesus draws on the language of John’s vision of Jesus in chapter one, the vision that introduces these messages.

### 3. Prophetic Message

The longest section contains the prophetic message itself. This section has the least amount of boilerplate, yet even here there is a two-part template: a narrative and a pronouncement.

Each narrative section begins with the same word, “I know.” Jesus knows what is going on in each church. Then follows a sequence of verbs in the present and past tenses, describing what Jesus knows in each of the churches. To five of the churches Jesus says, “I know your deeds.” In most cases Jesus commends the churches for their deeds. But in five of the churches this commendation is followed by censure for failures, often prefaced by the phrase, “But I have this against you.” The churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia receive no censure. The church in Laodicea receives no word of commendation.

These, then, are the things that have come to the attention of Jesus. Reacting to this information, Jesus issues a pronouncement in which the tenses are present and future. Many of these pronouncements include both a command and a promise. The command is often to remember and repent. The promise concerns the coming of Jesus.

### 4. Proclamation

Each message closes with a two-part proclamation, addressed to two sets of people: the one with an ear and the one who overcomes.

To each of the churches John writes, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The whole book is a letter. Within it are contained these seven messages, one to each church. Each message is relevant to that particular church. But each is also intended for all churches.

To each of the churches Jesus gives a promise to the one who overcomes. This word overcome (*nikaō*), also translated as conquer or be victorious, is a key word in the book, used 17 times (of 28 in NT). Warren Wiersbe recognizes this in entitling his commentary, *Be Victorious*, as does William Hendriksen with his, *More Than Conquerors*. But this conquering has nothing to do with who wins the battle of Armageddon.

To those who are victorious Jesus makes a promise. Each of the items promised reappears at the end of the book. The final use of the word conquer is in the declaration by God himself, “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son” (21:7), where “all this” refers to the new heavens and the new earth that have just been described. Those who conquer will find their home in the new heavens and the new earth.

We will look at this theme of conquering next week when we study the message to the church in Smyrna. For the moment, suffice it to say that the one who conquers is the one who heeds the message that Jesus has for the church, the one who holds on to Jesus. He is assured a place in the new heavens and the new earth. He has nothing to fear from God’s judgments that are poured out in the middle of the book.

## B. The Message to the Church in Ephesus

Hear the word of the Lord to the church in Ephesus:

**To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:**

**These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You**

**have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.**

**Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Rev 2:1-7 NIV)**

### 1. Ephesus

**To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: (2:1a)**

The first of the seven cities addressed by Jesus is also the largest, Ephesus. It was the home of John, before and after he was exiled to Patmos. It was presumably the starting point of the messenger who took the messages around the seven churches.

No city in the New Testament had as illustrious a spiritual history as Ephesus. Paul stayed here for more than two years on the outward leg of his third missionary journey (Acts 19). For three months he taught in the synagogue, then for two years he taught in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, with the result that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). Some years later, Timothy exercised a vital ministry in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3). Later still, Ephesus was the home of John.

### 2. Prophetic Message

Jesus’ prophetic message to the church in Ephesus contains commendation, chastisement, command, and warning. This is a church with a rich history stretching back over forty years. Jesus finds much still to commend in the church:

**I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. (2:2-3)**

**But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. (2:6)**

This is a church known for its hard work. It is not a lazy church. Its members are not sitting back in idleness. Outsiders would see a church buzzing with activity.

This is a church known for its perseverance. It has faced opposition and suffered hardship. Perhaps this opposition came from the same sources as the opposition Paul faced when he was in Ephesus. He was opposed by the Jews in the synagogue. And he was opposed by the Gentile merchants who profited greatly from the tourists who came to see the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Whatever the opposition, it had failed to discourage the church. The believers had remained resolute, not flagging in their work.

This is a church known for its zeal for the truth. Ephesus had a long history of false teachers. On his way home from the third missionary journey, Paul stopped at Miletus and summoned the elders from Ephesus, twenty miles away. He warned them,

**Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of**

**God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! (Acts 20:28-31)**

He instructed Timothy,

**stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer. (1 Tim 1:3)**

These false teachers had evidently remained a constant problem in Ephesus. But the church had a great track record of ferreting them out and exposing them. False teachers were still present in Ephesus, in the guise of the Nicolaitans. This group was active also in Pergamum (2:15), so we will consider them more thoroughly when we study the message to that church. The Nicolaitans were teaching that it is OK to compromise with the world. They were blurring the line between the church and the world. The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were riddled with compromise, but the church in Ephesus was not. It rejected the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Thus far, Ephesus seems to be a model church, receiving glowing commendation from Jesus. But all is not well in the church. Jesus chastises them:

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

For all of its hard work, perseverance and zeal for the truth, the church in Ephesus has forgotten the one thing needful. Externally it shows all the right characteristics: hard work, perseverance, zeal for the truth, but internally it has lost its way. Ephesus is not the only church in which this has happened. Sardis has a reputation of being alive, but is dead (3:1). Laodicea has become so lukewarm that it feels self-sufficient (3:17). Many churches throughout history have followed in their footsteps.

Hard work, perseverance, and zeal for the truth are not enough. It's not that they are unimportant, it's that they are not the most important things. This church had forgotten the one thing needful: love. The nature of this love is not specified, so commentators have debated whether it refers to love of God or love of man. But the love of the believer for the saints is driven by his love for God. New believers are characterized by a love for God, a tremendous appreciation for what he has done.

The church in Ephesus has lost this love. But it is not too late: Jesus offers the church an opportunity to mend her ways:

**Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. (2:5a)**

Jesus commands the church to do three things: remember, repent and repeat. They are to remember what life was like earlier, when they were driven by a passion for Christ. They are to repent, that is, turn back from their current mode of operation as a church. They are to repeat the things they did at first, when they were driven by passion for Christ.

Jesus next issues a warning as to what will happen if they do not heed this warning:

If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (2:5b)

Seven times in the book Jesus says "I am coming." Whether that is good news or bad news depends on whether or not we are longing for the coming of Jesus. It is obvious that the coming of Jesus is not

a good thing for the church in Ephesus, for his coming will imply judgment for the church.

I had the privilege of visiting Ephesus last June with a dozen others from this church. It is perhaps the largest archaeological excavation in the entire Mediterranean. Austrian archaeologists have been working on the site for over 100 years, and they anticipate another 100 years of work. The reason that Ephesus is such a large excavation is that the site has been abandoned for over 1000 years. This was the fifth largest city in the Roman Empire, a city of 250,000. It is the only city of such size to be totally abandoned.

Jesus warned that he would remove the lampstand from its place in Ephesus. So thoroughly did he do this that there is not only no longer any church; there is no longer any Ephesus!

### 3. Promise to the Victor

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (2:7)**

To the overcomer, Jesus promises "I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." In the context of this message, the overcomer is the one who maintains his first love, the one who is filled with passion for the Lord, and for what he has done in Christ. To this one Jesus will grant admission to the paradise of God, where grows the tree of life. Paradise is the Greek translation for the garden of Eden, where grew the first tree of life. It is through the tree of life that God mediates life to the humans whom he has created as his image-bearers, the humans whom he has created to dwell in his sanctuary. Ever since humanity was driven out of the garden and away from the tree of life, it has been on a quest to return to the garden. Access to the tree of life is granted by Jesus to the overcomer. The overcomer is the one who holds onto Jesus, who maintains his first love.

## C. Preserving Passion

As I mature as a Christian, I am becoming more acutely aware of the danger of losing my first love. I see how many churches there are that share the positive characteristics of Ephesus: busy with good deeds, persevering in the midst of opposition, zealous for identifying error and exposing it. But they are not driven by passion for Christ.

Unlike many churches, PBCC does not have a mission statement. But I have my own informal mission statement. I can claim no originality for it. Some of you may know Bob Roe, long-time former elder and pastor of PBC. Nine years ago I arranged for our interns to spend an evening with him, so that he could explain some of the history of PBC. One thing in particular stuck with me. He described how many years ago the elders had discussed the role of spiritual leadership at PBC. Essentially they were seeking a mission statement. And they adopted one. Their role was to lead people into an all-consuming love-relationship with the Lord.

C. S. Lewis distinguishes two types of longing: "the one is an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and the other is a disease."<sup>1</sup> In our movie theaters today are two fantasies, *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Some Christian parents are very concerned over whether or not to allow their children to see these movies. But these are not dangerous fantasies. Few if any of the children who watch *Harry Potter* really believe that there is a Hogwart's School of Wizardry. The dangerous fantasies are those fed us by Madison Avenue, by Wall Street, by Sand Hill Road. These fantasies arouse longings that disease our

minds and hearts. They have all the appearance of reality, but they are fantasies. The events of September 11th helped temporarily to expose them as such.

The Book of Revelation contains also the story of the great deception. The world is deceived by an unholy triumvirate: the dragon, the false prophet, and Babylon. The dragon, who is Satan, deceives the world to oppose God (12:9; 20:3, 8, 10). The false prophet deceives the world to worship the beast (13:14; 19:20) rather than worship God. Babylon, which is the mass of humanity living apart from God, deceives the world with all its treasures (18:23). The overcomer is the one who resists these deceptions, the one who refuses to worship the beast, who refuses to participate in the life of Babylon, who refuses to join the dragon in opposing God. He is the one who maintains his first love, who preserves his passion.

Messages bombard us all day, every day. They are seductive, but they are also deceptive. To counteract these fantasies we need regular doses of reality. That's what Sunday mornings ought to be about. We gather for a dose of reality. During the week we have become disoriented, none more severely than Christmas week. We gather to reorient ourselves. We join the angels and the saints in heaven gathered around the throne to reorient ourselves onto God and the Lamb. We remind ourselves that our lives revolve around that throne. We gather as a people, reminding ourselves that we are the people of God. This is why we sang "Holy God we praise thy Name," a hymn based on a fourth century Latin poem *Te Deum Laudamus* (You, O God, we praise). For 1600 years the saints below have been lifting their voices with this hymn to join those above, in the praise of God. This is why we sang "Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Heart," by Bernard of Clairvaux, with its line, "From the best bliss that life imparts, we turn unfilled to Thee again."

Bernard was keenly aware of the danger of losing passion for Christ. When a former monk from Clairvaux Abbey, of which he was abbot, was elected pope he wrote him a book to remind him not to allow the busy papal office to detract from his own spiritual life:

I should like you to note carefully, Eugenius, since you are the wisest of men, that whenever your consideration wanders from these things to lesser and visible things, whether in search of knowledge or something for practical use, or to do your duty in administration or action, you go into exile. You do not do so if your consideration concentrates on these higher things, so that through them it seeks what is above. To consider in this way is to come home.<sup>2</sup>

During the week as we get more and more distracted by the deceptions, we go further and further into exile. On Sundays we gather to consider God, and we come home.

The Book of Revelation has helped me grow in my longing for the coming of Jesus. Seven times Jesus says, "I am coming" (*erchomai*) Another three times he uses a different verb, "I will come" (*hēxō*) to say the same thing. Seven, yea ten times, Jesus says that he is coming. In the prologue John concludes his doxology addressed to Jesus with the excited cry, "Look, he is coming" (1:7). At the end of the prologue Jesus says, "Yes, I am coming soon." To which John answers, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). It seems that the whole book is designed to so reorient our vision that at the end we cry out, "Maranatha, Come Lord." Will the coming of Jesus be good news or bad news for you? Will it be a tremendous inconvenience because you are so enmeshed in the world, or will it be the fulfillment of all your longings?

**The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (Rev 22:17)**

1. C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 39.

2. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Consideration* I.1, in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Writings*, trans. G.R. Evans (New York: Paulist, 1987), 148.



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Revelation 2:8-11

Fourth Message

Bernard Bell

January 6th, 2002

# DEFYING DEATH

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

On September 11th, a new breed of terrorism was unleashed on the world. Among the thousands who died that day were nineteen men who voluntarily went to their own deaths. Until that day anti-terrorism experts had always assumed that hijackers wanted to stay alive. But these hijackers were willing to die for their cause. Indeed they gloried in their deaths, believing such death to be a fast track to Paradise.

This is a mindset completely alien to us. The U.S. devotes enormous resources to avoiding death. A substantial percentage of health care spending goes to prolonging life for the last few days. Advertising promotes the image of youth. When most people lived on farms, death was a fact of life with which all were familiar. But many now have no familiarity with death. Death frightens us. We want wars with no casualties on our side. On Friday the U.S. suffered its first combat fatality from enemy fire in Afghanistan. Will we now call for our troops to be brought home?

Today we turn to the message to the church in Smyrna. This, the second of the seven messages, is the briefest. It is the most positive message of the seven, yet we may not like its message, for it promises death as the expected fate of the believer.

## A. The Message to the Church in Smyrna

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Smyrna:

**To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:**

**These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty — yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (Rev 2:8-11 NIV)**

How are we to interpret these seven messages to the churches? Some interpretations argue that these seven messages represent seven ages of church history, for this book is prophetic. The message to Smyrna therefore addresses what to us is a past period of church history, and does not address us. But that does violence to the Biblical concept of prophecy. Prophecy is the word of the Lord for the present. It may certainly have ramifications for the future, but its intended audience is that which hears it from the Lord's prophet. These seven messages are addressed to seven churches in ca. AD 95. Each message contains imagery that is quite specific to the city being addressed. Hence I found it so helpful to visit six of these seven cities last June. We shall see that the message to the church in Smyrna makes many references to the situation in that city. Nevertheless,

each message is also addressed to all seven churches, for "he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Since the Book of Revelation has been incorporated into the canon of Scripture as God's Word, these messages are also addressed to us. Though this church in Cupertino in 2002 is quite different from the church in Smyrna in 95, we need to hear what the Spirit says to the church in Smyrna.

### 1. Smyrna

**To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: (2:8a)**

Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum vied for preeminence in the province of Asia. All three cities were of similar size, 200-250,000, with Ephesus being the largest. Pergamum was the original capital, but by the time of the writing of Revelation, Ephesus was the *de facto* capital if not yet the official one. Yet, despite the status of Pergamum and Ephesus, Smyrna claimed the title of "First in Asia," a title that it stamped on many of its coins. Smyrna's major claim to fame was its beauty. Strabo, a first century Roman geographer, acclaimed it as "the most beautiful city of all."

Smyrna lies at the end of a deep bay. The ancient Greek city was destroyed around 600 BC. For three hundred years Smyrna was a mere village before being refounded on a new site by Alexander the Great. Later citizens of Smyrna likened this to a phoenix rising from the ashes: the city had died and risen again. Smyrna was renowned for its loyalty to Rome, a loyalty that predated Rome's rise to dominance in the Mediterranean world. In 195 BC Smyrna built a temple dedicated to *Dea Roma*, the goddess Roma, the first city in Asia Minor to do so. In AD 24, during the reign of Tiberius, its loyalty was rewarded with permission to build a temple dedicated to the emperor. It was thus an important center of the imperial cult, of the worship of the emperor as divine.

Today Smyrna, renamed Izmir in the 1920s, is the third-largest city in Turkey. It is the only one of these seven cities with an unbroken church presence.

### 2. Self-description of Jesus

**These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. (2:8b)**

To the church in Smyrna Jesus describes himself as "the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." Smyrna claimed to be "First in Asia." But Jesus Christ is First of all. "First and Last" is a title borrowed from the Old Testament, where Isaiah uses it to describe God (Isa 44:6; 48:12). To apply it to anyone other than God would be blasphemy, but here is Jesus using the title of himself, and here is John ascribing him that title. Again we have this ascription to Jesus of language and imagery that belongs to God alone. There are three synonymous titles: the First and the Last, the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. John applies these progressively to God and to Jesus, until by the end of the book all three are applied to Jesus (22:13).

Smyrna likened itself to a phoenix, risen from the ashes. But Jesus describes himself as the one who has died and come to life. We'll see that this description has particular relevance for the church in Smyrna.

The citizens of Smyrna gloried in their city. But the church in Smyrna is to glory in Christ. It is he not the city who is First. It is he not the city that has risen triumphant from death. While yet living in Smyrna, they are members of the Church, of which Jesus is the head. They are part of the body of Christ: a glorious body and a glorious Christ.

### 3. Prophetic Message

As in the other six messages, Jesus' prophetic message to the church in Smyrna contains both a statement of his knowledge concerning affairs in Smyrna, and a prophetic pronouncement based upon that knowledge. There are many similarities between the messages to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia. These are the only two churches that receive no chastisement, only commendation. To the church in Smyrna, Jesus says,

**I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. (2:9)**

Two things about the church in Smyrna have come to the attention of Jesus: her afflictions and her poverty. The word translated as "afflictions" can also be rendered "tribulation." Most Christians in America have been taught that the Great Tribulation lies in the future, and that it will last for seven years. At some point during these seven years the Rapture will occur, whereby Christians are snatched up out of the earth, thus escaping the suffering on earth. The only question is whether the Rapture will occur before, during or after the tribulation. Many preachers will tell you that it is vitally important to figure out if you are pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib. Many churches write their position into their doctrinal statement. They will refuse you membership if you take the wrong position. Mid-trib professors cannot get teaching jobs at pre-trib seminaries. As I say this, you are either fuming because I've trodden on your toes, or your eyes are glazed over because you don't know what I'm talking about!

The Great Tribulation does not lie in the future. The tribulation is now and it has been now for a long time. The New Testament epistles tell us repeatedly that we should not be surprised at suffering. Indeed, they tell us that the believer should expect to suffer. Suffering was certainly the lot of the Church in the first 300 years. The pre-trib, mid-trib, and post-trib positions are recent ones; they could only have been developed in a climate where the Church does not suffer. Try having a debate about the relationship between the Rapture and the Great Tribulation with Christians in Indonesia or Pakistan, where they are being killed by Moslem fanatics! Or with Christians in China who refuse to be part of the government-sanctioned church. Or with Christians in any of the other countries around the world where they are facing persecution. That would be to belittle their present experience of tribulation. A promise of escaping tribulation through the Rapture would be meaningless to them. They are in the midst of tribulation right now.

Why is there tribulation? The Book of Revelation does not give us an answer until chapter 12. There is a dragon loose in the world; the dragon is Satan. First he sought to devour Christ, but God blocked him by snatching Jesus up to heaven. Next Satan tried to devour the Church, but God again blocked him. Satan next turns to the saints, the individual believers. This time God does not block him. Why

does God allow Satan to go after the saints? In the words of William Cowper that we sang,

God moves in a mysterious way  
his wonders to perform.

If we learn these hymns by heart, we can recall them to mind and find great comfort. The last verse reads,

Blind unbelief is sure to err  
and scan his works in vain;  
God is his own interpreter  
and he will make it plain.

If we look at the world through unbelieving eyes there is much that does not make sense, much that is grievous. But when we look through believing eyes we can trust that God knows what he is doing, that he is working out his purposes. I have called this series "The Seen and the Unseen." The Book of Revelation opens our eyes to the unseen realms to see that God is on the throne and that he is steadily working out his purposes, even through the suffering of his saints.

The church in Smyrna was in the midst of the tribulation at the end of the first century. Their poverty is probably a result of this tribulation. Most likely they were shut out of the local economy because of their loyalty to Christ. Smyrna was a prosperous port and a wealthy city, yet in the midst of such wealth the Christians were poor. But Jesus assures them that they are in fact rich. The Revelation opens our eyes to the unseen realms. In the seen world the believers in Smyrna are poor, but in the unseen world they are rich.

Jesus accredits this tribulation, at least in part, to "those who say they are Jews and are not." Most probably these are non-Christian Jews. For the first several decades the Christians were regarded as a sect of Judaism. The Romans regarded them as such. The Jews regarded them as such. The Christians saw themselves as such, while they resisted the pressure to require Gentile believers to become Jews. Wherever Paul went he first went to the synagogue, but the Book of Acts shows that everywhere he was forced to leave. The decisive break came with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. As the Romans approached the city following the outbreak of the Second Jewish War in AD 66, the Christians within Jerusalem fled the city. This was proof to the Jews that the Christians were not really Jews after all. Shortly after the fall of the city, the Jewish community incorporated into its daily prayers a curse on the Christians, the so-called *birkhat ha-Minim*: "Let the Nazarenes (Christians) and sectarians (*minim*) vanish in a moment! Blot them out of the book of life and do not record them among the righteous."

The Jews were granted certain rights by the Romans. The Romans had learnt that the Jews would rather die than be forced to engage in idolatrous practices. They were therefore exempt from the usual requirements of emperor worship, and also from military service which required obeisance to the idolatrous symbols of Rome. We can imagine the Jews denouncing the Christians to the Romans, telling them that they were not a Jewish sect at all, and that therefore they were not covered by these exemptions. The Jews claimed that the Christians were not Jews at all. But Jesus says that the behavior of the Jews shows that they are not real Jews; they are not acting as God's people. By opposing God's people they are functioning as a synagogue of Satan, as a Satanic congregation. Tough words indeed.

The church in Smyrna is a suffering church. What word of encouragement will Jesus give to such a church?

**Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (2:10)**

Some word of encouragement! Jesus makes it clear that their sufferings will continue. They will be thrown into prison. That might not seem too harsh a word for us in 2002. But in the ancient world, people were not sentenced to terms in prison. Prisons were holding centers for those awaiting trial, or for those awaiting execution. Jesus tells these Christians that they are to expect to die.

They will suffer persecution for ten days. It is certain that ten here is a symbolic number, but commentators differ as to whether ten days represents a long period of time or a short period of time. I take it as representing a complete but short period of time. Their suffering will last a complete period of time, but it will be only days not years. However, it is clear that the release which brings their suffering to an end is not freedom but death.

How are the Christians in Smyrna to face such suffering? Jesus gives them two commands: fear not, and be faithful. Two very simple commands, yet both very challenging. What does it mean to be faithful? In the context of the Book of Revelation, it means to bear witness to God and to Jesus. It means to avoid the triple deception of the dragon, the false prophet and Babylon: the deception of the dragon to oppose God, the deception of the false prophet to worship the beast and his image, the deception of Babylon to be intoxicated with her wares. Bearing witness does not mean keeping track of how many doors we knock on, of how many people we talk with each week about Christ. It's about loyalty. Smyrna had a reputation for loyalty to Rome. Christians are to have a reputation for loyalty to Jesus Christ.

It is clear that to be a faithful witness entails death. All of the faithful saints in the book end up dead. This was the fate of Antipas of Pergamum, whom Jesus describes as "my faithful witness" (2:13). This also was the fate of Jesus himself, described in the salutation as "the faithful witness" (1:5). Indeed the motivation to be a faithful witness comes from observing that this is just what Jesus did. We're all familiar with the WWJD slogan: what would Jesus do? That's a good question to ask. In the context of Revelation, Jesus would have been the faithful witness, faithful unto death. Indeed, he was. As the word of God he bore witness to God, and for that he was killed. The saints are called to walk in his footsteps.

Jesus follows up his two commands with a promise: to the saints in Smyrna who are faithful he will give a reward, the crown of life. The word for crown here, *stephanos*, from which we get our name Stephen, signifies a victor's wreath. This would be a familiar symbol in Smyrna, for the city hosted regular athletic contests, in which each victor was awarded a victory wreath. The victory for which the saints are awarded their wreath is not winning a race or a wrestling match, but winning a fight to the death, and they are the ones who die! The wreath is won simply by remaining faithful to the end. What is this victory wreath? It is life itself! The death of the saints ushers them into life.

#### 4. Promise to the Victor

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (2:11)**

Jesus ends his message to the church in Smyrna with a promise to the overcomer, the one who conquers, who is victorious. He assures him that he will not be hurt at all by the second death. This imagery of the second death reappears at the end of the book. The second death is the lake of fire (20:14; 21:8), the eternal destiny of all who are opposed to God. It is the destiny of the dragon (20:10), of the beast and the false prophet (19:20), of death and Hades (20:14), and of all whose names are not in the book of life (20:15). It is the place of eternal separation from God. This might seem a harsh idea to us, and many have tried to water it down, either by denying the existence of hell or by arguing for annihilation. But this is a very necessary idea. If God is to extend the holiness of heaven to earth, then he must remove all that is unholy from earth. His people he makes into saints, that is, ones who are holy. He thereby fits them for heaven. The rest he removes from the earth to a place of eternal separation from himself. Since all life is mediated by God, I cannot envision what life totally separated from God can possibly be like. Even the existence that Satan has at the moment is permitted him by God. A time is coming when God will remove all contamination of evil. Then he will be able to join heaven and earth together in a realm of complete holiness. The new heavens and the new earth that John sees at the end of the book are not possible until God banishes to the second death all that is opposed to him.

This eternal destiny in realms beyond earth is also an extension of life here on earth. I find considerable wisdom in C. S. Lewis' words in his Preface to *The Great Divorce*,

Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell; and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.

The faithful witness need not fear the second death, for he has already participated in the first resurrection (20:5). Contrary to some interpretations of the book of Revelation, I understand this first resurrection as taking place at the moment of the believer's physical death. At that moment he is ushered into the presence of God. These are the ones who have been killed "because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God," which is interpreted as meaning "they had not worshiped the beast or his image" (20:4).

And in this the believer is victorious. The Book of Revelation presents a topsy-turvy world of the victorious Christian life. The saints are all killed, going down to apparent defeat, but therein lies their victory. The dragon and the beast wage war against the saints and conquer them; the way they conquer is with death (11:7; 13:7). The saints are killed for their faithfulness to Jesus, for their refusal to worship the beast. But the tables are turned as the saints emerge victorious from death, for physical death is not the end. How do they conquer? They conquer through two things: the blood of the Lamb and the faithful testimony that they bear to Jesus (12:11; 15:2). They are victorious because Jesus has gone before them and has conquered Satan and death through his blood (5:5; 17:14). And they are victorious because they bear faithful witness to Jesus, who himself is the faithful witness. All they have to do to be victorious is to follow Jesus, holding on to him. For Jesus, the faithful witness, is also the firstborn from the dead, who will lead his followers through death. This topsy-turvy world is encapsulated within the twin images of Jesus as Lion and as Lamb. In chapter 5, John hears one of the elders proclaim, "See, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah...has triumphed (conquered)" (5:5). But what he sees is "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain" (5:6).

Just sixty years after this letter was written, ca. 155, Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, was killed. He was an old man of 86 years. He was a young man when the Book of Revelation was written. Perhaps he was present in the church in Smyrna when this message was read out. Polycarp was arrested and brought to the stadium where a crowd had gathered to watch the games. As he was bringing him to the stadium, the *irenarch*, the equivalent of our chief of police, asked him, "What harm is there in saying, Lord Ceasar?" Once inside the stadium, Polycarp was brought before the proconsul, the governor of the province, who said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent... I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ." But Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" The proconsul sent a herald into the center of the stadium to proclaim, "Polycarp has confessed himself a Christian." Then he had Polycarp burnt alive. Though it was the Sabbath day, the Jews helped collect wood for the fire. They betrayed their own understanding of God's law to murder God's faithful witness.

Polycarp was killed for his faithful witness. The Greek word for witness is *martyrs*. So common was it for Christ's witnesses to be killed during these first 300 years of the church that the word came to mean those who had died for their witness, the martyrs.

## B. Defying Death

The American church is not a suffering church. Death is not the expected lot of those who bear faithful testimony to Jesus. We do not live in risk of our lives. Yet I fear that many of us share the culture's fear of death. How do we live our lives in a way that defies death? Not the sort of defiance that would fly an airplane into the World Trade Center. But the defiance that would stand up to the authorities and quietly say, "So many years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

Maybe none of us will be called to die for our faith. But that does not mean the message to the church in Smyrna has no relevance for us. We are all called to a life of faithful witness. Those who are spared the second death are those who have refused to bow down and worship the beast and his image, and have refused the mark of the beast. This does not mean that we avoid carrying a credit card, or having a Social Security Number. It means we avoid getting entangled in the Satanic deceptions of this world. The Church is a colony of heaven on earth, an outpost of the kingdom of God. Where this kingdom confronts the kingdom of Satan there will necessarily be tribulation. No matter what form that tribulation takes we are to remain faithful. We are not to lash out, nor to respond in kind, nor to fret, nor to despair, nor to lose hope, nor even to be surprised. All we are called to do is rest in the Lord and be faithful. To enable us to do that we have been given eternal life. Literally this phrase means not everlasting life but "life of the ages," that is, life of the ages to come, the life of the new heavens and the new earth. Since we already have been given this life, we can face death without fear; the second death cannot harm us.

It is really very simple. All that Jesus asks us to do is to be faithful. This might seem like a little thing, but as Hudson Taylor said, "a little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a great thing." God doesn't call for spectacular heroics, yet being a faithful witness to the point of death is spectacular. So spectacular that in the first three centuries of the church many, many were converted through watching the martyrdom of the faithful saints. What was it, the spectators asked, that enabled these humble Christians to face death without fear? God makes the faithful witness of his saints very attractive to those who are seeking life. How many of us here came to faith through observing the faithful witness of another believer?

**Grace and peace to you from the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:5)**

Go and follow in his footsteps.

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 Revelation 2:12-17  
 Fifth Message  
 Bernard Bell  
 January 13th, 2002

# AVOIDING COMPROMISE

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Several years ago I read *Fear No Evil*, the autobiography of Natan Sharansky, the Soviet Jew who was imprisoned by the KGB in 1977 for requesting an exit visa to Israel. For nine years the KGB tried to break him. Realizing that direct force would not work, they tried subtly to make him compromise. But he refused to do so. Finally bowing to intense international pressure, Gorbachev released Sharansky and expelled him from the U.S.S.R. But when Sharansky arrived in Israel he found that life was unexpectedly complicated. Though he was now living in freedom, he looked back with a certain nostalgia to the true freedom he knew in his prison cell.

In freedom, I am lost in a myriad of choices. When I walk on the street, dozens of cheeses, fruits, and juices stare at me from store windows. There are vegetables here I've never seen or heard of, and an endless series of decisions that must be made: What to drink in the morning, coffee or tea? What newspaper to read? What to do in the evening? Where to go for the Sabbath? Which friends to visit?

In the punishment cell, life was much simpler. Every day brought only one choice: good or evil, white or black, saying yes or no to the KGB.<sup>1</sup>

In the black and white world of the KGB prison cell it was easy not to compromise. In the gray world of "freedom" it was much more difficult. We live in great freedom, but we are bombarded with choices. How do we navigate our way through these choices without compromising our identity as God's people? The Book of Revelation can help us greatly.

Today we come to the third message, that to the church in Pergamum. This church was tolerating those who were teaching that it was all right to compromise.

## A. The Message to the Church in Pergamum

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Pergamum:

**To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:**

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden

manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. (Rev 2:12-17 NIV)

### 1. Pergamum

**To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: (2:12a)**

Pergamum was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. In fact, the province of Asia was created out of the kingdom of Pergamum, which Rome acquired in 133 BC. The city of Pergamum lies 85 miles north of Ephesus and 15 miles inland. Its lack of a port would eventually cost it its status as capital. But at the end of the first century AD, although Ephesus was already the more important city, Pergamum was still the capital. As capital, it was the official seat of the proconsul, the governor of the province.

Pergamum owed its existence to the massive acropolis that looms a thousand feet above the surrounding plain. This acropolis was covered with a magnificent set of public buildings. The most prominent of these was a large theater cut dramatically into the side of the hill. There was a library, second only to the one in Alexandria. Our word parchment is derived from the name Pergamum, for whose library this new writing medium was developed. There were many temples. The oldest temple on the acropolis was to Athene, the goddess of Pergamum. Outside it stood the great altar of Zeus Soter (Zeus Savior), built in the third century BC to commemorate victory in battle. One hundred years ago the German excavators removed the altar to a museum in Berlin, leaving only the base. In 29 BC, Pergamum built a temple to Rome and Augustus, the first city in Asia to build a temple for the imperial cult. Shortly after the Revelation was written, another imperial temple was built, at the very top of the acropolis, this one dedicated to the emperor Trajan.

There were other temples in the city that spread out across the plain at the foot of the hill. Also at the foot of the hill was the Asklepeion, a famous medical center dedicated to Asklepius, the god of healing, whose symbol was the serpent. People came from all over the Roman Empire seeking healing.

In this city of Pergamum was a church. It would have been a house church; in this city filled with temples the church had no building of its own. This church was living in the shadow of the acropolis: in the physical shadow of the hill itself; in the spiritual shadow of the temples up there, temples that acclaimed Caesar as divine, Zeus as Savior, Asklepius as Healer. In this dark city the church was a lampstand, bearing witness to God, and bearing witness to the Lamb who is the true Lord, the true Savior, the true Healer. It is to this church that Jesus Christ writes the third message.

### 2. Self-description of Jesus

**These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. (2:12b)**

The symbol of official power in the Roman Empire was the short, double-edged sword. In the province of Asia ultimate judicial power

rested in the hands of the proconsul, whose official seat of power was Pergamum. The proconsul had the sole authority to condemn people to death, authority vested in him by the Emperor. But the power wielded by the proconsul is not absolute at all, though he may think it is. Jesus reminds the church that above the proconsul is a greater authority, that of Jesus himself. The eyes of the saints in Pergamum are opened to see into the unseen realms. In the seen world, Rome bears the sword; in the unseen world it is Jesus who bears the sword. This is the sword of which the saints are to be conscious.

### 3. Prophetic Message

We should now be familiar with the structure of the prophetic message that Jesus delivers to each church: a statement of his knowledge concerning affairs in the church, followed by a prophetic pronouncement based upon that knowledge. Jesus' statement of knowledge contains both commendation and chastisement. First the commendation:

**I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. (2:13)**

There has been much speculation about the identity of Satan's throne. Perhaps it was the altar of Zeus that perched on the edge of the hill. From all over the city people would have seen the smoke of the offerings, offerings that proclaimed Zeus as Savior. Perhaps it was the temple to Augustus that proclaimed Caesar as lord. Or the whole complex of temples atop the acropolis that loomed so dramatically over the city. Or the throne-like appearance of the theater. Or the Asklepiion dedicated to Asklepius the Healer with his serpent symbol. Or the city itself as the seat of Roman Empire. Perhaps it was all of these. The church in Pergamum lived in the shadow of great darkness. For all the magnificence of these buildings, the ruins of which amaze the tourist today, Jesus describes them as Satanic. To acknowledge Zeus as savior, Caesar as lord, Asklepius as healer, is Satanic. Satan was well enthroned in Pergamum. But Jesus knows where his saints are living. He wants them there, as a lampstand blazing away in the midst of great darkness.

It would have been easy for the church to grow discouraged, to feel overwhelmed by all that loomed over it. But it had not. The saints had remained true to the name of Jesus. They had continued to bear testimony to Jesus. They had been faithful even to the point of death. Antipas, whom Jesus describes as "my faithful witness," had been put to death. Probably he had been publicly executed, condemned by the proconsul who alone had the authority to impose the death sentence, the proconsul who wielded the sword of judicial authority. Yet even then, the Christians did not buckle. Even then they resisted the temptation to renounce their faith in Jesus. They had remained faithful in the face of great external pressure.

But all is not well in the church in Pergamum:

**Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (2:14-15)**

The church had remained faithful in the face of external attack, but it was tolerating internal attack from false teachers. Jesus identifies two types of false teaching: the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans. We have already met the Nicolaitans in the

message to the church in Ephesus. The saints there had exposed these people as false teachers, but the church in Pergamum was tolerating them. We know very little about the Nicolaitans and their teaching, but it was evidently the same as what is here identified as the teaching of Balaam. It was also the same as the teaching of Jezebel which the church in Thyatira was tolerating.

We read about Balaam and Balak in the Old Testament, in Numbers 22-24. As the Israelites advanced up the east side of the Jordan Rift Valley, they passed through the land of Moab, and camped on the bank of the Jordan River opposite Jericho. Balak the king of Moab was terrified. Enlisting the help of Midian, he sent the elders of Moab and Midian on a long journey north to the River Euphrates, where lived a sorcerer named Balaam. Balak offered to pay Balaam handsomely if he would cast a curse upon Israel, but the Lord repeatedly overruled so that Balaam instead blessed Israel. But Balaam was greedy for Balak's money, so he suggested a more subtle approach: send Moabite and Midianite women over to the Israelite camp. It worked: we read that the Israelite "men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods" (Num 25:1-2; cf. 31:16). What Balak was unable to do overtly by having Balaam curse Israel, he did covertly by having the Moabite women lead the Israelite men into compromise.

The Israelites had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt; they had met with God at Sinai and there been constituted as his people; they had been blessed with God's care through their wilderness wanderings; and now they were camped on the Jordan River ready to enter the Promised Land. But they were also camped on the edge of Moabite territory. They failed to keep their distance. They forgot their identity: God had redeemed them to be a distinct people. They forgot their destiny: their eyes should have been on the goal set before them, the Promised Land that lay across the river. Instead they turned their eyes to what was behind them, Moab. With their eyes turned the wrong way, the Israelite men fell prey to the enticements of the Moabite women. They engaged in sexual immorality, and they engaged in idolatry, worshiping the Moabite gods, and sharing in the feasts dedicated to these gods.

There were two sins: sexual immorality and eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. These were a snare for the Israelites camped on the plains of Moab. They were also a snare for Christians in the first century. Sexual immorality and idolatry were rampant throughout the Roman Empire, except among the Jews. The Romans thought it so odd that Jews and Christians worshiped only one God that they called them atheists. And they thought it so odd that Jews and Christians refused to participate in much of the social life of the Empire that they called them misanthropic—antisocial people-haters. Much of civil life in the Roman Empire revolved around the temples. The temples were among the most prominent public buildings in any city. The priests and priestesses of the temple cults enjoyed high stature. Good citizens were expected to offer sacrifices to the gods. Most social gatherings included offerings to the gods, followed by a festive meal featuring food offered to the gods.

The early church, being Jewish, remained apart from this promiscuous and idolatrous life of the Roman Empire. But as Gentiles were incorporated into the church, the church leaders had to face the issue. In Jerusalem a council of the church leaders was convened to consider this remarkable conversion of Gentiles. After much debate over whether or not the Gentile believers should be required to become Jews, the leaders wrote a letter to the Gentile believers.

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things” (Acts 15:28-29). The Gentile believers did not need to become Jews; the Church would henceforth include both Jews as Jewish believers and Gentiles as Gentile believers. God had broken down the dividing wall of hostility, making one new people out of Jew and Gentile. But the believers were to refrain from participation in the promiscuous and idolatrous life of Rome.

In Pergamum 45 years later there were teachers contradicting this clear directive. They were blurring the line between the church and the world. And unlike in Ephesus, the church in Pergamum was tolerating this teaching. Certainly this compromise made life easier for the church. The Christians could participate more fully in the life of the city. They could participate more fully in work life, in the activities of the guilds to which all tradesmen belonged. They were spared the ridicule of work colleagues and neighbors. They were spared the disapproval of the officials who wanted all people to demonstrate their loyalty to city and to Rome. But they were ceasing to be the church.

Therefore, Jesus issues a command and a warning:

**Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. (2:16)**

Jesus calls on the church to repent. Repent of its toleration of these false teachers. Repent of its compromise that had blurred the line between the church and the world. Repent of its entanglement in the life of the world.

If they do not repent, Jesus warns that he will come to them. This coming is not the blessing for which the faithful saints are longing. It is a coming in judgment upon the false teachers. By compromising, the church need not fear the judicial sword wielded by the proconsul, the sword that killed Antipas, the faithful witness. But the church has a greater sword to fear, that wielded by Jesus. At the end of the book Jesus appears as the rider on the white horse, effortlessly destroying his enemies with the sword coming out of his mouth. The Church in Pergamum was looking to the wrong judge. They were afraid of the Roman judge, when it is the heavenly judge they should be fearing. They were acting to minimize the risk of sentence from Rome, but this was throwing them right into the hands of the heavenly judge. Jesus does not want a compromised church. He will fight to cleanse it.

#### 4. Promise to the Victor

**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. (2:17)**

As in the other messages, Jesus issues a promise to the one who overcomes. In the context of the message to the church in Pergamum, the overcomer is the one who rejects this false teaching, who refuses to compromise, who resists getting entangled in the lifestyle of the Roman Empire. To this one Jesus promises to give three things: manna, a stone, and a name.

The faithful saints refuse to eat food sacrificed to idols. Such food may have been their only opportunity for meat. Meat was not part of the daily diet in the Mediterranean world, then or now. For their refusal to eat this earthly food, Jesus promises them manna, which is

heavenly food. It is hidden for it is unseen by the world. Jesus nourishes his people in this world, and he will nourish them in the next.

Jesus will give the faithful saints a white stone. There are many suggestions for the meaning of this white stone. The one which I find most appropriate to the context of this message understands the white stone as a token of acquittal. In courts of justice in the ancient world a black stone represented a guilt verdict and a white stone represented acquittal. When Paul made his defense to King Agrippa, he described how he had persecuted the church in Jerusalem: “On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them” (Acts 26:10). Literally, Paul cast a pebble, the same word as used here for “stone.” Though the faithful saints may be condemned by the authorities in Pergamum, Jesus will acquit them and usher them home into heaven.

The third thing Jesus gives is a new name. A name expresses identity. To the overcomer in the Philadelphia Jesus promises to write on him three names: “the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem...and my new name” (Rev 3:12). The identity of the believers lies in God, in Jesus, and in the New Jerusalem. It does not lie in Pergamum, in Asia, or in Rome. They are God’s people not Rome’s people, not Asia’s people, not Pergamum’s people.

#### B. Resisting Compromise

How are we to avoid compromise? The easy thing would be for me to simply say, “Don’t compromise otherwise Jesus will condemn you.” You would perhaps leave here with a renewed commitment not to compromise. Perhaps you would be motivated by a holy zeal for God, a zeal to live a holy life, a higher life, a victorious life. Perhaps you would be motivated by a fear of God’s judgment, of his disapproval. Before long you would confront the world. You would find yourself confronted with choices. How are you going to decide what to do? The obvious solution is to draw up a list of rules, a list of permissible and impermissible behavior. Many churches have followed this route, developing spoken or unspoken lists of what constitutes compromise with the world: smoking, drinking, dancing, going to movies, playing cards, growing facial hair. But this is legalism.

The Book of Revelation doesn’t follow this route. Jesus does not give these seven churches a detailed list of do’s and don’ts. He doesn’t carefully delineate the boundary between the church and the world in terms of daily behavior. What Jesus does instead is give the churches a vision, a vision of their identity and a vision of their destiny.

Jesus gives the churches a vision of their identity. They are lampstands. It would be much easier if the Christians could escape to the desert and live as a holy huddle, with no polluting contact with the outside world. But Jesus doesn’t want his churches to live like that. He wanted this church to be in Pergamum, in the shadow of the acropolis. Amidst a culture of immorality and idolatry the church is to shine as a bright light. He wants PBCC to be a lampstand in the midst of Silicon Valley, blazing with God’s light.

The book of Revelation describes two sets of people. One group is at home on the earth, living in Babylon. It bears the mark of the beast, and worships the beast. The other group, though living on earth, is not at home on earth. The members of this group will only be home when they are dwelling in heaven, for their home is the New Jerusalem. They bear the seal of the Lamb. Rather than worship the beast, they are destined for the throne where they will wor-

ship the Lamb. The Book of Revelation alternates between visions of heaven and visions of earth. It is these visions of heaven that remind the saints on earth of their true identity. They see that their martyred brethren like Antipas are already in heaven gathered around the throne of God and the Lamb. They see that, although the Roman beast thought it had conquered Antipas, it was Antipas who emerged victorious in the end.

Jesus gives the churches a vision of their destiny. The two sets of people have different destinies. Those who have been seduced by the deceptions of the dragon, the false prophet and Babylon are destined for the second death, the lake of fire, where they will be joined by the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, even death and Hades. They will be removed from God's presence. The faithful saints are destined for the new heavens and the new earth, for the New Jerusalem, where they will see the face of God and live forever in his presence. This is only what both sets of people have desired all along. Again to quote C. S. Lewis, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"<sup>2</sup> The faithful saints in Revelation are longing for the coming of Jesus. The rest are blaspheming God, hiding their faces from him, and trying to live their lives apart from him.

Most people consider that the Book of Revelation is useful only for developing timetables for the future. But this book is of tremendous value for today. We live in a gray world, in which it can be hard to discern right from wrong, permissible from impermissible. As Natan Sharansky found, it is much more difficult to avoid compromise in a gray world than in a black-and-white world. Revelation redraws the colors. In Revelation there are no grays, only black and white. You bear either the mark of the beast or the seal of the Lamb. You are either at home in this world or headed to be at home in heaven. Your home is either Babylon or the New Jerusalem. You either worship the beast or you are headed to worship the Lamb. There is no middle ground. The seen world is filled with gray. But the Revelation opens our eyes to the unseen world where things are black and white. This vision of the black and white of the unseen world sharpens our vision so that we can see more clearly in this seen world.

Though we are destined for the New Jerusalem, God wants us to live here in Cupertino. PBCC is to be a lampstand here in Silicon Valley. We don't avoid the world, separating ourselves into a monastic life. But we don't seek to become like the world. Instead, we live in the world but not of the world. We are no longer at home in the world. To walk the tightrope between being in but not of the world, we need a clear vision of our identity and of our destiny. This is what Revelation gives us. It is this vision that enables us to preserve our passion, defy death, and avoid compromise until Jesus comes.

Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus.

1. Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (New York: Random House, 1988), 423.

2. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Fontana, 1972 [1946]), 66-67.



Catalog No. 1506  
 Revelation 2:18-29  
 Sixth Message  
 Bernard Bell  
 July 14th, 2002

# RESISTING DECEPTION

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

We return today to the Book of Revelation, resuming the study of the seven messages to the churches that I began the three weeks after Christmas. In the next four Sundays we will cover the remaining four messages. The Book of Revelation continues to be in the news. It even made it to the cover of *Time Magazine* for July 1st: “The Bible and the Apocalypse: Why more Americans are reading and talking about the end of the world.” This cover story was timed to coincide with the release on July 2 of *The Remnant*, the tenth book in the *Left Behind* series, which is “now available everywhere.” People are interested in Revelation more than ever before. But what they’re interested in are the seals, the beast, Armageddon and the millennium. The seven messages to the churches receive relatively little attention. When people do turn to them, all too often they regard these seven churches as prophetic of seven ages of church history, and we are of course always in the seventh age. This means that the first six messages have nothing to say to us today. But these messages are integral to the book, both structurally and thematically. They were of vital importance to the seven churches to whom John wrote, and they are of vital importance for us today. This is true even of the message to the church in Thyatira, of which one commentator says, “The longest and most difficult of the seven letters is addressed to the least known, least important and least remarkable of the cities.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this was the only one of the seven cities that I did not visit last June, so I have no pictures to show you. Despite the relative obscurity of this message to Thyatira, I believe that of the seven messages this is the one that most closely mirrors the situation in Silicon Valley today.

## A. The Message to the Church in Thyatira

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Thyatira:

**To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:**

**These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.**

**Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come.**

**To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations —**

**‘He will rule them with an iron scepter;  
 he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ —**

**just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 2:18-29 NIV)**

Since it’s been six months since we last looked at these messages, let me briefly remind you of their structure, and of their place within the book as a whole. Each message consists of the same four parts. First, a command addressed by Jesus to John to write to a particular church. Second, the introductory formula “Thus saith,” followed by a self-description by Jesus. The words “Thus saith” are the language of Old Testament prophecy, for Jesus is consciously casting his messages to the churches in the same format as God’s messages to Israel and Judah. The self-description of Jesus is drawn from John’s vision of Jesus in chapter 1. Third, the actual message to the church, presented as a prophetic proclamation. This in turn consists of two parts: a statement of Jesus’ awareness of the condition of each church, whether negative or positive, followed by Jesus’ resolution as to what he is going to do with each church in the light of such conditions. Fourth, each message concludes with a promise to each one in the church who conquers, together with a statement that all the churches are to hear each message. The fulfillment of these promises is found in the last two chapters of the book.

Let me also remind you that the whole Book of Revelation is a letter addressed to these seven churches. Each message, though addressed to a particular church and having particular significance for that church, is also to be heeded by the other churches. The themes of the messages will recur throughout the Book. This means we first have to understand the book in the light of conditions in these churches before we can understand the book’s message for us today. Sadly, too many popular writers fail to do that.

### 1. Thyatira

**To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: (2:18a)**

Thyatira lay about forty miles south-east of Pergamum, the capital of the kingdom of the same name that, once captured by the Romans, was made into the province of Asia. Thyatira was a military outpost, guarding the vulnerable south-eastern approach to Pergamum. Itself in a vulnerable location, Thyatira suffered during the wars that waged across the region, as it was attacked by those seeking to capture Pergamum, then reclaimed by Pergamum and refortified to resist future attack. The city therefore had cause to be grateful when, twenty years before the birth of Jesus, Rome and its ruler Augustus brought peace to the region, inaugurating the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace. Thyatira’s military position was weak, but commercially it was in an advantageous location at a major crossroads. Once Rome had brought peace to the region, Thyatira thrived. We know from ancient inscriptions that it was a commercial hub in

which many trades flourished. We read of one of these trades in the Book of Acts, where Paul found in Philippi “a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira” (Acts 16:14). Already a “worshiper of God,” the “Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” and she became the first Christian convert in Europe.

Each trade in Thyatira had its own guild, in which everyone in that trade was expected to participate both commercially and socially. Here’s what William Barclay writes about the guilds:

They held common meals. These would very often be held in a temple and even if not, they would begin and end with a formal sacrifice to the gods, and the meat eaten would be meat which had already been offered to idols. Further, it often happened that these communal meals were occasions for drunken revelry and slack morality.<sup>2</sup>

This posed a dilemma for the Christians in Thyatira. Participation in the economic activity of the city required participation in the idolatrous practices of the guilds. What was Lydia to do if she returned home from Philippi? Forty years later, when John was writing to the church in Thyatira, what were the Christians to do? Refusal to participate in the idolatrous practices of the guilds would limit one’s economic opportunities.

This is where I find this message to Thyatira so relevant to us today. Of all seven cities I think that Thyatira is closest to Silicon Valley. We are not facing death at the hands of the authorities as in Pergamum, or at the hands of the Jews as in Smyrna. But most of you are involved in the commercial life of Silicon Valley. Many of you have experienced the tensions that this can bring. Full participation in the life of the Valley’s companies calls for sacrifices to the gods. Not the gods of the Greek or Roman pantheons, but the modern day gods: the stock market, the IPO, shareholder value, the bottom line. All around you are people dazzled by these gods. You are called to sacrifice your family life. Resistance to these expectations limits your hope of financial reward. How are you to keep yourselves pure?

What message does Jesus give to the church in Thyatira? Since “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” this is a message for Thyatira, for all seven churches in Asia, for all churches through time and space, and a very relevant message for us today, nineteen hundred years later and seven thousand miles away.

## 2. Self-description of Jesus

**These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. (2:18b)**

The first thing that Jesus does is direct the gaze of the believers to himself. Each of the seven messages begins this way, as does the whole block of seven messages. Immediately after John is given the command, “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches” (1:11), he is given an overwhelming vision of Jesus. One or two elements of the vision are re-used in each individual message. In the message to Thyatira it is the eyes like blazing fire and the feet like burnished bronze. The source of the imagery is the Old Testament, but it is also imagery that is familiar to the inhabitants of each of these cities. In Smyrna the believers are about to face martyrdom, but Jesus reminds them that he is “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (2:8). Pergamum, as capital of the province of Asia, was the seat of the proconsul, the governor of the province, who wielded the judicial sword, the symbol of his sole authority to sentence people to death; Antipas had already been killed by the authorities for his faithful witness. But Jesus reminds the believers there that he is the one “who has the sharp, double-edged sword” (2:12). In

Thyatira as the believers walked about the city, no doubt they would pass many statues: statues of the emperors, statues of the gods. Some of these statues were probably made of “burnished bronze,” bronze that has been so polished that it glistens and dazzles. Probably this burnished bronze was a Thyatiran specialty. The tradesmen of Thyatira were dazzled by their gods, dazzled by Rome which had brought peace, dazzled by her emperors, dazzled by Caesar Domitian who styled himself as divine, as the son of God. But the Christians are not to be so dazzled. They are to be dazzled by Jesus, who, in imagery picked up from Daniel 10, is portrayed with feet of burnished bronze. Jesus with his eyes of burning fire, his all-penetrating gaze. Jesus who is the true Son of God. When the believers so see Jesus, they will realize that all others are imposters.

A side-bar to the main article in *Time*, offers a definition of The Apocalypse: “From the Greek word meaning ‘revelation’ or ‘the lifting of the veil’: used to describe evangelical-Christian ideas of the world’s cataclysmic end and the beginning of Christ’s kingdom on Earth.” The most frequent mistake about the Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse, is to think that its unveiling concerns only the world’s cataclysmic end. This book is so important for us today not because it helps us fill in our timetables of the end, but because it unveils present realities.

The Book of Revelation portrays the conflict between the true and the counterfeit. Because it is the counterfeit that is normally seen, John and the churches need a revelation of the true that is normally unseen. This revelation begins with a vision of Jesus, a vision of Jesus that orients both John and the seven churches. It is the vision of Jesus that orients us. As we go through the week here in Silicon Valley we become progressively disorientated as the visible world increasingly takes center stage and idols compete for our loyalties. This is why it is so important for us to gather on Sunday morning to be reoriented. We come together to center ourselves on God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We affirm that we are his people, redeemed by the Lamb, filled with the Spirit. The first thing that the Christians in Thyatira need is to see Jesus, and the first thing that we need is to see Jesus. And it needs to be a vision that so dazzles and overwhelms us, that it leads us to worship, as it did John in chapter 1.

## 3. Prophetic Message

Next, Jesus issues his prophetic message to the church: a statement of his knowledge concerning affairs in the church, followed by a prophetic pronouncement based upon that knowledge. Jesus’ statement of knowledge, introduced by the phrase “I know,” contains both commendation and chastisement. First the commendation:

**I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. (2:19)**

There is much about the church in Thyatira that is praiseworthy. Her deeds are fourfold, and are presented as two pairs, a pair of internal attitudes, and a pair of external behaviors that flow from those attitudes. Her internal love leads to external service; her internal faith leads to external perseverance.

But all is not well in the church in Thyatira, as, with the words “But I have against you,” Jesus turns to chastisement:

**Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. (2:20-21)**

There is in Thyatira a woman whom Jesus calls Jezebel, whom the church is tolerating. Jezebel is presumably not her real name, but an epithet that she has brought upon herself because her behavior is similar to that of Jezebel in the Old Testament. We read of Jezebel in 1 Kings 16,

**Ahab son of Omri did more evil in they eyes of the LORD than any of those before him. He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians, and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him. (1 Kgs 16:30-33)**

Jeroboam was the first king of the northern kingdom Israel after the division of the kingdom upon the death of Solomon. His sins, as recorded in 1 Kings 12, were to establish a compromised religion. Because Jerusalem lay in the other kingdom, Judah, Jeroboam established his own places of worship in Dan and Bethel, where he set up golden calves. He established his own priesthood using non-Levitical priests. He established his own festivals on days “of his own choosing.” Ahab went further than this. When he married Jezebel, a foreigner, she brought her Baal worship with her. Not only did Ahab join her in worshipping Baal, but this Baal-worship became the religion of the land. Why did Ahab marry Jezebel? He married her to get ahead. This marriage forged an alliance with Sidon, one of the chief trading nations of the day. For economic and political gain he sold his soul to Baal.

Just as Ahab’s Jezebel led Israel astray, so the Thyatiran Jezebel was leading the Thyatiran church astray. Her teaching was leading the church into two sins: sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. Presumably she was teaching that it was acceptable to participate fully in the life of the guilds. Such participation, as we have seen, would engage the believers in eating food sacrificed to idols. Whether the sexual immorality is literal or figurative is probably a moot point: the two were closely associated in the ancient world, and throughout the Bible adultery is used figuratively of idolatry. By blurring the line between the church and the world, Jezebel was compromising both the faith and the lifestyle of the church. Jezebel is described as a deceiver, a role later played also by the dragon, by the false prophet and by Babylon. It is because there is so much deception in the visible world that we need a revelation of the unseen world where there is no deception, that we need regular reminders of the true, regular liftings of the veil. This is what the Book of Revelation provides.

Jesus’ prophetic pronouncement, issued in light of Jezebel’s lack of repentance and the church’s tolerance of her, comprises a warning of judgment upon the guilty and a word of encouragement to the innocent few. First, the judgment:

**So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. (2:22-23)**

Because Jezebel has cast the church onto the bed of adultery, Jesus will cast her onto a bed. But it will not be a bed of pleasurable delights. Rather it will be a bed of suffering, a bed of judgment. Jesus will extend this judgment to all those who have been deceived into following Jezebel. Such judgment sounds harsh and uncivilized to us, but such judgment is a necessary part of Jesus ridding his church

of evil. He has redeemed the church to be his bride, not to be intoxicated with the world.

Many in the church would have looked like Christians, for they were active in their service and perseverance. But internally they were compromised. They were letting go of Jesus. As the one with eyes like blazing fire, Jesus’ gaze penetrates deep. Nothing can be hidden from his penetrating gaze. He examines the hearts and minds of each person in Thyatira; he knows the hidden motives of each person in their interaction with the world.

But not all have succumbed to the teaching of this Jezebel. To these faithful saints Jesus issues a simple command by way of encouragement:

**Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. (2:24-25)**

How are the faithful believers to remain faithful in a city where they are being enticed to compromise? The simple solution would be to give them a list of rules, rules governing permissible and impermissible behavior. But Jesus doesn’t do that. He specifically says that he will not impose any other burden on them than the simple command: “only hold on to what you have.”

This language is similar to that issued by the Jerusalem Council: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:28-29). As Gentiles came into the church, there was pressure from some Jewish believers to require these Gentiles to become Jews, to take upon themselves the Jewish identity markers of circumcision and Torah observance. The Jerusalem church decided that it was the Holy Spirit’s will not to burden the believers with such rules. Likewise, Jesus does not burden the Thyatiran church with rules. He doesn’t give them anything new. Instead, he tells them to do only one thing, to hold on to what they already have. They already have what it takes to withstand deception and compromise. In the context of Revelation, what they already have is Jesus. The saints, redeemed by Jesus to be his bride, are to hold on to Jesus.

#### 4. Promise to the Victor

**To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations —**

**‘He will rule them with an iron scepter;  
he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ —**

**just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. (2:26-28)**

As in the other messages, Jesus issues a promise to the one who overcomes, the one who is victorious. In the context of the message to the church in Thyatira, the overcomer is the one who resists Jezebel’s deception, the one who holds on to Jesus. To this one Jesus promises to give two things: authority and the morning star. The faithful believers seem powerless in the face of the guilds. But in the end the tables will be turned. Since the quotation from Psalm 2 is applied elsewhere to Jesus, the overcomers will be elevated to reign with Jesus. Not only will Jesus share his rule with the faithful believers, he will also give them himself, for he is the morning star, so identified in 22:17. As with the promises at the end of each of the other messages, these two promises are realized at the end of

the book. Christ's faithful followers in Thyatira are assured that they need not fear what happens in the middle of the book, the seals, the trumpets, the bowls. If they are victorious they will emerge at the end of the book into the new heavens and the new earth. They might suffer economically, but as long as they hold on to Jesus they will overcome.

## B. Resisting Deception: Holding on to what we already have

How are we to resist deception today? How are we to avoid compromise with the world? How are we to live in Silicon Valley without being sucked into its deceptions? For the past two thousand years the Church has wrestled with how to live in the world but not of the world. Some Christians leave the world, retreating to monasteries, but God wants us in the world as a witness to his redeeming grace. He wanted his Church in Thyatira, and he wants his Church in Silicon Valley. The key to resisting deception is to hold on to what we already have. More broadly in the context of the New Testament, what we already have is the Bible, which we hold to be God's word to us. More narrowly in the context of Revelation, what we already have is Jesus.

### 2.1 Holding on to the Bible

All Christians acknowledge the importance of the Scriptures, but many groups of Christians have found the Scriptures insufficient for living life in the world. They therefore add new teachings so that what the believers have is the Bible plus something else. Jezebel was doing this in Thyatira, adding new teaching that it was acceptable to compromise with the world. The apostle Paul is emphatic that those to whom he writes are to pass on the pure apostolic teaching. To the church in Thessalonica he writes, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess 2:15). To Timothy, pastor of the church in Ephesus, he writes, "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care" (1 Tim 6:20); "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (2 Tim 1:13-14); "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim 2:2).

The visible church today is split into three major groups: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. Each has added to the apostolic teaching of Scripture in different ways. The Catholic Church, in which many of you here grew up, has added Tradition. This Tradition, which is the official magisterial understanding of the Catholic Church, is steadily expanding as the papacy makes official pronouncements backed up by the claim of papal infallibility. The Bible cannot be understood except with reference to this Tradition, and frequently the Tradition has been elevated far above Scripture. The Orthodox Church also stresses Tradition, but it is a very different Tradition. It is the fixed Tradition of the early church, particularly as developed by the early Greek Fathers. The Orthodox Church is thus caught in a time warp dating from AD 300-800. The Protestant Church rejects both types of Tradition. The Protestant Reformers sought to return *ad fontem*, back to the source, and that source was the Bible. Stripping away so much that had been added over the centuries, they summarized their understanding in the four solas: *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone; *sola gratia*, grace alone; *sola fide*, faith alone; and *solus Christus*,

Christ alone. These were the four clarion calls of the Reformation. But the Protestant Church, while decrying Tradition, has been very busy adding its own traditions. Sometimes these traditions take the form of rules: no dancing, no smoking, no drinking, the purpose of which is usually to prevent worldly compromise. But the apostolic church was careful not to burden believers with rules. Sometimes the traditions take the form of doctrinal statements which add to the teaching of Scripture, or which have a specificity that goes far beyond Scripture.

But I fear what is increasing plaguing the evangelical church today is the outright neglect of Scripture. PBC, whether in Palo Alto or Cupertino, has shared that belief of the Reformers in returning to the source. That is why we lay such emphasis on the study and teaching of the Scriptures. Scripture is what we have, and so I gladly affirm *sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone. In the Scriptures we have the gospel that proclaims salvation is by faith alone and by grace alone and through Christ alone, and so I gladly affirm *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Christus*.

### 2.2 Holding on to Jesus

I do not hold on to Scripture for its own sake, as if there were something magical about it. I hold on to it because it testifies to the Lord Jesus Christ, and so I hold on to Jesus. Revelation refreshes our vision, bringing Jesus constantly before us, so that we hold on to him. Sadly, this cover story in *Time* made very little reference to Jesus. When it did it was solely with respect to his Second Coming. One pastor, commenting about "the surge in End Times interest," is quoted as saying "people...long to see Jesus." But it is clear that he is talking only about Jesus at his Second Coming. We should long for Jesus to come, and that will be the theme of next week's message. But what we need is to see Jesus today. We need a vision of Jesus that so dazzles us that we will not be dazzled with the deceptions of this world, so dazzled that we pledge allegiance to Jesus, whether or not the words "under God" are in the pledge of allegiance.

To assist us in reorienting ourselves onto Jesus, we're going to close by singing two hymns that extol him. *How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds* was written by John Newton, who as captain of a slave trading ship was thoroughly enmeshed in the commercial life of the expanding British Empire, profiting greatly at the expense of countless captives. Transformed by God's amazing grace in Christ, he became a pastor and wrote hundreds of hymns. *The Church's One Foundation* was written by Samuel Stone to affirm the Church's historic understanding of itself and of its relation to the triune God.

**Jesus...my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring.**

**To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen (Rev 1:5b-6)**

1. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 106.

2. William Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (2 vols.; DSB; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976), 1:102.



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Revelation 3:1-6

Seventh Message

Bernard Bell

July 21st, 2002

# STAYING ALERT

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week I indulged in some Seventies nostalgia by watching the movie *A Thief in the Night* (1972), featuring Larry Norman's song "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." More amazing than the seventies' clothing and hairstyles was the movie's portrayal of the Book of Revelation. I could see little evidence that the book the movie-makers were using is the same as the book that I read. I watched the movie as part of my preparations for today's sermon on the message to the church in Sardis.

## A. The Message to the Church in Sardis

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Sardis:

**To the angel of the church in Sardis write:**

**These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.**

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 3:1-6 NIV)

### 1. Sardis

**To the angel of the church in Sardis write: (3:1a)**

In the sixth and seventh centuries BC, Sardis, capital of the kingdom of Lydia, was a fabulously wealthy city. King Midas of Phrygia, desperate to rid himself of his legendary golden touch that he had initially so prized, was instructed to wash in the River Pactolus. Henceforth, it was the river that ran with gold, bringing great wealth to Sardis situated on its banks. Here were minted the earliest coins, of electrum, a gold-silver alloy. The city was built atop an acropolis that rises one thousand feet above the plain. In times of peace the small hilltop proved insufficient, and a settlement was established on the plain at the foot of the hill. The acropolis is composed not of rock, but of compacted earth, which has been eroded to form precipitous sides. A single narrow path led to the citadel. Here the kings of Lydia dwelt secure, convinced they were invulnerable. But twice Sardis was captured, and in exactly the same manner.

The first to capture this seemingly invincible stronghold was the Persian ruler Cyrus in 547 BC. Eager to thwart the advance of Cyrus into Asia, Croesus, king of Lydia, had consulted the oracle at Delphi about the advisability of taking a preemptive strike against Cyrus. The oracle replied that if he did so he would destroy a great empire. Croesus ventured forth, fought an indecisive battle against Cyrus, then

retreated to his stronghold Sardis to prepare for another campaign the next year. But, to his surprise, Cyrus came after him. The Greek historian Herodotus, writing a hundred years later, describes what happened:

This is how Sardis was taken. On the fourteenth day of the siege Cyrus sent officers to ride round his lines and tell the troops that he promised a reward for the first man to scale the wall. Following this an attempt was made in force, but it failed and was abandoned; then a Mardian named Hyroeades resolved to try at a point in the fortifications which was unguarded, because a successful attack had never been supposed possible. It was a section of the central stronghold so precipitous as to be almost inaccessible...

On the previous day Hyroeades had seen one of the Lydians fetch a helmet, which had rolled down this precipitous slope, and the sight of the man climbing down set him thinking. He had then made the ascent himself, and other Persians followed; after this a great many more followed up, and Sardis was taken and sacked.<sup>1</sup>

Croesus made the fatal mistake of thinking Sardis impregnable. He did not bother to place guards on the walls at those places where the cliffs were most precipitous. But Cyrus' alert soldiers found a way in. Croesus never imagined that the empire he would destroy would be his own.

Three hundred years later, in 214 BC, Sardis was captured in exactly the same manner. A few men from the army of Antiochus the Great scaled the cliffs at their most precipitous point and again found the walls unguarded. In both instances, the invaders entered Sardis like a thief in the night, when the inhabitants were least expecting it.

As if this weren't enough, an earthquake devastated Sardis in AD 17. Living in the Bay Area, we all know that earthquakes come like a thief in the night. Though Sardis was rebuilt, and enjoyed a fair measure of prosperity, her glory was 650 years in the past by the time Jesus addressed this church.

### 2. Self-description of Jesus

**These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. (3:1b)**

There are numerous parallels between the first three and second three churches. Each of the first three churches is paralleled by one of the second three. Smyrna and Philadelphia each receive no condemnation, and each face opposition from the synagogue of Satan. Pergamum and Thyatira are each being misled into eating food sacrificed to idols and into committing sexual immorality. Ephesus and Sardis form the third pair. Jesus introduces himself to these two churches in similar manner. To the church in Ephesus he is the one "who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands" (2:1). To Sardis he is the one "who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1). The seven lampstands are the churches, the seven stars are the angels of the churches, the heavenly representatives of these colonies of heaven on earth. The seven spirits, or the seven-fold spirit, are God's power at work in these churches. All three images emphasize that Jesus is at the center of the Church.

These seven churches are set amidst the pagan Roman Empire, but at the center of the churches stands Jesus not Caesar. These churches have a visible presence on earth, but they are actually heavenly entities, heavenly colonies on earth. These seven churches contain humans with human agendas, but it is actually the seven-fold spirit of God who moves through the churches.

Ephesus has lost its love (2:4), Sardis has lost its life (3:1). Both had forgotten that they were the church of Jesus Christ. The church needs repeatedly to be brought face to face with Jesus, to remind it of what it is. It is not a social club; nor an organization for the perpetuation of the cherished traditions of the founding fathers. It is first and foremost the group of believers who confess Jesus as Lord and who follow him. May we never forget that “the Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.”

### 3. Prophetic Message

**I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. (3:1c)**

The church in Sardis is in such bad condition that Jesus launches straight into condemnation. It has a reputation of being alive. But it’s all a sham: in fact the church is dead. The church is still alive physically, but it has lost its life spiritually. I find it significant that the two churches which receive only condemnation are the two churches in which there is no opposition. Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira are beset internally by false teachers. Smyrna and Philadelphia are beset externally by the false Jews who seek to kill the believers. But in Sardis and Laodicea there is no opposition, either internal or external. When the church faces no opposition it gets flabby. It loses its passion and its vitality.

What word does Jesus give to such a church that has lost its life? He gives a set of commands, followed by a warning of judgment. First the commands.

**Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. (3:2-3a)**

Jesus issues five commands in staccato fashion: wake up, strengthen, remember, obey, and repent.

The first command is doubly relevant to Sardis. The word means “to remain awake because of the need to continue alert.”<sup>2</sup> It has a two-pronged meaning: being awake in the present so as to be alert for the future. Twice in the history of Sardis, this impregnable city had fallen because her ruler had failed to be alert, had failed to place watchmen on the battlements. The church in Sardis has fallen into the same trap as King Croesus. Its activity, its reputation for life, has lulled it into a false sense of security. But it is dead and needs to wake up. The Greek verb is *grēgoreō*, so let all of you men who are called Gregory or Greg particularly remember this command to be alert, for your name means “watchful.”

Second, Jesus calls the church to strengthen what remains. Life in Sardis has not been completely snuffed out, though it is close. There is still a dying ember which can be fanned back into flame. How is this dying ember to be fanned back into life? By remembering, obeying and repenting. Jesus calls the Sardis church to remember and repent, the same two commands he gave the Ephesus church (2:5). She is to remember who she is, and repent of her overconfidence, of her self-sufficiency, of losing sight of who she is. Revival within the church always comes from returning to the central truths that have been forgotten, never from some new teaching. The church is to obey, or better “keep.” Elsewhere in Revelation, this verb is used of keeping

the word of Jesus, the commandments of God, and the words of this book. Again the focus is on being true to God and to Jesus.

If the church in Sardis fails to be alert, Jesus warns of impending judgment.

**But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. (3:3b)**

Just as the enemy had twice entered Sardis like a thief in the night, so Jesus will come to the church in Sardis. Many people see a reference here to the Rapture, the sudden removal of the church from the world. According to the understanding of the End Times that prevails in the American evangelical church today, there will be the Great Tribulation, lasting for seven years, followed by Armageddon, then the millennium. Jesus will return not once, but twice. His first return will be secret and invisible, to snatch the church out of the world either at the beginning of the Great Tribulation (pre-tribulation rapture) or midway through (mid-tribulation rapture). At the end of the Tribulation Jesus will return visibly to inaugurate his millennial kingdom on earth. Because the church is raptured out of the earth, it is thus spared most or all of the tribulation on earth. The predominant view is the pre-tribulation rapture. This is the view espoused by the *Left Behind* series, and by the movie *A Thief in the Night*.

But the Rapture is a novel doctrine within the church, a belief that dates back no further than the late nineteenth century. Though it has become dogma in much of the American evangelical church it rests on what I consider to be very shaky Biblical ground. The few verses that are cited as evidence of the Rapture have historically been understood in a completely different manner. I see no evidence in Scripture for a secret rapture of the church which removes it from tribulation on earth. As I have said before, the New Testament is clear that suffering and tribulation are the expected lot of the church on earth. John, in exile on Patmos, introduces himself to the churches as “your brother and companion in the suffering (tribulation)...that are ours in Jesus” (1:9). The church in Smyrna is already in the midst of tribulation (2:9). The expected lot of the saints in Revelation is martyrdom: death resulting from their faithful witness. The original meaning of martyr, the meaning that it has in Revelation, is “witness.” It is because so many witnesses were killed for their faith that the word acquired what for us is its primary meaning.

Belief in the Rapture could only have arisen in a land where the church does not face tribulation today, where it does not have martyrs, where Christians are free to pontificate in their cozy armchairs. That begs the question as to whether the lack of tribulation is due to flabbiness in the church. But there are plenty of places today where the church does face tribulation. Offering them a future Rapture which snatches them from suffering trivializes their present tribulation. Is belief in the Rapture so prevalent because the American church doesn’t know how to suffer, doesn’t want to suffer?

I have a more serious objection to the Rapture: it diverts us from the main thing. Americans hold on to belief in the Rapture because they want to be spared suffering. This is why the pretribulation rapture position is so attractive. This is clearly the message of the movie *A Thief in the Night*. People are urged to turn to Christ so that they be spared the coming tribulation. Yes, Jesus is coming, and I am to long for that day. But the reason I long for the coming of Jesus is not that I might be spared tribulation on earth, but that I might see Jesus and be with him.

Jesus warns the church in Sardis, “if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief.” The context demands that this coming of Jesus is not to remove the church from tribulation but a coming in judgment. There is a single coming of Jesus that we await. This coming will be

simultaneously in judgment and in salvation, as has been every other manifestation of the coming of God. To the faithful followers of Jesus, his coming will mean the completion of their salvation. To those who reject and oppose Jesus, his coming will mean final judgment. Which side will the church in Sardis find itself on? Will it find the sudden appearance of Jesus to be good news or bad news? That is a very sobering question. The fact that it claims to be a church does not guarantee its safety.

Fortunately, not all in Sardis have lost their vitality. Jesus sees a few who have remained faithful, and he commends them:

**Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. (3:4)**

There are still some in Sardis who have not soiled their garments by compromise with the world. Jesus promises that they will walk with him, dressed in white, symbolic of their purity. Elsewhere in Revelation, we know that the white garments are a divine gift, not a human creation. A victorious Roman general or emperor was usually awarded a triumph in Rome, a parade through the streets of Rome, to the acclaim of crowds dressed in white. Perhaps the same imagery is present here. When Jesus returns at his parousia, he will lead his faithful saints in triumphal procession. A faithful few in Sardis are awaiting this parousia, but most are not watchful.

#### 4. Promise to the Victor

**He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. (3:5)**

The overcomer or victor in Sardis is the one who remains alert: alive in the present and watchful for the future. To him Jesus promises three things: white garments, a secure entry in the book of life, and acknowledgment of his name before God. The book of life is the citizen's register of those whose home is heaven. The third promise suggests that many in the church were afraid to confess the name of Jesus before the world. Those who are not so ashamed or afraid, Jesus will confess their names before his Father and the heavenly court.

## B. Staying Alert

Last week I said that of all seven cities it is Thyatira that most closely parallels Silicon Valley. Broadening the horizon to consider the American church as a whole, I find that it is the message to Sardis that gives me most food for thought. How do we stay alert today? The church in Sardis was told to stay alert for two reasons: it was more dead than alive, and Jesus would return at any moment. Just like Sardis, we need to stay alert both for the present and for the future.

### I. Alert for the present

The church in Sardis, while having a name for being alive, was actually dead. It needed to wake up and get some life. There are many churches today that are in the same situation. In the world's eyes they seem to be alive, but in Jesus' eyes they are dead. Why? Because they have forgotten that they are part of the Church of Jesus Christ. Similarly, church history is littered with churches outwardly alive but inwardly dead. When the church loses sight of its Head it first loses its passion, as in Ephesus. Next it loses its very life, as in Sardis.

Many American churches today show amazing vitality, but does this count as life in the eyes of Jesus? Yesterday I came across this report:

Glendale, Arizona's Community Church of Joy has initiated a \$100 million capital campaign to add, among other things, a housing development to its menu of offerings. Judging its sprawling campus, conference center, school, mini-mall, and mortuary insufficient to

meet all extant needs, Senior Pastor Walt Kallestad believes that the addition of a hotel, a water park, and subdivisions will help transform the Church of Joy into what he hopes will be a genuine "destination center"...

According to David Kinnaman, vice president of Barna Research, which advises "24/7" churches, this only makes sense in an environment where people "are looking at churches with a similar cost-benefit analysis they'd give to any other consumer purchase." After all, Kinnaman notes, one out of every six adult churchgoers "church-hops" annually "based on their need du jour... There is little brand loyalty. Many are looking for the newest and the greatest."<sup>3</sup>

A church with a school, conference center, Starbucks, water park, and its own subdivision would have a great reputation in the world's eyes for being alive. But what about in Jesus' eyes? What the church needs is not a water park, not even a Starbucks. What it needs is Jesus. The more a church seeks to cater to all the perceived needs of its congregation, the more it risks neglecting the one glaring need, the need for Jesus.

We gather on Sunday mornings to remind ourselves that we are the church of Jesus Christ. This morning's service was carefully crafted to facilitate that. We opened with a call to worship, drawn from Revelation 5, a vision of the heavenly throne room where God and the Lamb receive the praise and adoration of the heavenly choir. Each of the services in this series of four will begin with a call to worship drawn from the throne room visions of Revelation: last week from chapter 4, today from chapter 5, next week from chapter 7, and the fourth week from chapter 11. If I had more weeks, we would carry on to chapters 12, 15, 19. Did you know that Revelation contains all this worship? Many people I've talked with are astounded to learn this. And no wonder, given the books that people are reading. Where is Jesus in these books? He is there, but playing a minor role in his two returns. The focus is not on Jesus, but on the seals, the trumpets, the bowls; on the beast, and his number and mark; on Armageddon and the millennium. But you can't read many verses of Revelation without being brought into the heavenly throne room to see God and the Lamb. And it is always the same thing that is going on in that throne room: worship. The cherubim, the elders, the saints, all are worshiping God and the Lamb for what they have done. The worship of the heavenly choir is the automatic response to the activity of God and the Lamb.

Next in our service, we on earth joined the heavenly choir in singing worship to Jesus Christ: "Rejoice, the Lord is King!" But when we truly direct our gaze to God we become aware of our own inadequacies. Inadequacy to worship God aright, so we asked God to tune our hearts to sing his grace. Inadequacy to follow him aright, so we sang "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love." This sense of inadequacy led us into Psalm 5: "Give ear to my words, O Lord." We continued in the psalter with a responsive reading of Psalm 62, which juxtaposes the frailty of man with the confidence that God alone is our rock and salvation. This is my fifth message on the churches. Each of the five services has included a responsive reading from the psalter to tie together Israel's songbook, the psalter, with the Church's supplement, the Book of Revelation.

Having confessed our inadequacy, sin and frailty, we hold on to our hope of an advocate on high: "Before the throne of God above I have a strong and perfect plea." Since we are prone to wander, prone to forget that we are the Lord's, what do we hold onto when we fail? We hold onto Jesus Christ, who intercedes at the Father's right hand, ensuring that the Father never forget that we are the people for whom he died, that we are the Church of Jesus Christ. Therefore I can gladly sing, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

This brought us full circle so we could sing another song of praise, “O God Beyond All Praising.”

What was going on during that half-hour? We were being reoriented. During the week, as we were bombarded with overt and subtle messages, as we were subjected to stresses great and small, as we were dazzled by things serious or trivial, it was easy to lose sight of Jesus. This morning we refreshed our vision.

Let me use an analogy from the world of computers. Older system software, and poorly written software even today, suffers from fragmentation of RAM and from memory leaks. Eventually a system reboot is necessary to consolidate the memory allocation. Similarly, as files are written to and erased from a hard drive, the hard drive becomes fragmented. You need to run a defragmentation utility to restructure and consolidate the data. A similar thing needs to happen to us on Sunday mornings. We restructure our memory. We consolidate our identity. We remind ourselves that we are the church of Jesus Christ, redeemed from our sin by the Lamb unto the Father and filled with the Spirit. Yesterday I came across a great quote to this effect by Garrison Keillor: “Sunday feels odd without church in the morning. It’s the time in the week when we take our bearings, and if we miss it, we’re just following our noses.”<sup>4</sup>

I don’t care whether the texts we sing are old or new. Last week we sang *Holy God, We Praise Thy Name*, an English setting of the *Te Deum*, a fourth century Latin poem. Today we sang a contemporary arrangement of Psalm 5, a text from three thousand years ago. *O God Beyond All Praising* was written just twenty years ago and set to an English folk tune. *Before the Throne of God Above* was written in 1863, but set to a tune from 1993. Let’s dispense with the fallacy that old is good and new is bad, or that old is bad and new is good. It matters not whether the text or the tune are old or new, whether we sing to piano or guitar, whether with or without the drums. What matters is whether or not we are brought face to face with God and with his Christ. The purpose of worship is not to leave us feeling good, but to leave us saying that we are the people of God, redeemed by grace, that we are the Church of Jesus Christ.

## 2. Alert for the future

If worship, and the remembering it brings, are essential to staying alert in the present, how do we stay alert for the future? How do we remain watchful for the day when Jesus will return? Many say that we need to be carefully monitoring world events, trying to match them up against Biblical prophecy, so that we will know when the end is nigh, and the return of Jesus is upon us. Last week all the stock market indices tumbled. But did you know that the Rapture Index rose two points? You can find the index at [raptureready.com](http://raptureready.com).

The key to staying alert for the future is exactly the same as for the present. We need to turn our gaze not onto world events, but onto Jesus. Seven times in Revelation, Jesus says, “I am coming” (*erchomai*, 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20). When Jesus comes he will simultaneously bring salvation and judgment, for this is what it is always like when God comes on the Day of the Lord. Each of the seven times Jesus says “I am coming,” it is a word of hope and comfort to his people, his faithful followers. The final such saying is in the penultimate verse of the book: “He who testifies to these things [i.e., Jesus] says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20). I have increasingly come to think that this penultimate verse is crucial to the message of the book. Revelation so refreshes our vision, so reveals the true and the counterfeit, that when at the end Jesus says, “I am com-

ing soon,” our automatic, heartfelt response is to cry, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.” Not that Jesus would come so that we are raptured out of tribulation. Not that Jesus would come because that gets us closer to the end. But that Jesus would come because it’s him!

This raises a very sobering question for me, a question that has been much on my mind for a year or more. Would the coming of Jesus be a delight or an inconvenience? Would it be an inconvenience because my focus is on the things not yet accomplished on earth: my portfolio hasn’t yet recovered, my options haven’t yet vested, I haven’t yet gotten married, I haven’t yet made it to CEO, I haven’t yet started my own company, I haven’t yet been vindicated in some dispute, I haven’t yet... I haven’t yet... Or would the coming of Jesus be the fulfillment of all of my longings because what I already have is Jesus? I’ll leave you with that question to ponder this week: Would the coming of Jesus be a delight or an inconvenience? But I think it’s going to take you more than a week to ponder.

Meanwhile, let us sing. The Book of Revelation is full of hymns, the hymns that are being sung in heaven by the heavenly choir gathered around the throne. The Book is also a rich treasury of imagery that has been mined by hymn writers for the earthly choir gathered below. We’ll close with two hymns by Charles Wesley, who picks up some of this imagery. Both hymns direct our gaze onto Jesus. The first hymn, *Lo, He Comes*, sweeps from Rev 1:7 in the first two verses to Rev 22:20 in the final verse, as Wesley leaves us with that final cry of the Bible on our lips:

Yea, Amen! let all adore Thee,  
High on Thine eternal throne;  
Savior, take the power and glory,  
Claim the kingdom for Thine own.  
O come quickly, O come quickly,  
Alleluia! Come, Lord, come!

The second hymn, *Love Divine, All Love’s Excelling*, takes us beyond that cry from earth to our destiny after Jesus does return:

Finish then Thy new creation,  
Pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see Thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in Thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise!

**Look, he is coming with the clouds. (1:7)**

**He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”  
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.**

**The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. (22:20-21)**

1. Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.84.

2. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 23.72.

3. “Of the World, But Not In It,” *Modern Reformation* 11:4 (July/August 2002): 12.

4. *Modern Reformation* 11:4 (July/August 2002): 11.



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Revelation 3:7-13

Eighth Message

Bernard Bell

July 28th, 2002

# STANDING FIRM

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Each day we open our newspapers and news magazines, we read that the American public is suffering a massive loss of confidence. Loss of confidence in the stock market as the indices tumble. Loss of confidence in the business executives, enmeshed in scandals at Enron, Tyco, WorldCom. Even Martha Stewart is tarnished. Loss of confidence in the accountants who were supposed to keep the businesses honest. Loss of confidence in the financial analysts. Loss of confidence in the regulators. Loss of confidence even in Alan Greenspan: three years ago he could do no wrong; now we see that he doesn't have the golden touch. Shaken on all fronts, investor confidence is in the tank. Accompanying this loss of confidence is a strong sense of betrayal: betrayal by the executives, by the accountants, by the regulators, by the analysts, by the market, by the system.

This loss of confidence extends beyond the economic world. Our sense of national security was shredded by the attacks on 9/11. Who would have dared predict on September 10th that by midday the next day the twin towers of the World Trade Center would be mounds of rubble? Those towers which seemed so strong, so invincible brought low by people armed with nothing more than box cutters.

How the mighty have fallen: the World Trade Center, Enron, Arthur Anderson, WorldCom. What has been so amazing has been the speed with which these mighty empires have collapsed. But this is quite in keeping with the Book of Revelation, where three times in chapter 18 the lament goes up that Babylon the "great city" has fallen "in one hour" (18:10, 16-17, 19).

Perhaps it is something else that has left you feeling shaken: serious illness or death in the family, marital difficulties, problems with your kids.

Whatever your source of anxiety, many of you are feeling like the rug has been pulled out from under your feet, that there is no stability. Perhaps you found it difficult to say those words from our responsive reading: "Surely he will never be shaken... He will have no fear of bad news... His heart is secure, he will have no fear" (Ps 112:6-8). You can't relate because you're full of fear and profoundly shaken. How do we stand firm when everything around us seems shaky? May the message of Jesus Christ to his church in Philadelphia be of help to us today.

## A. The Message to the Church in Philadelphia

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Philadelphia:

**To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:**

**These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will**

**make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth.**

**I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 3:7-13 NIV)**

### 1. Philadelphia

To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: (3:7a)

We all know that Philadelphia means "brotherly love." This city, the original Philadelphia, was established around 160 BC by the king of Pergamum, either Eumenes II (197-159) or his brother and successor Attalus II (159-138). Though it is unclear exactly which of these brothers founded the city, what is clear is that it was named in honor of Attalus, whose loyalty to his older brother during the thirty-eight years that the latter was king earned him the nickname Philadelphus, meaning "brother-lover." During all those years Eumenes had confidence that his younger brother was not plotting to usurp him from the throne.

Philadelphia is located about thirty miles upstream and southeast of Sardis. The youngest of the seven cities, it was a frontier town. A frontier town geographically, located at the point where the major road to all points east left the river valleys and climbed up into the mountainous plateau of the interior. A frontier town culturally, established as a base for spreading Greek civilization into the interior lands that had recently come under the dominion of Pergamum.

It was a prosperous agricultural region, with rich volcanic soils, ideally suited to the growing of grape vines. Even today the land around Alasehir, modern day Philadelphia, is planted with mile after mile of vineyards.

Philadelphia lay in a region prone to earthquakes. A massive earthquake destroyed the city in AD 17, the same earthquake that destroyed Sardis. Tiberius, the current emperor, gave the city generous aid. In gratitude the city took the name Neocaesarea. Fifty years later the city took a third name, Flavia, family name of the emperor Vespasian. By the time this message was written the city bore three names: Philadelphia in honor of the loyalty of Attalus to Eumenes, Neocaesarea in honor of the generosity of Tiberius, and Flavia in honor of Vespasian.

But then the rug was pulled out from under the feet of the Philadelphians. Vespasian's son Domitian, emperor since 81, faced two major agricultural crises throughout the empire: overproduction of wine and a severe shortage of grain. In AD 92 he issued a decree that half of

the vineyards in the provinces be destroyed, so as to protect the Italian wine industry, and encourage the growing of grain. Philadelphia was heavily dependent upon the wine industry, so dependent that its chief deity was Dionysius, the Greek god of wine. Imagine the sense of betrayal by the city that bore Domitian's family name. This would be far worse than a US president ordering the destruction of half the vineyards of the Napa Valley in order to bolster New York wineries. Domitian claimed the title "Lord and God" and demanded the worship of his people. This is worship that the provinces had been willing to give, particularly the province of Asia where the *pax Romana*, the Roman peace first established by Augustus, brought great prosperity. Asia was enormously grateful to Rome and to her emperors, and built many temples in their honor. But what do you do when your "lord and god" turns on you?

Domitian issued this edict just three years before Jesus addressed the church in Philadelphia. How will Jesus address his church in a city that has been rocked by earthquakes in the past and recently betrayed by the Roman emperor?

## 2. Self-description of Jesus

**These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. (3:7b)**

As with the other messages, Jesus introduces himself in a manner which is relevant to Philadelphia's situation and directs the gaze of the church onto himself. Jesus is holy and true. We could just as well translate this second word as "genuine." As the Jesus People said back in the early seventies, borrowing from the Coke ad, Jesus is the "real thing." Unlike Domitian, he will never betray his people.

A major theme of the book of Revelation is exposing the contrast between the true and the counterfeit. In the visible world there is a throne, a ruler, a city, a people, worship. In Revelation's imagery, the throne is occupied by the beast, the city is Babylon, her residents are called the inhabitants of the world, and they give their worship to the beast. At the end of the first century AD, Babylon is Rome, or more generally the Roman Empire, and the beast is the Roman emperor. If Philadelphia places all her confidence in Rome and her emperors, then she is bound to end up betrayed in the end, for their throne is a counterfeit throne. In the end, Rome will be exposed and the mighty empire will come crashing down. Rome, the self-proclaimed eternal city, did fall suddenly, but Babylon is alive and well. Wherever gathered mankind lives in autonomy from God, there is Babylon. Wherever men are at home in the present world, there are the inhabitants of the world. Wherever man sets himself up as king, there is the beast. But this is all a sham, a deception by the dragon, Satan.

The church in Philadelphia is not to be so deceived, for she knows the true. Her eyes have been opened to see what is unseen to the others. In the normally invisible realm there is also a throne, a ruler, a city, a people, and worship. On the true throne, the throne that really does lie at the center of the universe, sits God, and beside him sits the Lamb. The true city is the New Jerusalem, home and destiny of all those who long for God. Her residents give their worship to God and to the Lamb.

While Philadelphia looks to Rome and its Caesar, to Domitian who claims to be Lord but betrays his people, the church is to look to Jesus, who truly is Lord. Jesus, whose very name is "Faithful and True" (19:11). Jesus who is faithful to his God and Father and is therefore faithful to his people. The single greatest need for all seven churches is to look to Jesus. This is why Jesus begins each message with a revelation of himself.

Secondly, Jesus introduces himself as the one who holds the key of David, imagery drawn from Isaiah 22:22. There it was used of the authority that King Hezekiah's steward had in granting access into the king's throne room. Here Jesus uses it to describe his authority to grant access into the heavenly throne room, into the very presence of God. Jesus alone can determine this. Jesus himself is the door, and it is through him alone that we have access into God's presence. He is the doorway into the New Jerusalem at the end of the book. Those whom Jesus admits cannot be shut out by any one else, no matter what level of hostility there might be from society. As in the other messages, Jesus focuses the attention of the church onto himself. The thinking of the churches must begin and end with him. Indeed he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega (22:13).

## 3. Prophetic Message

**I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. (3:8)**

Jesus' prophetic word to each church begins with the statement, "I know." He is aware of the exact circumstances of each church; nothing is hidden from him. In most of the churches there is good and bad; they are a mixed bag. But in Philadelphia, as in its counterpart Smyrna, Jesus sees no bad; he issues no word of condemnation, only commendation.

Jesus is aware of three features of the Philadelphian church: it has little strength, it has kept his word, it has not denied his name. He knows that the church in Philadelphia has little strength. Presumably the church is numerically small, probably socially weak, the antithesis of one of today's mega-churches. The church is under pressure from the synagogue of Satan to deny the name of Jesus. The synagogue of Satan, active also in Smyrna, probably refers to Jews who are persecuting the church. Initially Rome considered the Church to be a Jewish sect, and therefore eligible for the religious privileges that Rome had granted the Jews, notably exemption from emperor worship. But, as foreseen by Jesus (John 16:2), the time came when the Jews cast the followers of Jesus out of the synagogues. By rejecting the people of Jesus these Jews showed that they were not the synagogue of God but the synagogue of Satan, for they were opposing the purposes of God. Fifty years after these messages were sent to the churches, Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was martyred in that city, after being betrayed to the authorities by the Jews. In the document describing his death, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, mention is made of other martyrs in Smyrna, and also in Philadelphia. It seems that in the mid-second century these two cities suffered unique persecution from the Jews. This persecution was already underway in AD 95.

Though the church was weak and under attack it had not given in. It was loyal to Jesus, having kept his command to hang in there in patient endurance. What did Jesus expect of his church in Philadelphia? That she be large, impressive, influential? No, what he expects of her is loyalty, that she hold faithfully to his name, that she endure even under pressure. That's all.

With this verse I have to take issue with the NIV (and NRSV), in favor of NASB: "Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, *because* you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name." It was because the Philadelphian church had held on to Jesus despite its lack of strength that Jesus set before it an open door. Many understand this as an open door for mission, appropriate to Philadelphia's situation as a frontier city. It is true that the church is called to witness, and faithful testimony to God and to Jesus is a major theme of the book. But I think the

immediate context of the keys of David, and the broader context of the whole book require us to consider this door as the entrance into God's throne room, into the new heavens and the new earth, into the New Jerusalem. Nothing the synagogue of Satan can do can prevent the admission of the faithful saints into that blessed state. All they have to do is remain faithful to the name of Jesus.

The church in Philadelphia is weak but faithful. What action will Jesus take with her?

**I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. (3:9-10)**

Because the church is doing nothing to earn condemnation, there is no need for any warning of judgment. Instead, Jesus says there are two positive things he will give the church: acknowledgement by her enemies and preservation through tribulation.

All those enemies who sought to shut the believers out, Jesus will finally bring to acknowledge that it was upon this little church that his favor rested. The church might be small and weak, but it is beloved of Jesus, and that is what matters.

Because the church has already endured patiently, he will preserve it through tribulation. Many see this as a reference to the Rapture, that Jesus will remove the church from the world prior to the seven-year Great Tribulation that marks the End Times. But I disagree. The only other New Testament use of this phrase "keep from" (*tēreō ek*) is on the lips of Jesus in his Upper Room Discourse to his disciples, "I do not ask that you take them up out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15). Jesus specifically does not ask the Father to remove his disciples from the world. Jesus wants his church to be in the world as a testimony to his saving grace. Removing the saints would rob the world of faithful witnesses. He wants his faithful followers in Philadelphia. He wants his faithful followers in Silicon Valley. But that raises a problem. Since the enemy is so much stronger than the disciples, how are the saints to withstand his attacks? It is for this reason that Jesus petitions the Father to preserve the disciples through these attacks. The church is preserved not by being removed but by the divine hand of Father and Son upon her. On her own the church cannot possibly withstand tribulation, but she is backed by Jesus.

Tribulation is going to come. In Philadelphia it had already started as the Jews opposed the Christians. Within fifty years this would lead to martyrdom. That had already happened in Pergamum, where Antipas had been publicly killed for his faithful witness (2:13). But God in Christ preserves his Church. This does not mean that he keeps his followers from suffering, or even that he keeps them from death. The Book of Revelation makes it clear that faithful witness to Jesus is costly; all the faithful witnesses end up dead. But therein lies victory, because of the open door into the New Jerusalem.

As a third component of his prophetic message, Jesus gives the church a simple command, preceded by a promise.

**I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (3:11)**

All the church has to do is to hold on to what it already has. Again, the vitality of the church lies not in coming up with something new, but in holding on to what it already has, or, if it has forgotten that, in remembering and repenting. What the church has is Jesus. The

church is to hold on lest anyone take her crown. The Greek word *stephanos*, whence comes the name Stephen, this crown is not the diadem of a ruler, but the victory wreath of a champion. The believers will emerge victorious as long as they hold on.

Why should the church hold on in the face of persecution? Because of its simple hope in the return of Jesus. Seven times Jesus says "I am coming" (*erchomai* 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20). Four of these times he says "I am coming soon" (*erchomai tachy* 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). Already nineteen hundred years have passed, but still it is true that Jesus is coming soon. This is what motivates us to hold on. This is how we stand firm when all around us is giving way.

#### 4. Promise to the Victor

As with the other letters, Jesus closes his message to the church in Philadelphia with a promise to the victor, to the one who overcomes.

**Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. (3:12)**

The victor in Philadelphia is the one who does not deny the name of Jesus even in the face of hostility and persecution. To this one Jesus promises two things: a place in his temple, and a set of new names. Solomon's temple featured two free-standing pillars outside the door; Solomon named them Jakin, "he will establish," and Boaz, "in strength" (1 Kgs 7:21; 2 Chr 3:15-17). The new temple will also have pillars, but these will be not bronze columns but people. When it comes right down to it, the New Jerusalem does not feature a temple at all (21:22). This would be most unusual in the ancient world. It was already unusual enough for Jerusalem to have a single temple, when most cities had multiple temples. But the New Jerusalem has no temple at all. Why? The temple represents the earthly residence of the deity. Confining the deity to a building limits him. In the New Jerusalem there will be no confinement. The physical building is replaced by the people as God is fully present with his people. Such is the promise held out to the saints in Philadelphia. Because they are incorporated into the very structure of God's residence, never again will the believer have to leave. After each of the earthquakes that struck Philadelphia, the residents took to the countryside, living in simple shelters. There will be no earthquakes in the New Jerusalem, the will be nothing unsettling that might cause flight.

Philadelphia had taken on a set of new names to show her appreciation for the Roman emperors. Likewise, the faithful saints will have a set of new names, ones not of their own choosing, but given by Jesus. He will grant a set of three new names, expressing the believers' new identity. The Bible contains many examples of people being renamed to express their new identity: Abram to Abraham, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul. Geographically the church is in Philadelphia, a city that has defined itself with respect to the Roman Emperors. But that is not how the believers are to define themselves. They are a colony of heaven on earth, an outpost of the New Jerusalem. As Don Carson says, the church is "an eschatological outpost in time." This means that written upon it is New Jerusalem not Philadelphia, New Jerusalem not Cupertino.

#### B. Standing Firm

How do we stand firm today in a shaky world? Not by denying that we should even face trials which threaten to shake us, for both Peter and John tell us not to be surprised when trials and tribulation befall

us (1 Pet 4:12; 1 John 3:13). The question is not how we can keep ourselves from ever being hit by trials, but how can we stand firm when the trials do come. I learn two valuable lessons from Jesus' message to his church in Philadelphia: I stand firm in my weakness, and I stand firm in my identity.

### 1. Standing Firm in Our Weakness

The first key to standing firm is to recognize that, paradoxically, we have no strength of our own. Jesus commends the Philadelphian church because she has stood firm despite her limited strength. The church is not called to have strength. She is called to grasp onto Jesus.

Let me give you a beautiful picture of the church in weakness. My parents were missionaries in Thailand for almost forty years. In their early years they each worked with leprosy sufferers. In the mid-1950s, my mother, then still single, helped with leprosy clinics. Each day teams of two women missionaries would visit a different village, riding their bikes in the dry season or going by boat in the rainy season. They would set up under a sala, a simple shelter consisting of four posts and a simple roof. Here they would invite those with leprosy to come to them for treatment. In the 1950s leprosy was still a greatly feared disease, and those afflicted with the disease were treated as outcasts. These women would touch the lepers, treat their wounds, give them medication to arrest the disease. They would also tell them of a savior who cared for the outcast, a savior who reached out to the leper, the prostitute, the tax collector, a savior who calls "the last, the lost, the least...and the dead"<sup>1</sup> to come to him. A church was born in Central Thailand. In fact two churches were born: a "leprosy church" and a "well church." The missionaries called the church of the leprosy sufferers the "sala church" because they met in these simple rural shelters. They had no money and no resources. The "well" Christians could afford to rent a building in town, or even build their own. Which was the stronger church? The leprosy church was considerably stronger, both numerically and spiritually. So much so that the missionaries would say of the one, "physically not well but spiritually well," and of the other, "physically well but spiritually not well." These leprosy sufferers had no illusions of trying to do anything in their own strength. They knew they had no strength, and so they were more ready to look to Jesus for their strength, and therefore stand firm. Herein lies one of the great paradoxes of the Christian life. It is not the strong whom God chooses but the weak.

### 2. Standing Firm in Our Identity

The second key to standing firm is to examine how we identify ourselves. Philadelphia defined herself by Rome and her emperors, but Domitian turned upon her. If we define ourselves by the transitory we will be shaken. If you define yourself by your job, you will be shaken if you lose it. If you define yourself by your portfolio, you will be shaken by turmoil in the stock market. If you define yourself by your health, you will be shaken by illness or aging. If you define yourself by your family, you'll be shaken by marital discord or strife with the kids.

Discovering that our identity does not lie fully in God and in Christ can be a very hard lesson to learn. It is easy to assure ourselves that we are trusting only in Jesus, only to discover under trial that this is not so. I think I first woke up to the risk of this self-deception when I read the following words by the 18th-century English pastor and hymn-writer Philip Doddridge,

Can you maintain a more steady calmness and serenity when God is striking at your dearest enjoyments in this world, and acting most directly contrary to your present interests and to your natural passions and desires.<sup>2</sup>

If you can, said Doddridge, it's a sure sign of growth in grace. The one who trusts in God can never be shaken even when God takes away what is most dear to him, because his identity is defined not by what he has but by whose he is.

Let me illustrate with another missionary story. In *Green Leaf in Drought*, Isobel Kuhn tells the story of the last few China Inland Mission members detained in China after the Communist takeover. In 1950 Arthur and Wilda Mathews arrived in the far north-west of China, not far from Tibet. They had spent years preparing for this and were confident that God would bless their ministry. But immediately Communist officials began to tighten a noose around them, first confiscating the meeting hall which they had rented and renovated at considerable cost. In January 1951 the Mission ordered the evacuation of all its members in China, but the officials refused to allow the Mathews to leave. The noose tightened: the Mathews were forbidden to leave their compound, then forbidden to talk with the Chinese, then confined to a single room. It would be nice to say that they met each blow with grace, but that would be unrealistic; that would make them superheroes to whom we could not relate. No, they struggled greatly. They desperately grasped onto any sign that they might be released, only to have their hopes dashed again and again. Finally "there came a day...when together Arthur and Wilda knelt before the Lord and abandoned themselves to live on in that stunted little kitchen as long as He wished them to. And the peace of God poured in like a flood bringing such joy as they had not known before."<sup>3</sup> Their problems did not immediately end; they were not permitted to leave until July 1953. But they found what Isobel Kuhn called "the Feather Curtain of God...soft and comforting to the sheltered one; but intangible, mysterious, and baffling to the outsider."<sup>4</sup> It was not till God stripped them of all their props that they found stability. Then they could stand firm no matter what else was thrown at them.

Is this consistent with your view of God? It certainly is consistent with God as revealed in the Book of Revelation. Is your identity hidden in a God like that? God who can strike at all your props, but then throw down his feather curtain around you. If so, then you can stand firm, no matter what befall.

**To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy — to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)**

1. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.

2. Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745), excerpted in David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Burning and a Shining Light* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 183; republished as *English Spirituality in the Age of Wesley* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2000).

3. Isobel Kuhn, *Green Leaf in Drought* (Singapore: OMF Books, 1948), 78.

4. Kuhn, *Green Leaf*, 61.



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 Ninth Message  
 Bernard Bell  
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## POOR AND NEEDY

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today we come to the last of the seven messages addressed by Jesus to his churches in the Roman province of Asia. These churches face three different challenges. Smyrna and Philadelphia face *persecution*. Pergamum and Thyatira are being taught that it is acceptable to *compromise*. Ephesus and Sardis have succumbed to *complacency*, losing their passion, even their life. Jesus writes to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable. Each message addresses conditions particular to that church, but each message is also to be heeded by all the churches, for the one with an ear is to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. We, likewise, are to heed these messages, for they are relevant to the Church in every generation.

The message to the church in Laodicea is the best known of the seven for it contains well-known imagery: the church is lukewarm, neither hot nor cold; Jesus threatens to spew the church out of his mouth; he stands at the door and knocks. Unfortunately these familiar images have been subject to much misinterpretation. There are no afflicted people in Laodicea for Jesus to comfort. Quite the opposite: Laodicea is full of comfortable people whom Jesus afflicts with a stinging rebuke. I find this message all too relevant to us today for we live in a society that wants to be comfortable at all costs, and the values of our culture have penetrated deeply into the Church.

### A. The Message to the Church in Laodicea

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Laodicea:

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Rev 3:14-22 NIV)

#### 1. Laodicea

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: (3:14a)

Laodicea lay 100 miles east of Ephesus, beside the Lycus River, a tributary of the Maeander. It was on a major crossroads between the

road heading east from Ephesus, and the road heading south to the coast from Sardis and Pergamum. Today it is an unexcavated ruin, but at the end of the first century, Laodicea was one of the wealthiest cities in Asia. Its wealth and renown were based on three industries in particular: it was an important banking center; it was a medical center specializing in eye salve; and it was a textile center, specializing in luxury garments made with its distinctive native black wool.

In AD 60, Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake. But whereas Sardis and Philadelphia gladly accepted the aid offered by the Roman emperor after their devastating earthquake in AD 17, Laodicea insisted on rebuilding its own way, using its own resources. The first-century Roman historian, Tacitus, writes, "In the Asian province one of its famous cities, Laodicea, was destroyed by an earthquake in this year, and rebuilt from its own resources without any subvention from Rome."<sup>1</sup> Such limited archaeology as has been done on Laodicea confirms this picture of a city proud of its own resources. Archaeologists have discovered numerous stones from monuments and buildings inscribed with the Greek phrase *ek tōn idiōn*, "of his own," i.e. the building was erected using the benefactor's own resources.

The New Testament mentions two other cities in this Lycus Valley. Colossae lay 10 miles upstream, where a cool, fresh mountain stream entered the Lycus. Hierapolis lay six miles away, directly east across the valley. Clearly visible from Laodicea is a broad white scar. Up close it can be seen that this is a white cliff, 300 feet high and about one mile wide. Today this is known as Pamukkale, Turkish for "cotton castle." This remarkable phenomenon is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Atop the cliff are hot springs, rich in calcareous minerals. As the water pours over the cliff, its minerals are deposited as dramatic white formations. The Romans were as impressed with this site as is UNESCO today. Around the hot springs on top of the cliff, they built Hierapolis.

In each of these three cities was a church. Probably these three churches had been established by Epaphras when Paul was at Ephesus. We know for sure that Epaphras established the church in Colossae, for Paul writes to that church,

You learned it [the gospel] from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. (Col 1:7-8)

And we know that Epaphras was at work also in the other two cities, for Paul adds at the end of his letter,

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. (Col 4:12-16)

In the early 60s there were vibrant churches in these three cities. But as we'll soon see, just thirty years later the church in Laodicea was not doing well.

## 2. Self-description of Jesus

**These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. (3:14b)**

As usual, Jesus commences his message to his church in Laodicea by directing her gaze onto himself. He introduces himself using three terms. Unlike the other six messages this self-description is not drawn from John's initial vision of Jesus (1:12-16), but it is fully consistent with the imagery of the whole book. Jesus is the Amen, language drawn from Isaiah 65:16 where God is twice called the God of Amen, the God of truth or the true God. Amen is a Hebrew word, an adverb that means "may it be so." In every instance other than Isaiah 65:16, it is used as a response to something just said, expressing the commitment of the speaker to what he has just heard. This usage is picked up in the New Testament, and continued on in the Church until today. When we say Amen at the end of a prayer, we are committing ourselves to that prayer, longing that it be so, that it be fulfilled.

Once in each testament the word Amen is used in a highly distinctive way. In Isaiah God says "Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth [Amen]; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth [Amen]" (Isa 65:16). The context is God's promise to restore his people. Ultimately God's promises rest on his own character, for he is the Amen. Here in Revelation, Jesus describes himself as the Amen. As we've seen before, we have an ascription to Jesus of Old Testament titles reserved for God alone. Their attribution to anyone other than God would be blasphemous. Again we have this extraordinarily high Christology, this exalted understanding of the identity of Jesus. God is the Amen, and now Jesus is the Amen. Paul writes, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God" (2 Cor 1:20). In the name of Jesus Christ we add Amen to our petitions. But the important Amen is the one God has spoken to us, Jesus himself.

John has been instructed to write what he has seen, namely what is now and what will be (1:19). In the world of the "now" there is a contrast between the seen and the unseen. The visible world is largely counterfeit: the beast occupies a counterfeit throne, and receives the worship of the inhabitants of the world, the citizens of Babylon. There is open hostility to God and to his people. But John is given a revelation of the unseen world, where he sees the true throne, occupied by God and the Lamb, receiving the worship of his people. "What will be" is that the imposters will be exposed, the counterfeit will be overthrown. Once they are then the unseen can become seen, as the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth. We long for that day to come, and at the end of the book we cry out, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:21). How can we know that this transition from the "what is" to the "what will be" will happen? It will happen because Jesus himself is the Amen. The "may it be so" is not just our wishful thinking, but is the declaration of God in Christ. Jesus is God's Amen that makes it happen.

The second term Jesus uses of himself is "the faithful and true witness." John has already described Jesus as the faithful witness (1:5). Faithful witness is a key concept in this book. In this world the saints

are called to bear faithful witness to Jesus. Their model is Jesus, the archetypal faithful witness. It means bearing testimony to the true, which in the world of the "what is now" is unseen to those without a revelation.

Thirdly, Jesus describes himself as "the ruler of God's creation." If you compare translations you will notice that the translators have had some difficulty with this phrase. The word *arche* signifies priority, whether in time or position or cause. Does it mean that Jesus has priority of position over creation, that he is its ruler? Or that he has priority in time, that he was before creation, as we read in John's Gospel, "*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God *in the beginning*" (John 1:1-2)? Or that he has priority of cause, that he is the First Cause of all creation? Theologians have puzzled long and hard over the relationship between the Father and the Son, and over the relationship between the Son and creation. It is surely significant that the other passage that sheds most light on this phrase is in the letter which Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, just ten miles away. Paul describes Jesus Christ this way,

**He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:15-20)**

It seems more than likely that Rev 3:14 is a deliberate reference back to Paul's letter to Colossae. The Colossian believers had a faulty Christology. They had fallen prey to Gnosticism, one of whose tenets was to impose a chain of intermediaries between God and Christ. The Laodiceans also have a faulty Christology, though of a different type, as we'll see in a moment. Both needed to restore Jesus to the beginning of their thinking, to give him the preeminence. At the end of Revelation God describes himself as "the Beginning and the End" (21:6), and Jesus echoes (22:13). Indeed, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (22:13). In whatever sense we understand Jesus' priority in this verse, it is clear that Jesus is reminding the Laodicean church of his exalted preeminence. In each of the three terms, Jesus places himself center-stage before the church. We will soon see why he does so.

## 3. Prophetic Message

**I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. (3:15-17)**

As to the other churches, Jesus begins his prophetic message to his church in Laodicea with a statement of his knowledge of affairs in the church. In the other six churches, Jesus finds at least something good to commend, but in the Laodicean church he finds nothing worthy. Jesus accuses the church of being lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. Many sermons interpret the hot as zeal for Jesus and the cold as antagonism to him. But Jesus seems to consider hot and cold as equally satisfactory conditions. Here it helps to understand the local

geography. Across the valley, Hierapolis had its hot mineral springs, which people then and now considered of medicinal value. Upriver lay Colossae, with its cold, fresh water. In between lay Laodicea with no useful water of its own. Indeed it had to import water by aqueduct from a mineral spring. By the time the water reached Laodicea it would have been lukewarm and probably rather emetic. The first problem of the Laodicean church was that it was useless, good for nothing. The church neither healed nor refreshed.

Jesus has a second criticism. The city boasted of its wealth and refused Roman aid in rebuilding from the earthquake of AD 60. The church has a similar boast, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." The city did not need Rome, although it owed its prosperity to the peace that Rome had brought to Asia. The church does not need Jesus. Yet the church is the church of Jesus Christ. As we have repeatedly sung over the past few months, the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. No doubt there was plenty of activity in the Laodicean church, but the church had lost its focus. The church in Ephesus had forsaken her first love (2:4). The church in Sardis was worse: though she had a reputation of being alive, she was dead (3:1). The church in Laodicea is still worse: she has forgotten the Lord completely. It is the antithesis of the Smyrnan church. That church thought she was poor, but Jesus says she is rich (2:9). This church thinks she is rich, but Jesus says she is poor. Indeed, the church is in such poor shape that Jesus piles up five adjectives to describe it: wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, naked.

What will Jesus do with such a church, a church that is so sick it makes him want to spew it out of his mouth? His resolve is a mixture of invitation and command:

**I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. (3:18-20)**

There is still time. Jesus has not given up on the church in Laodicea. Since Laodicea was a prosperous commercial center, Jesus uses a commercial metaphor to urge repentance, counseling the church to buy from him three things that would be familiar to every resident: gold, woolen garments, and eye salve. By doing so she will redress her condition of being poor, blind and naked. The treasures that the world affords her are transitory and cannot meet her deepest needs. She needs spiritual riches that have been refined in the crucible of patient endurance. She needs spiritual garments, washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, so that she gain admission to the marriage supper of the Lamb. She needs spiritual sight so that she can see the unseen as well as the seen, so that she can distinguish the true from the counterfeit. Jesus bids her come to him to buy for that is commercial language she understands, but in reality we cannot buy anything from him. He knows that we have no money, yet still bids us come. In the closing verses of the book we find a wonderful invitation:

**The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (22:17)**

This invitation is based on one issued by God through his prophet Isaiah to his people,

**Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,**

**come, buy and eat!**

**Come, buy wine and milk**

**without money and without cost. (Isa 55:1)**

Each invitation is addressed not to those who are rich but to those who are poor. The tragedy of the Laodicean church is that she thinks she can make it on her own, using her own resources. To quote Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way." The city did it her own way, proudly chiseling *ek tōn idiōn* "of her own" onto her monuments. The church is doing the same thing, but by so doing she is shutting out Jesus.

Jesus' stinging rebuke of the church is evidence not of his rejection of the church, but of his great love for the church, for it is those he loves that he rebukes and disciplines. It is his church, not the Laodicean's church. His rebuke is for the purpose that the church might repent and once again be zealous for him. It is because he loves his church that he appeals to the church to let him back inside.

Verse 20 is one of the most famous verses of the Bible, a verse that has been used repeatedly for evangelistic purposes. It is assumed that the verse is written to unbelievers, but notice that the verse is addressed to the church, the church which has shut Jesus out. Holman Hunt's famous painting *The Light of the World*, portrays a weak Jesus standing forlornly outside a door with no handle on the outside. It would be better to envision Jesus hammering loudly and persistently at the door of the church, seeking to awaken the church from its self-sufficient complacency. If they will let him back in to his rightful place as head of the church, there will be restoration. If not, the implication is judgment. The opportunity for Jesus' gracious restoration is expressed in the metaphor of a meal, a powerful symbol of hospitality, friendship and reconciliation.

#### 4. Promise to the Victor

As with the other letters, Jesus closes his message to the church in Laodicea with a promise to the victor, to the one who overcomes.

**To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. (3:21)**

The victor in Laodicea is the one who does not shut Jesus out, the one who knows his need for Jesus and welcomes him. To this one Jesus promises a place on his throne. Jesus will deal with the overcomer the same way that his Father dealt with him, the archetypal overcomer. Because Jesus was the faithful witness, the Father vindicated him. Because the overcomer is a faithful witness, Jesus will vindicate him. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the believer is called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

## B. Poor and Needy

The Laodicean church receives the harshest criticism of any church because she has shut out Jesus, the Lord of the Church. The complacency that had already infected Ephesus and Sardis had reached its logical end in Laodicea. The church had forgotten that she is the church of Jesus Christ, had forgotten that it is all about Jesus. We are poor and needy people desperately in need of Jesus, both for salvation and for ongoing spiritual life.

### 1. Poor and Needy for Salvation

We are poor and needy when it comes to salvation. The scandal of the gospel is that it is the poor and needy who receive salvation. Throughout the gospels we find addressed to Jesus the cry *kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy." It is on the lips of lepers, the blind, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the father of the epileptic boy. But it is never on the lips of the religious leaders. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus tells

the parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector, each of whom prayed to God. The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like all other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.” The tax collector prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Each received what he asked for. The Pharisee asked for nothing and received nothing. The tax collector asked for mercy and received salvation.

In their quest to be contemporary and seeker-sensitive, many churches have abandoned talk of sin and repentance. But they do seekers a great disservice. The best thing we can do for the seeker is to introduce him to the cry, “Lord have mercy upon me,” and to the Savior who hears such a cry. It is the poor and needy that Jesus invites to himself. This is why I included certain hymns in our service. First, the hymn by Horatius Bonar,

I heard the voice of Jesus say,  
 “Come unto Me and rest;  
 Lay down, thou weary one, lay down  
 Thy head upon My breast.”  
 I came to Jesus as I was,  
 Weary, and worn, and sad;  
 I found in Him a resting-place,  
 And He has made me glad.  
 Then the hymn by Joseph Hart,  
 Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,  
 Weak and wounded, sick and sore;  
 Jesus ready stands to save you,  
 Full of pity, love and power.  
 All the fitness he requirerth  
 Is to feel your need of him...  
 ...If you tarry till you're better,  
 You will never come at all.

It is no disgrace to admit that we are needy. Quite the opposite: until you admit you are needy there is no hope of salvation. If you are laboring under the impression that you need to clean up your act first before you can find mercy from God, you are mistaken. It is “the last, the lost, the least...and the dead”<sup>2</sup> that Jesus welcomes. Come to him and find mercy.

## 2. Poor and Needy for Daily Life

Our state of being poor and needy does not end when we find salvation in Christ. The Church must beware lest she cease to cry for mercy. For centuries this cry for mercy has been integrated into the very liturgy of the Church, in either sung or spoken form. In its sung form, there are many beautiful settings of the cry, “Lord, have mercy,” in either its Greek form, *Kyrie eleison*, or its Latin form, *Miserere*. In its spoken form, a liturgy typically includes confession of sin, the call “Lord, have mercy upon us,” and the pronouncement of absolution upon those who truly repent and believe.

The contemporary Church, in her rejection of liturgy, her desire to be seeker-sensitive, and her use of contemporary praise choruses, has thrown out this cry for mercy. This is to the great detriment of the believer, as well as to the seeker.

Our responsive reading from Psalm 86 began, “Hear, O Lord, and answer, for I am poor and needy.” This was a cry addressed to God by one of his people, David, who recognized the need for God’s ongoing mercy in his life. These two terms, poor (*‘ānī*) and needy

(*‘ebyōn*), originally meant those who were literally in that physical state. But the terms acquired a spiritual meaning, signifying those who were aware of their spiritual need and therefore were longing for God’s salvation. “The poor” (Heb. *‘anawim*) became a term for those hungering for God. Luke introduces us to two such people: Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25) and Anna, who spoke to those who were “looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). Because both were longing for God they were able to recognize Jesus as the answer to their dreams, as God’s Amen to his promises. These are the sort of people to whom Jesus refers in his first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3).

The thing that I fear most is not that I face suffering or persecution, but that my heart grow cold, that I forget that I am poor and needy. The moment I start thinking that I can do it on my own, out of my own resources, I atrophy. Unlike Sinatra, I never want to say, “I did it my way.” Preachers are fond of identifying this generation with the Laodicean church. But this final message is a strong warning to the believer in every age. It is a warning to all of us here, to beware of ever thinking ourselves strong and in need of nothing. We are desperately in need of Jesus and his ongoing mercy.

To those who welcome Jesus he promises to sup with them. Therefore let us come to the communion table. The meal served at this table is simple in its elements, but rich in its symbolism. We eat the bread and drink the cup to remember that we are saved through the body and blood of Jesus, not through any of our own doing. We eat and drink together in communion because we are together the body of Christ, part of the Church of which Christ is the Head. And we eat and drink in the presence of God for this is a fellowship meal with him, a meal of friendship signifying reconciliation. We eat and drink because we were poor and needy and God in Christ showed us mercy. We eat and drink because we continue to be poor and needy, and in need of an infusion of God’s grace. Quite how that grace is conveyed through this meal is a mystery, but Christ bids us come and receive grace. Quite how Christ is present is also a mystery, but he is here and he bids us come to sup with him.

But before we come to the table, let us sing. Last week we sang, *Round the Throne in Radiant Glory*, a hymn written just three years ago by the late James Boice, long-time minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia. In the last year of his life he wrote a dozen hymns, for which the director of music at Tenth Presbyterian composed tunes. This week we’ll sing another of Boice’s new hymns. Based upon Revelation 22 it is an invitation to “Come to the waters, whoever is thirsty...Jesus, the Living One offers you mercy.”

**O Lord, have mercy upon us, and grant us thy salvation.**

**[Now may you] grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and for ever! Amen. (2 Pet 3:18)**

1. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (trans. Michael Grant; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), 14.27.

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.



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Revelation 4:1-11

Tenth Message

Bernard Bell

April 6th, 2003

## BEHIND THE VEIL

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

On Friday I returned from ten days in Europe where I visited family and friends. Everywhere I went it was not long before conversation turned to the war in Iraq. As a European resident in America, people were especially interested in my opinion, especially my opinion of President Bush. The president has a clear vision. He sees the world in black and white. There is the way that the world is and the way that the world ought to be. In the world as it is, evil is afoot, harbored by an axis of evil, terrorists are able to strike not only at American targets overseas but now at America itself, and a tyrant rules in Baghdad. The world as it is must give way to the world as it ought to be. President Bush is willing to throw the considerable resources of the USA to ensure this transition. Bush also sees the nations of the world in black and white: they are either with the USA or against the USA. There is no middle ground. Bush has little patience for endless debate, little acceptance of the concept of just learning to live with the world as it is. This polarized view of the world in turn polarizes the people of the world. There are those who agree with the president's vision and with his leadership. But there are others who view him as a great threat.

It is not my role to endorse Bush or condemn him, nor to tell you whether to support the war in Iraq or to oppose it. What I do want to say is that this way in which President Bush seems to look at the world is very helpful in understanding the book of Revelation. According to Revelation, the world is a particular way because evil is afoot. There is an axis of evil opposed to the purposes of God. But certain things must happen so that this world becomes the way it ought to be. The book contains strong warnings not to accommodate to the way things are. Revelation contains a rich cast of characters, but there are only two sides. All the characters are either with God or against God. There is no middle ground.

Revelation presents the world in black and white. Our vision too easily becomes clouded so that we see the world in gray. Revelation is vital for today, not because it gives a blueprint for Armageddon—I don't think it does—but because it refreshes our vision. In a world of gray there are no lines; the boundaries have become fuzzy. Revelation redraws the lines so that we can once again see the world in black and white. Revelation redraws the lines to distinguish the way things are from the way things must be. It redraws the lines to distinguish those who are with God from those who are opposed to God. Revelation is not a friendly book for politicians who have learnt to accommodate themselves to the shifting whim of public opinion. But it is an essential book for those who want to have vision, for those who want to see clearly in a gray world.

### The way things are and the way things must be

We return to our studies in the book of Revelation, resuming with chapter 4.

**After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me**

**like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." (4:1 NIV)**

This book is "the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John" (1:1). The revelation starts with God, for all things start with him. The revelation is both given to and is about the Lord Jesus Christ. He in turn entrusts the message to one of his angels who mediates and explains it to John, for he is unable to comprehend the message on his own. Because of his role, this angel, one of many in the book, is called the interpreting angel. In turn, John entrusts the revelation to writing and sends it to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. There it is read out to each assembled church. The angel, John, the reader and the listeners all constitute the servants of God.

The interpreting angel summons John, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." This phrase, "what must take place" is a crucial one, used four times in the book. As we have seen, the whole book is "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (1:1). At the end of the book, the interpreting angel reminds John that this is the purpose of the book, "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (22:6).

In calling him to a prophetic ministry, Jesus instructs John, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (1:19). John is to write the things which he has seen, the visions he has been shown. These visions contain two elements: the things which are now, and the things which will take place later (or better, "the things which are about to take place after these"). That is a good summary of the book of Revelation. There are certain things which are now; the world is a particular way. Why is the world the way it is? We're not given the answer until chapters 12-13, where John is shown the axis of evil: the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. These three are in rebellion against God and wage war against God's people on earth, those who bear faithful witness to Jesus.

But the world will not always be as it is now; other things are about to take place. These events are always considered to be imminent, even though 1900 years have passed since this book was written. What are these things which must soon take place? The angel summons John up to heaven to show him. The things which he shows him are recorded in chapters 4-16. The most familiar features of these chapters are the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, which represent God's judgments upon those who are opposed to him. These judgments build in intensity until the seventh bowl when it is proclaimed "It is done!" (16:17)—the same verb as in the phrase "the things which must happen." With the pouring out of the seventh bowl, these things have happened.

After the interpreting angel has shown John these things, another angel twice more gives John a similar summons: "Come, I will show

you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters" (17:1); "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9). These two summons further clarify the things which must take place: Babylon, the prostitute, the city that is autonomous from God, the residence of the inhabitants of this world, must fall to make way for New Jerusalem, the bride, the city of God, the residence of the people of God. There are only two cities, but there is not room for both in the world as it must be. One city must fall so that the other can fill the whole cosmos.

The book of Revelation builds to two climaxes, each announced with a proclamation. Midway through the book, when the seventh trumpet is blown, the cry goes up, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). At the end of the book, after the three members of the axis of evil (the dragon, the beast and the false prophet) and everything else opposed to God are thrown into the lake of fire, the cry goes up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). That is the glorious message of the book of Revelation.

Today we enter the central section of Revelation, a set of visions which runs through chapter 16. Perhaps many of you are impatient for me to get onto "the good stuff": the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. These are the most familiar visions of this central set of visions, but they are not the most important visions. They represent the things which must happen, but they do not explain why these things must happen. Did you notice that little word "must" in verse 1? It is used seven times in the book, surely not an accidental number.

The first seal is not opened until chapter 6. The visions which come before it, the visions which constitute chapters 4-5, are the most important visions of the section, for they explain that little word. They explain why the world will not remain as it is, why the axis of evil will not prevail, why the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, why Babylon must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem, and why in the end the dwelling of God is with his people. They explain why without any shadow of a doubt these things must be.

## The Throne

**At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. (4:2-3a)**

The first thing that John sees in his vision into heaven is a throne. Seen here for the first time, this throne is a dominant feature of the book. Forty times John refers to this throne. Everything in the next few verses is described in relation to this throne. No fewer than eight prepositional phrases refer to the throne: *upon* the throne is someone sitting, *around* the throne is a rainbow, *around* the throne are twenty-four other thrones, *from* the throne come thunder and lightning, *in front of* the throne are seven lamps, *in front of* the throne is the crystal sea, *in the middle of* the throne and *around* the throne are the four cherubim. This throne is the center of the universe.

The throne is occupied. Dorothy and her three companions journeyed to the Emerald City to request help from the wizard of Oz. When they got there they were terrified by his powerful voice and awesome presence. But when Toto pulled back the curtain, they found that "the great and powerful wizard of Oz" was just humbug;

his imposing presence was a smoke and mirrors act. Behind the veil was an imposter. Behind the veil of heaven, John sees no imposter. He sees God himself. But John doesn't call him God. He refers to him as "the one seated upon the throne." In fact, this is John's usual way of referring to God. He says more about him by calling him "the one seated upon the throne" than by calling him "God."

There is another throne, that of the axis of evil: the dragon has a throne which he gives to the beast (13:2). The whole world is deceived by the false prophet into worshiping the beast who sits upon this throne (13:12). But Revelation does not allow us to consider the world as bipolar. There are not two equal and opposite poles to the cosmos. We are never allowed to consider Satan as equal and opposite to God, or the beast as equal and opposite to the Lamb. The throne of the dragon and the beast is counterfeit, and the one sitting upon it is an imposter. At the moment of God's choosing he will effortlessly overthrow the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. The cosmos is monopolar. At the monopole stands a throne and the one seated upon it. That is why the things shown to John must happen. The existence and occupation of that throne is the guarantee that they will happen.

## Around the Throne

John next describes what he sees around the throne:

**A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.**

**In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. (Rev 4:3b-8a)**

The rainbow which John sees around the throne is part of the dazzling radiance of God, radiance which John likens to jasper and carnelian. John is borrowing from Ezekiel's vision of God, where the prophet, unable to adequately describe what he sees, concludes, "Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezek 1:28).

The rainbow is probably also a reminder of God's covenant with Noah and with every living creature upon the earth that "never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen 9:11). The rainbow reminds us that God's goal is not a destroyed earth but a restored earth. It reminds us that God will keep this world functioning until the things which are have given way to the things which must be.

The crystal sea probably serves a similar purpose as the jasper and carnelian, and as the emerald-like rainbow. It forms part of the radiance of the enthroned God. Ezekiel saw under God's throne "what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome" (Ezek 1:22). Moses saw under God's feet "something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself" (Exod 24:10).

Next John sees twenty-four thrones arranged around the throne. These are the thrones of the twenty-four elders. The vision of God in his heavenly throne room surrounded by his heavenly court or divine council is common in the Old Testament. The number twelve often signifies the people of God. Twice times twelve would indicate the people of God in both testaments, Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church whose true members together constitute the one people of God.

From the throne comes thunder and lightning, imagery borrowed from Exodus 19, where thunder and lightning heralded God's coming to earth:

**On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. (Exod 19:16-19)**

This thunder and lighting recurs three more times in Revelation, with the seventh seal (8:5), with the seventh trumpet (11:19) and with the seventh bowl (16:18). Each is more intense than the previous. Each signifies a theophany, God's coming to earth. Each is a reminder that the terrible judgments which come upon the earth proceed from the very throne of God. They are not random events in a random universe. They are deliberate events orchestrated by the sovereign God who occupies the throne at the center of the universe.

In front of the throne are seven lamps, representing the seven spirits or seven-fold spirit of God. In addition to the significance of the number seven, this is perhaps also a reference to Isaiah's seven-fold description of the spirit: "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD" (Isa 11:2).

Finally John sees four living creatures gathered around the throne. The imagery is again borrowed from Ezekiel's vision of God, when he saw "what looked like four living creatures" (Ezek 1:5). These are later identified as cherubim (Ezek 10:20). As we have come to expect by now, John does not slavishly borrow from the Old Testament, but here, as everywhere, he modifies the imagery. Each of Ezekiel's four living creatures has four faces; each has the face of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle. But each of John's cherubim is like only one of these creatures. Cherubim are God's throne attendants, present in his sanctuary. They were present in the garden of Eden. They were symbolically present in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and in the temple. John now sees them in heaven, in God's true sanctuary, of which the tabernacle and the temple were earthly copies.

Ezekiel's cherubim had four wings apiece. Each of John's has six, the same number as the seraphim that Isaiah saw in his vision of the Lord (Isa 6:1-4). This blending of Ezekiel's cherubim and Isaiah's seraphim allows John to introduce the song sung by the seraphim: "Holy, Holy, Holy."

### Worship of the One Seated Upon the Throne

Next John describes the activity around the throne. He sees first the cherubim then the elders offering their worship to the one who

sits upon the throne. The cherubim acclaim God as holy; the elders acclaim him as worthy.

#### 1. The worship of the cherubim: God is holy

Day and night they never stop saying:

**"Holy, holy, holy  
is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was, and is, and is to come." (4:8b)**

The cherubim offer up their ceaseless praise. They sing the same song as the seraphim whom Isaiah saw singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa 6:3). This song has been enshrined into the liturgy of synagogue and church as the *qedushah* (Hebrew, "holy thing") of the synagogue, the *trisagion* (Greek, "thrice-holy") of the Orthodox Church, and the *sanctus* (Latin, "holy") of the Catholic Church. Perhaps some of you have sung the *sanctus*, either in Catholic services or in a choral production. Many composers have made beautiful arrangements of this piece. I have an entire CD of different settings of the *sanctus*. Here's what the liner notes say: "Though the 'Sanctus' is part of the Roman Catholic Mass, its glorious beauty and message of peace belong to all races and creeds."<sup>1</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. The proclamation that God is holy makes mere creatures fall on their faces. The proclamation that God is holy rules out all other creeds.

Holiness means that something is other, that it is extraordinary, out of the ordinary. In Rudolph Otto's classic formulation, the holy God is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery which makes one tremble yet fascinates. God is a mystery. He cannot be fully comprehended. Neither Ezekiel nor John can describe God. God is a mystery who makes one tremble. Isaiah, Ezekiel, John all fall down when confronted with God. There is a radiance and brilliance about God that makes one fall down before him. As the hymn says, "Tis only the brightness of light hideth thee."<sup>2</sup> Yet God is also a God who fascinates. Created beings are drawn to him, to worship their creator. Rev 22:4 shows that a time is coming when God will no longer be hidden, for his servants "will see his face" when they have been rendered holy also.

#### 2. The worship of the elders: God is worthy

**Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:**

**"You are worthy, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they were created  
and have their being." (4:9-11)**

The twenty-four elders respond to the lead of the cherubim. They strip themselves of their crowns, abase themselves, and offer their worship to the one seated upon the throne, to the one who lives for ever and ever.

The elders acclaim their Lord and God as worthy. This is almost certainly a polemic against Domitian, the Roman emperor at the time John wrote this book. Domitian styled himself as *dominus et deus*, "Lord and God." He built a large palace in Rome, complete with a magnificent throne room. Throughout the empire, the imperial cult acclaimed him as worthy. But Domitian, like the wizard of Oz, is humbug; his magnificence is a smoke and mirrors show. Rev-

elation 4 is designed to refurbish the imagination of God's people in Asia and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. They were surrounded by people who acclaimed Domitian as their lord and god, and proclaimed him worthy. That is the seen world. But John, and those to whom he writes, are given a vision into the unseen world, where they are shown the one who is their true Lord and God, the one who is truly worthy to receive glory, honor and power. To see beyond the seen world to the unseen requires revelation.

The number three features prominently in the worship. The cherubim acclaim God as thrice-holy. They offer him glory, honor and thanks. The elders offer him glory, honor and power. In the next chapter this will be intensified to a seven-fold attribution: "power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise" (5:12). This three-yea seven-fold attribution to God and to the Lamb implies that all worship belongs to them.

## Thoughts about worship

Revelation is a book about worship. I will never tire of saying this. Yet most people are unaware that worship is a dominant feature of the book. I will close with three comments about worship as seen in Revelation.

### 1. Worship centers

The book of Revelation shows worship to be highly focused. It is focused on the throne and its occupant. Upon that throne sits one who is both holy and worthy. Throughout the book we see an ever-wider circle gathered around that throne to worship. Worship should re-orient us. Throughout the week we lose our focus, other things compete for our attention, idols arise clamoring for us to acclaim them worthy, we become fragmented. Worship centers us again upon God. It defragments us and reorients us. Sadly too many of our songs are centered on the wrong person, upon me rather than upon God.

### 2. Worship gathers

The book of Revelation also shows worship to be a communal activity. The cherubim, elders, angels and saints who gather around the throne are not an assembly of individuals. They are a community, the servants of God gathered to acclaim their sovereign master. We are here today as part of God's family, a family that stretches around the world and through time. When I sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" it is not just me singing that. I am singing the same song sung by the seraphim seen by Isaiah, sung by the cherubim seen by John, sung in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, English and countless other languages throughout the world and through time. Sadly too many of our contemporary songs are written in the first person singular, not the first person plural. No longer is it "Holy God we praise thy name, Lord of all we bow before Thee." Now it is "I just want to praise you."

This does not mean that we all must sing exactly the same song all the time. Throughout Revelation, the worship is antiphonal. First one group sings, then another. The cherubim sing, then the elders, then the angels, then all creation. This has helped me understand the role of choirs and worship teams. If the worship team is doing all the singing, and I am merely a spectator, then it is not gathered worship. But it is quite acceptable for a worship team or a choir to offer its contribution if this stirs the congregation to add its own voice to the worship. The end result should be that all of the saints gathered below join all of the saints gathered above in adding their voices to those of the cherubim, elders and angels gathered around the throne. Together we all acclaim that God is holy and that God is worthy.

### 3. Worship responds

Worship in the book of Revelation is always responsive to the being and deeds of God and of the Lamb. The cherubim worship because they see God. The elders worship because the cherubim proclaim him to be holy. For me to worship I first have to see God. I have to be given something to respond to. I must be shown the being and deeds of God. We gather on Sundays not just to worship. We gather to have our vision refreshed, to have our eyes opened wide to see God enthroned in glory. The worship can happen only when our eyes are opened afresh to see God. We must be given a reason to worship and praise. It is only when I see God as revealed in his being and his deeds that I will fall down and sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "Thou art worthy."

**Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim 1:17)**

1. *Sanctus: Meditations for the Soul* (Archiv, 1996).
2. Walter C. Smith, *Immortal, Invisible* (1876).

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 Bernard Bell  
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## WORTHY IS THE LAMB

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Of the writing of books about Revelation there is no end. On my shelf I have about forty of them, but this is just a small fraction of what has been published. If you ask people what Revelation is about, many would say it is about the Great Tribulation, Armageddon, and the Millennium. Many books foster this understanding, for example, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and currently the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.<sup>1</sup>

But other books about Revelation have completely different titles. Here are a few from my shelf: Richard Brooks' *The Lamb is all the Glory*, Dennis Johnson's *Triumph of the Lamb*, Craig Koester's *Revelation and the End of All Things*, whose cover art makes it clear that this end is the worship of the Lamb, and Robert Coleman's *Singing with the Angels*.<sup>2</sup>

So different are these two sets of titles that it is natural to wonder if the authors are reading the same book. The first set of books focuses on what happens on earth. The second set focuses more attention on what happens in heaven. The events of Revelation unfold on these two planes, heaven and earth. But which is the more important arena? Where does the real action take place? Are the descriptions of heaven merely an inconvenient interruption to the much more interesting events on earth? Or is it the events in heaven that give meaning to what happens on earth? Those of you who have followed my series so far should know by now what I think of those questions.

Nowhere are these questions more important than in chapters 4-5. The first group of authors pay relatively little attention to these two chapters, except to note that the Rapture occurs at the beginning of chapter 4—the Church is removed from earth so that it does not endure the Great Tribulation. They then rush on to chapter 6 to look at the seven seals. The second group recognizes that the seals, trumpets and bowls are always set in context with a vision of the heavenly throne room and of the worship that takes place around the throne.

The first approach to Revelation tends to breed either fascination or fear—fascination with timetables, or fear over the awful events that unfold. God and Christ tend to get lost in the excitement. The second approach leads to doxology, to praise and worship offered to the one seated upon the throne and to the Lamb.

### The Scroll

**Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. (Rev 5:1-4 NIV)**

The setting of chapter 5 is the same as for chapter 4, the heavenly throne room. In chapter 4 John saw a throne in heaven and one seated upon it. Now he sees that God is holding a scroll in his right

hand. The scroll is a repeated image in the Old Testament prophets. Sometimes a prophet was told to write God's prophetic word on a scroll. Sometimes the prophet saw a scroll containing God's word. In either case, the contents of the scroll are always a word of judgment. The closest parallel is to Ezekiel who saw a scroll written on both sides with words of lament, mourning and woe (Ezek 2:10).

John sees that the scroll is in God's hand. God has determined that judgment should happen. Why? We saw last week that Revelation is about both the things which are now and the things which must happen after this (1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). The world as it is now is out of order. The earth is in rebellion against God. In the imagery of Revelation, the dragon has installed the beast upon his earthly throne, and the false prophet has deceived mankind into worshipping the beast rather than God. But God is on his throne, and he declares that certain things must happen soon.

God could have chosen to just zap things into order, an act which theologians describe as *deus ex machina*. But God has chosen not to work this way. This is not due to any lack of power or ability on his part. For reasons of his own, hidden within his own inscrutable purposes, God chooses to work through his servants. Who is the servant through whom God will set things right, the servant through whom he will bring judgment upon his enemies and thereby complete the salvation of his people? John sees that the scroll is sealed with seven seals. The things that must happen soon cannot happen until those seals are broken. But who can open them?

John sees an angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scrolls?" Who can bring about the unfolding of God's purposes? Alas, there is no one worthy. There is no one on earth: those on earth with power are opposed to God; those who long for God have no power. There is no one under the earth: the residents of the underworld provoke and lead the rebellion against God. There is not even anyone above the earth: even the angels are not equal to the task. Indeed 1 Pet 1:10-12 suggests that even the angels did not know the long-term referent of Old Testament prophecy. The angels did not know how God was going to fulfill his oracles of judgment and salvation. God did not reveal to them how he would simultaneously judge and remove evil on the one hand, and save his people on the other hand.

John weeps. His hopes had been raised in seeing the scroll: God would put things right. But, seeing no one able to unlock the scroll, his hopes are dashed. How then will God accomplish his purposes? How will he set things right?

### The Lion

**Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." (5:5)**

John is not allowed to weep for long. One of the twenty-four elders urges him to dry his tears so that he can look. There is one who is able to open the scroll and its seven seals. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David can do so because he has triumphed. The elder ties together two Messianic titles from the Old Testament.

When Jacob pronounced his blessing upon his sons, he likened Judah to a lion:

**“You are a lion’s cub, O Judah;  
you return from the prey, my son.  
Like a lion he crouches and lies down,  
like a lioness—who dares rouse him.  
The scepter will not depart from Judah,  
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,  
until he comes to whom it belongs  
and the obedience of the nations is his.” (Gen 49:9-10)**

Jacob refers to two aspects of the lion: his power in devouring prey, and his regal authority. Even in English we refer to the regal lion, calling him the king of the beasts. This imagery of the lion remained linked to the tribe of Judah. Even today, the crest of the city of Jerusalem features a lion. The second title is drawn from Isaiah, who foretold,

**A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit...**

**In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. (Isa 11:1, 10)**

Today is Palm Sunday. The Jews of Jesus’ day were longing for God to send his Messiah. This Messiah would be great David’s greater son, a mighty king who would go into battle, overthrow Israel’s enemies, and restore her to the greatness befitting her identity as the people of God. On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Matt 21:9; cf. Mark 11:9-10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13). The crowd wanted a lion to throw off the power of Rome.

## The Lamb

**Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. (5:6-7)**

John looks, expecting to see the Lion, but instead he sees a Lamb. The juxtaposition of what John hears and what he sees indicates an identity between the two. The Lion of whom he hears is in fact the Lamb whom he sees. What a juxtaposition of images: a conquering lion and a slain lamb. Herein lies a great paradox. John is told that the Lion has triumphed and conquered. But that victory has been accomplished through the Lamb being slain. God has made his power manifest through weakness.

Why was the Lamb slain? The Old Testament has pointed towards this image. Each year the Israelites slew a lamb on Passover, to remember that God had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. God had accomplished a great victory over Pharaoh, the tyrannical ruler that held God’s people in captivity. On account of the slain blood of the Passover lamb, the Lord passed over his people, protecting them

from his judgment. God graciously accepted the vicarious death of an animal sacrifice in place of the Israelites’ firstborn sons. Having brought his people into freedom, God provided the sacrificial system, graciously accepting the vicarious death of animal sacrifices as providing atonement for sin.

Within the context of Revelation the Lamb was slain for his faithful witness to God. He is the archetypal martyr. In chapter 10, John again sees a scroll. The mystery of this scroll, as revealed in chapter 11, concerns two witnesses. How will the deception of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet be unmasked? How will their tyrannical rule be brought to an end? How will the death of the saints be vindicated? Not by acting like a lion, but by acting like a lamb. The witnesses follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Like Jesus, they are killed for their faithful witness. But just as they followed Jesus into death, they also follow him through death into new life. Similarly, the saints are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, bearing faithful witness. They are to expect death, but are also assured of following Jesus through death into new life. Sadly, too often the Church has behaved like a lion, even sometimes ironically carrying the banner of the Lamb and Flag into its battles.

From here on, “the Lamb” will be John’s favorite title for Jesus, a title he uses 28 times, or four times seven. We are never allowed to forget that there is a throne in heaven with one seated upon it. Nor are we allowed to forget that Jesus is the Lamb.

John sees the Lamb approach God and take the scroll from his right hand. With a huge sigh of relief we now await the opening of the seals. This is what you have all been waiting for! What are these seven seals? But, wait, we are not yet shown the opening of the seals. Before the Lamb opens the first seal John is shown something of great importance. Before the judgments upon earth which the seals unleash, John is shown something further in heaven. There is an interlude between the initial sight of the seven seals and the opening of the first seal. Similarly, there will be an interlude between the initial sight of the seven trumpets (8:2) and the blowing of the first trumpet (8:7), and an interlude between the initial sight of the seven plagues (15:1) and the pouring out of the first plague from the first bowl (16:2). These interludes are of great importance. In each case the interlude shows events in heaven which provide context for the terrifying judgments upon earth. The judgments upon earth are terrifying indeed, but we are never allowed to forget that they proceed from God’s throne around which God’s people are gathered in worship.

## Worship of the Lamb

The interlude between the sight of the seven seals and the breaking of the first seal is filled with the worship of the Lamb. The response of the creatures in heaven to the Lamb taking the scroll is not to pick up their timetables in order to try to figure out the timing of the seals. No, their response is to fall down and worship. In chapter 4 we had two songs of worship addressed to the one seated upon the throne. Now in chapter 5 we have two songs of worship addressed to the Lamb, followed by a song addressed to both.

### 1. The Lamb is worthy to receive the scroll

**And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song:**

**“You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,**

because you were slain,  
 and with your blood you purchased men for God  
 from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our  
 God,  
 and they will reign on the earth.” (5:8-10)

The immediate response of the cherubim and the elders to the sight of the Lamb taking the scroll from the one seated upon the throne is to fall down in worship and sing a new song. The new song indicates a new redemptive act by God, which brings forth a new song of praise from his people. They proclaim that the Lamb is worthy to take the scroll. He is able to unlock the mystery of God’s will, the mystery whereby God will bring to pass the things which must happen. He is able to do so not because of his power, but because he was slain. Revelation shows that the world is populated by men and women of every tribe, nation, language and people, a four-fold phrase that is used seven times in various combinations. Though these people be in rebellion against God, he does not abandon them. He is plundering the domain of Satan, who holds every tribe, nation, language and people captive, in order to assemble around his throne saints from every tribe, nation, language and people. And the means he uses is the blood of the slain Lamb.

## 2. The Lamb is worthy to receive praise

**Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:**

**“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
 to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength  
 and honor and glory and praise!” (5:11-12)**

Next John sees myriad upon myriad of angels adding their chorus. The cherubim and elders acclaimed the Lamb as worthy to receive the scroll. The angels intensify the worship, acclaiming him as worthy to receive praise. Their seven-fold attribution indicates that nothing is held back. God is worthy to receive glory and praise because he is the Creator. The Lamb is worthy to receive glory and praise because he is the Redeemer.

Handel used this song as the great climax to *Messiah*. In the Amen which follows, Handel has the choir join in sequentially: first the basses, then the tenors, then the altos, and finally the sopranos, until all are singing “Amen” to the cry, “Worthy is the Lamb.” What a fitting climax.

## 3. The Lamb is worshiped with God

**Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:**

**“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
 be praise and honor and glory and power,  
 for ever and ever!” (5:13)**

Every creature in every realm joins in, offering their worship to both the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. This worship that is jointly offered shows just how extraordinary is the worship of this chapter. Revelation always maintains a clear distinction between the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb. Yet it is also clear that worship is offered to both. The early church continued Judaism’s insistence on monotheism. Yet from the earliest days the Church worshiped Jesus without feeling that it was sacrificing monotheism. There is only one God, but Father and Son are together worshiped.

The worship of Jesus is not something the early church would have done lightly. This is a profound mystery. It would not be until the fourth and fifth centuries that this would be worked out theologically in the doctrines of the Trinity and of the full deity of Jesus. It would not be until the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon in 451 that the Church would complete its process of defining the identity of Jesus. But here in Revelation we have a very high Christology, a very high understanding of the person of Jesus. The Lamb is not one of the worshipers. He is worshiped. There could be no more powerful statement of the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

## 4. The cherubim’s Amen

**The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped. (5:14)**

The four cherubim round out the chorus of praise by adding their “Amen.” It was they who commenced the worship in 4:8, and it is they who bring it to a close. They are the throne attendants of God, the innermost circle of the worshipers gathered around the throne.

## The Lamb and the Communion Table

Two weeks ago I went to Belgium to see a piece of art. Though it is one of my favorite pieces of religious art I had never seen it in real life. What is today known as the Ghent Altarpiece was painted in the 1420s by the van Eyck brothers for the altar of a chapel in what is today St Bavo’s cathedral in Ghent. The altarpiece was designed to stand behind the altar. It is a triptych, consisting of two doors which close over a central section. Normally the altarpiece would be closed, showing panels of muted color. These panels portray, among other things, Old Testament prophets who foretold the Messiah, and the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary.

On feast days the altarpiece would be opened, revealing a dozen brilliantly-colored panels. The central panel is known as the Adoration of the Lamb. At the center is the Lamb standing on the altar. Blood flows from his breast into the communion chalice that stands on the altar. Around the altar kneel angels. Beyond the circle of the angels are four groups of people, all gazing upon the Lamb. At front left the Old Testament prophets kneel in front of a great company of people drawn from every nation, indicated by their many different hats. At the front right the New Testament apostles kneel in front of church martyrs, indicated by their red robes. At the back left, waving palm branches as they approach the altar, are the confessors, the faithful saints whose death was not due to martyrdom. At the back right, also waving palm branches and approaching the altar, are the women saints and martyrs. On four adjacent panels, four additional groups process toward the altar. From the left come the just judges and the knights of Christ; they stood faithfully for Christ in the world. From the right approach the hermits and the pilgrims; they faithfully followed Christ by withdrawing from the world. These four groups are journeying towards the altar, there to join those already gathered around the altar, worshiping the Lamb standing as though slain. Above them the heavenly angels offer their worship, the singers on the left, the musicians on the right.

The altarpiece is a marvelous portrayal of Revelation 5. On festival days, Mass would be observed in front of the opened altarpiece. We do not share the Catholic understanding of the Mass as a repeated sacrifice of the Lamb. Nevertheless, this is a marvelous piece of art for the communion table. It is a powerful reminder that the slain Lamb whose blood fills the communion cup is also now receiving the worship of the saints above and below.

In a few minutes we will take communion. This is an act of remembrance, as we remember Christ's death: the Lamb was slain for us. It is an act of proclamation, as we proclaim Christ's death until he comes. Through sharing in the symbols of Christ's broken body and shed blood we proclaim that the triumph of the Lion is accomplished through the slaughter of the Lamb. It is an act of worship as we offer our thanks: we thank God that he has accepted the slaughter of the Lamb in our place, and we acclaim the Lamb as worthy of our adoration because he was slain.

Before we come to the communion table we will add our chorus to that of the cherubim, the elders, the angels and all creation, who are gathered around the throne and the altar. Revelation 4-5 contains five stanzas of worship: two addressed to God, two addressed to the Lamb, and the fifth addressed to both. James Boice, late pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, worked these into a five-stanza hymn, *'Round the Throne in Radiant Glory*. As we prepare to sing this, I urge you to ensure that your understanding of Revelation be doxological. If Revelation doesn't make you want to join Handel in singing, "Worthy is the Lamb," then perhaps you have a wrong understanding of the book.

**To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:5b-6).**

1. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Left Behind* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1995) and subsequent volumes.

2. Richard Brooks, *The Lamb is All the Glory* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986); Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Robert E. Coleman, *Singing With the Angels* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1998; originally published as *Songs of Heaven* [Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1980]).

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Revelation 6:1-17

Twelfth Message

Bernard Bell

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# WHEN GOD TURNS HIS FACE

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today is the day you've all been waiting for. Today we come to the seven seals, the beginning of the "good stuff." But I want you to notice that it's been two years since I started this book. I've preached eleven sermons covering five chapters. That's nearly a quarter of the book. These have been vitally important chapters. Yet many people have the impression that the book really begins with the seven seals. You're itching to know what I'm going to say about these seals. If you have come with your charts and your timetables, either to test me against them or to fill in the blanks, then let me disappoint you straight away. What I'm going to say over the next three weeks about the seals has little to do with the charts that are so popular, so you can put them away.

The Book of Revelation contains a series of visions given to John which he was told to write down and send to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. These visions concern both the things which are now and the things which must soon happen (1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). I need to say a word about the timeline of Revelation. The narrative sequence of the book is the series of visions, not the content of the visions. John repeatedly writes, "Then I saw," interspersed occasionally with "Then I heard." There is no necessity that the contents of the visions follow the same sequence as the visions themselves. The only chronology John is told is that the things which are now must give way soon to the things which must happen. That word "soon" has remained so for nearly 2000 years.

Chapters 4-16 form a tightly integrated sequence of visions. John is caught up to heaven in a visionary trance. First he sees a throne, with one seated upon it. All of heaven is gathered around this throne in worship of its occupant. In the hand of this occupant he sees a scroll, which presumably contains the program of the things which must happen. But who is able to make these things happen? God could choose to zap the world into order with a snap of his fingers, but that's not how he chooses to operate. He chooses rather to work through the slaughtered lamb. This slain lamb, who has conquered through the shedding of his blood, is thereby worthy both to open the seven seals and to receive the worship of heaven (5:9, 12). We are in a topsy-turvy world where the Lion who has conquered is the Lamb who was slain.

It is never very clear what is actually written on the scroll, and whether the contents of the scroll are actually ever announced. Is the opening of the seals part of the message on the scroll, or is it a prelude? One could argue that the scroll is not open until the seventh seal is broken. Is the content of the scroll revealed after the opening of the seventh seal? But the breaking of the seventh seal brings seven trumpets; one can argue that they function as heralds of the message of the scroll, so that the content of the scroll is not proclaimed until the seventh trumpet is blown: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). Or is the message of the scroll not revealed until the seventh bowl is poured out? That event brings the great

proclamation, "It is done!" (16:17). The things which must happen have happened.

Even after many years of study, Revelation retains many mysteries. There are plenty of details that are not clear. But the principal messages are abundantly clear. The things which are now will give way to the things which will happen. These things *must* happen, and they must happen *soon*. The day is coming when God will say, "It is done! It has happened!" That's about as much chronology as I'm willing to impose on the book.

## The Four Horsemen

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

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

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

**When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth. (6:1-8 NIV)**

The first four seals are presented as a cohesive quartet, as are the first four trumpets and the first four bowls. The breaking of these four seals summons the four horsemen of Durer's famous etching, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

The account of the breaking of each of the first four seals follows an identical pattern: the Lamb opens a seal, one of the cherubim cries out, "Come!" and out comes a horse with a rider. All of the imagery is drawn from the Old Testament. The imagery of the four horsemen is drawn from Zechariah 1 and 6, where horses of various colors are sent out by the Lord to patrol the four corners of the earth.

The first horseman is mounted on a white horse. Because Jesus later appears as a rider on a white horse (19:11), some people interpret this first horseman as Jesus. But this cannot be so. The four horsemen must be interpreted as a quartet, but Jesus does not belong with the other three. Furthermore, Jesus already has a role in the vision, as

the Lamb who opens each scroll. No, this first horseman represents military conquest. The bow is a symbol of war, and the white horse indicates victory. He rides out as an invader bent on conquest, and is successful in his mission.

The second horseman is mounted on a horse that is red, the color of blood. And blood flows aplenty, as he removes peace so that men kill each other. His large sword is symbolic of this slaughter. The first horseman brings death by external invasion and conquest; this second horseman brings death by internal civil war, by the breakdown of society.

The third horseman rides a black horse. The scales he holds are for measuring out food for purchase. A quart of wheat is enough to feed one person for one day. But it costs a denarius, a day's wage for a laborer. If he chooses to eat rougher food, he can buy enough barley for three people. People have to spend all their money on mere subsistence. But the famine is limited: the olive trees and grape vines are not harmed.

The color of the fourth horse is *chloros*, the pale green color of chlorine, the sickly color of a corpse. His rider is Death. Accompanying him is Hades or Sheol, the abode of the dead. They kill a quarter of the earth by sword, famine, plague and wild animals. In the Old Testament these are the archetypal agents of God's judgment, his "four dreadful judgments" (Ezek 14:21). Though the judgments are terrible, they are limited, affecting only a quarter of the earth.

These four horsemen represent God's judgment upon the world, judgments which prepare the way for the Lord to come. But when do these judgments occur? Are they past, present or future? There are four major opinions: futurist, preterist, historicist and idealist.

The futurist believes that these judgments are all in the future, specifically during the Great Tribulation after the Rapture. Because the Church has been raptured out of the way, Christians do not have to face these judgments. This is the dominant view in America, the view espoused by the *Left Behind* series and countless other books.

The preterist believes that the judgments have all occurred in the past, either prior to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, or prior to the Fall of Rome in 410. It is true that the events symbolized by these horsemen did indeed befall the Roman Empire. A reader at the end of the first century would have recognized the first horseman as a Parthian. Parthia, located in what is today Iran, was the only empire able to stand up to the power of Rome. Parthia was a constant threat on Rome's eastern frontier, and launched several successful invasions into Roman territory. Furthermore, the Parthians soldiers were skilled archers, uniquely able to use their bows while mounted on horseback. Rome brought peace to the Mediterranean, the famous *pax Romana*. But that peace was periodically removed, plunging the Empire into chaos. Ensuring sufficient food supplies to feed the empire was a perennial problem for the emperors; there were periods when grain was scarce and expensive. Plague became a recurring problem, brought back by soldiers who had fought on the northern and eastern frontiers. In recent years there has been a resurgence of the preterist position. While I am willing to accept that the judgments of these horsemen were visited upon Rome, I don't think that exhausts the meaning of the series.

The historicist sees the judgments worked out progressively throughout the whole of church history. This position was popular in the past, but is no longer so.

The idealist views these judgments as typical of all history. This is the view I hold. It is potentially the most troubling view. Preterism relegates these judgments to the distant past, futurism puts them in the indeterminate future. In either case we don't have to face them today. Even historicism dismisses most of the judgments to other times in church history. But idealism says we have to face up to what these horsemen represent throughout history. God is continually intervening in history, bringing judgment upon the world.

Perhaps it's the fact that I'm European that makes me more sympathetic to the idealist view. Throughout much of the 2000 years since Revelation was written, Europe has been wracked by chaos and disorder. At my boarding school in England there was a huge reproduction of Picasso's famous painting *Guernica*, filling a whole wall. For three years I walked by that painting several times a day. It bears grim testimony to the horrors of war.

Here in the U.S. we have been largely immune to terrifying events. We have the occasional hurricane and tornado; we've had scares with AIDS and SARS. But these shake us only temporarily. You have only to look around the world to see God's four dreadful judgments: the sword, famine, plague and wild animals. Yesterday President Bush returned from a five-day visit to Africa. How do you make sense of the terrible chaos of that continent: the brutal civil wars in the Congo and Liberia, the high rate of AIDS in Botswana, the rapacious regimes of many countries, the terrifying diseases that emerge from the jungles? Is this world just random? Is this world absurd? Where is God? Christians have to face up to this. We can't just put our head in the sand and say judgment was in the distant past, or will be in the indeterminate future after the Church has been raptured out of the way. That ignores both the ongoing turmoil in the world and the fact that Christians are caught up in the turmoil alongside non-Christians.

Where is God amidst all this evil? Is he an absentee landowner? Does he care? Has he turned his back? Why doesn't he do something? There is a crucial word, though one easy to miss, which explains where he is. It's the little word *edothē*, meaning "it was given." It's a key word in Revelation: it's used 31 times in the New Testament but 21 of those are in Revelation. A crown was given to the first horsemen. The removal of peace from the earth was given to the second along with a large sword. Authority to kill a quarter of the earth was given to the fourth. Who does the giving? This little word is a circumlocution, a roundabout way of referring to God, the occupant of the throne. Everything begins with God: not just salvation, but also judgment. Where is God? He is on his throne. Why doesn't he do something? He is doing something. Death by the sword, famine, plague, wild animals are indications not of God's absence but of his presence: this is what happens when God turns his face upon a world that has turned its back upon him. This is not a comfortable view; we want to think of God as loving and kind. But any other view is a recipe for despair. If there be no throne at the center, nor an occupant on the throne, nor his superintendence over all things, then this world is absurd.

### How Long?

Christians get caught up in these judgments of God just as much as non-Christians. You have only to ask Christians in Africa today. But Christians face a further challenge: they also suffer death for their faith. That's the message of the fifth seal:

**When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed. (6:9-11)**

In the Old Testament, the blood of sacrificial animals was thrown upon the altar, where it flowed down into collecting channels underneath. John sees under the altar not the blood of sacrificial bulls and goats, but the martyrs whose death is here regarded as a sacrificial death, as an offering to God. They have been killed because of "the word of God and the testimony they had maintained." This is language that occurs again and again throughout the book: God's people are called to hold on to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. That's all they are asked to do. It is highly likely that they will end up dead for doing so. The Greek word *martys* means witness. It was because so many were killed for their witness that the word came to mean one who is killed for his faith. Being a witness doesn't mean primarily that you go around sharing *The Four Spiritual Laws*. It means that you hold on to the belief in all that you do that the throne at the center of the universe is in heaven not on earth, that it is occupied by one to whom all worship is due, that it is Jesus Christ who is Lord, that salvation has been won through the blood of the slain Lamb. There are still places in the world where holding on to these facts brings death.

This raises another dilemma for the believer: has God turned his back on the one who has turned his face toward him? If God has established his kingdom on earth, has placed his king on the throne, and has saved his people, why does he allow his people to be killed? Why doesn't he prevent it, or at least do something to avenge their death? That's the substance of the prayer of these martyrs: "How long?" How long, O Lord? Why don't you put things right? Why don't you bring your judgment upon these killers who seem to be acting with impunity? Their killers are "the inhabitants of the earth," a term used nine times in the book to refer to those who are living their lives in autonomy from God, those who have turned their backs upon God. How long, O Lord? Why don't you turn your face upon them in terrible judgment? Why do you turn your back on us? Earlier we heard the psalmist's cry, "How long will you hide your face from us?" (Ps 13:1).

God's answer is both comforting and perplexing. White robes are given to them—there again is that little word *edothē*, "it was given." These white robes indicate that though they are dead, they are vindicated in God's sight. Then he tells them to rest a while, because a lot more saints have to be killed first. How do you make sense of that? If becoming a Christian is supposed to bring health, wealth and prosperity, why do all the saints in Revelation end up dead, killed for their faithful witness? As we sang earlier in William Cowper's great hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." The last verse runs, "Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his work in vain; God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain." God's purposes are hidden within the inscrutability of his own will. Attempting to discern these purposes without faith will be futile.

How do you make any sense out of the fact that all the saints in Revelation are killed? By seeing that death is not the final enemy. George Caird comments, "The idea that life on earth is so infinitely precious that the death which robs us of it must be the ultimate

tragedy is precisely the idolatry that John is trying here to combat."<sup>1</sup> That's a very sobering word for Americans, who devote enormous resources to avoiding or delaying death. This is a theme we'll touch on again and again throughout the rest of Revelation. In Revelation there are two deaths. Christians may be killed for their witness, but this is merely the first death which ushers them into the first resurrection (20:5). "The second death has no power over them" (20:6). The second death is the lake of fire (20:14; 21:8), the place of eternal judgment whither are banished those who persist in turning their backs on God. It is the second death not the first death that is the ultimate tragedy.

## The Day of the Lord

**I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.**

**Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (6:12-17)**

The theme of judgment reaches a crescendo with the sixth seal. Again the language and imagery is drawn from the Old Testament, where descriptions of the sun being darkened and the moon turned blood red were not part of the weather forecast, but metaphors for the great and climactic day of the Lord. The imagery grows out of the tension between the way things are and the way things ought to be. In the world as it is, the wicked prosper, God's people suffer under oppression, and God is not universally acclaimed. Where is God? Why does he allow this state of affairs to continue? Through his prophets, the Lord told his people that a day was coming when he would put things right. A day when he would judge his enemies, save his people, and vindicate his holy name. The day when this would happen is described as the "day of the Lord" or "the day of the Lord's wrath," or even just "that day." "Great," thought Israel, "the day is coming when God will zap our enemies." But it is a dangerous thing to long for the day of the Lord. "Why do you long for the day of the Lord?" Amos asked Israel. "Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light" (Amos 5:18, 20). Because Israel had turned its back upon God, it would be a terrifying day when God turned his face upon her, for his face would be turned in judgment not salvation.

When does this day happen? When does God intervene to put things right? The prophetic imagery was fulfilled in 587 BC, when the Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and took the people into captivity in Babylon. The day of the Lord arrived in 539 BC, when the Persians captured the invincible city of Babylon, and Cyrus issued a decree allowing the captive Jews to return home. It happened in greater measure in the first century AD when Jesus went to the cross. The Jews expected God to come to judge their enemies, the Romans, and vindicate them, establishing Israel as chief nation. But when God came, it was at the cross, on which, through his faithful and obedient servant Jesus he judged the greater enemies of sin, death and Satan, and through the shed blood of the slain Lamb brought salvation to his people. But we do not yet see all things put right. The day of the Lord is yet future. There is a day when God will

turn his face upon the earth to finally put things right. It's the day when the things which must happen happen. It's the day when it is proclaimed, "It is done!"

For those who have turned their backs on God, it is a terrifying thing to have his face turned upon them. They will try to hide from that face, for God's gaze is fixed on them in judgment. So terrifying is that judgment that they ask, "Who can stand?" Who can stand when God comes in judgment? The assumed answer is "no one," but that's not the correct answer. The next chapter is an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. John has a vision into heaven where he sees that there are people who can stand before God: "there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (7:9).

Revelation paints a black and white picture. There are only two sets of people: those who have turned their back on God, and those who follow the Lamb. In the end, God will turn his face upon both sets. Sooner or later, everyone has to face God. For some that will be glorious, for others it will be terrifying. For those who have turned their backs upon God, it will be terrifying when he turns his face upon them. But for the saints, to see the face of God is their glorious destiny in the new heavens and the new earth (22:4). C. S. Lewis expresses this well,

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.<sup>2</sup>

Do you long to see the face of God? Or are you too busy with your own life here on earth? Earlier we sang in F. W. Faber's lovely hymn, *My God how wonderful Thou art*,

How wonderful, how beautiful,  
The sight of Thee must be.  
...  
Father of Jesus, love's Reward,  
What Rapture it will be  
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,  
And gaze, and gaze on Thee!

Sue and I have a border collie that can gaze and gaze on us. Does that prospect of gazing on God thrill you with anticipation, or bore you to a yawn, or make you quake in your boots? That is a far more important question than whether you have your charts filled in correctly.

**The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.**  
(Num 6:24-26)

1. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 113, commenting on Rev 8:11.

2. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.



Catalog No. 1513

Revelation 7

13th Message

Bernard Bell

July 20th, 2003

## WHO CAN STAND?

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week we saw that the sixth seal unleashes the great and terrible day of the Lord, the day of wrath when he turns his face upon a world that has turned its back on him. The recipients of his wrath cry out to be hidden from his face, asking, “Who can stand?” (6:17) It seems like a rhetorical question, to which the obvious answer is “no one.” The ones asking this question include “the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty” (6:15). When the real sovereign of the universe shows up they realize how small and weak they really are. If they can’t stand when God shows up, then who possibly can? The end has obviously come, no one can stand, and we expect the seventh seal which wraps it all up.

But that’s not what we get. John’s next vision is not of the seventh seal being opened; that doesn’t happen until 8:1. Instead, he is given a vision which addresses the question, “Who can stand?” We weren’t expecting an answer, thinking the question to be rhetorical. But there is an answer, and a vital one it is. Because chapter 7 addresses the question raised in 6:17, in some respects it is still part of the sixth seal. But in other respects it forms an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals, an interlude during which John is shown people and events in a different realm.

The title of this series on Revelation is “The Seen and the Unseen.” The visions of the book move between the seen world on earth and the unseen world in heaven. One of the purposes of the book is to open the readers’ eyes to these unseen realities of heaven. In a song by Stuart Townend that we’ve been singing lately (*O My Soul, Arise and Bless Your Maker*), we beseech God, “Fill my gaze with things as yet unseen.” No book does this better than Revelation. Yet too many popular books about Revelation are devoted to filling our gaze with things as yet unseen on earth, devoted to figuring out timetables of visible events in the “seen world.” What we really need is to gaze on things as yet unseen in heaven, to gaze on the hidden realities in the unseen world. This is what Revelation 7 gives us.

“Who can stand?” It is in the “seen world” that the question is asked, but in the “unseen world” that it is answered. That’s why the only answer available to the rich and powerful is “no one.” They see only the “seen world” That’s why we need this interlude: to fill our gaze with things as yet unseen.

John’s vision is two-fold: note the repetition, “After this I saw” (7:1), “After this I looked” (7:9)—the verb is actually the same, though NIV translates it differently. What he sees concerns two groups of people: 144,000 from all Israel, and an innumerable multitude from all nations. As we shall see, there is much disagreement over the identification of these two groups.

### A. The 144,000 (7:1-8)

**After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of**

**the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: “Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.” (Rev 7:1-3 NIV)**

Though we are still in the series of seven seals, we are already being prepared for the seven trumpets. The four angels whom John sees restraining the four winds from blowing on the land, the sea and the trees are presumably the four angels who blow the first four trumpets, which unleash terrifying destruction upon the land, the sea and the trees. In the Old Testament, the four winds are a metaphor for the four corners of the earth. In Zech 6:5 they are also identified as the four chariots which are pulled by the colored horses. These horses and the horses of Zechariah 1 are the image bank from which are drawn the four horsemen of the first four seals. Zechariah’s horses went out from God’s presence to patrol the earth. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse go out to bring judgment upon the four corners of the earth, judgment which is given them from the one seated upon the throne. The trumpets also bring God’s judgments but with the intensity turned up. But there is a pause. The winds cannot yet be released; the trumpets cannot yet be blown. Something of vital importance has to happen first.

John sees another angel approaching from the east, the direction of life. He carries the seal of the living God, and explains to the four angels that the reason they are restraining the four winds of judgment is so that God’s servants might first be sealed on their foreheads with the seal of God. The seal represents ownership: these are God’s people. It also represents protection: once they are sealed they cannot be harmed.

Who can stand? These angels can stand. They stand so that God’s servants might be sealed in protection against the devastating judgment on the day of God’s wrath.

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

**From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,  
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,  
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,  
from the tribe of Asher 12,000,  
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,  
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,  
from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,  
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,  
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,  
from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,  
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,  
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000. (7:4-8)**

How many people are sealed? John hears that there are 144,000 drawn from all the tribes of Israel. There follows an enumeration: 12,000 from each of twelve tribes. Notice the pre-eminence of Judah,

Jacob's fourth-born son; he is listed first because from his tribe came the victorious Lion who is a slain Lamb.

Who are these 144,000? The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that this is the actual number of JW's. But there have now been more than 144,000, more than 288,000. So they now believe there are multiple sets of 144,000 with each successive set being less special. That's chronological discrimination!

Dispensationalists believe that the Rapture occurred at 4:1, removing the Church from the earth. The events from 6:1 on unfold during the Great Tribulation, affecting those who are "left behind." These 144,000 are the exact number of Jews who are converted during the Tribulation. One problem with taking this list literally is that the list does not actually include all the tribes of Israel. Dan is missing, presumably because in the Old Testament Dan was responsible for so much idolatry (e.g. Judges 18). Joseph is present but so is one of his sons, Manasseh. Jacob did indeed have twelve sons, but after Jacob went down to Egypt, Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh were reckoned as Jacob's. They became full tribes in Israel in place of Joseph. That makes thirteen. The list was reduced to twelve because Levi was counted separately. Called to special service to God, Levi received no inheritance in the land, for the Lord himself was Levi's inheritance. Yet Levi is present in this list. It seems, therefore, that this list is not literally "all Israel."

A third view is that these 144,000 are God's people throughout time. They are not just Jews, and they are not just during the Great Tribulation. 144,000 is a symbolic number representing the entire people of God, but using Israel language. Even the Old Testament applies the language of Israel to Gentiles. For example, the text we have on our bulletin cover,

**Glorious things are said of you,**

**O city of God:**

**"I will record Rahab and Babylon**

**among those who acknowledge me—**

**Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—**

**and will say, "This one was born in Zion."**

**Indeed, of Zion it will be said,**

**"This one and that one were born in her,**

**and the Most High himself will establish her."**

**The LORD will write in the register of the peoples:**

**"This one was born in Zion." (Ps 87:3-6)**

Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia: these are all Israel's enemies. They are obviously Gentiles, and just as obviously, they were not born in Zion. Yet the Lord will record in the register, "This one was born in Zion." These Gentiles belong to the people of God. This is an extraordinary psalm: not only will God save the "good Gentiles"; he will extend his salvation even to Israel's enemies, recording them all in the register of Zion.

If we take these 144,000 as representing all God's people, all God's servants, what sense do we make of the number? It is a compound of two further numbers: 12-squared and 10-cubed. Certain Biblical numbers have well-established meanings: 12 represents God's people; 10 is the complete number, and 10-cubed represents a very large complete number. The compound number thus represents the very large totality of God's people. It is not a limiting number, as the Jehovah's Witnesses take it, but an expansive number. How many are sealed? All God's people, and it's a lot of people. Furthermore, they're enumerated: God's knows them all. They're all there. No one is missing.

## **B. The Innumerable Multitude (7:9-17)**

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

**"Salvation belongs to our God,**

**who sits on the throne,**

**and to the Lamb." (7:9-10)**

John has heard that the number of the sealed is 144,000. Now he looks and sees a great multitude beyond counting. Notice the juxtaposition of what John hears and what he sees: he hears 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel; he sees an innumerable multitude from every nation. We've encountered this juxtaposition before: John heard the identity of the one able to unseal the scroll, the Lion who has conquered. He then saw the Lamb who was slain. This juxtaposition of what is heard and what is seen is a technique for expressing identity between two seemingly contradictory images. It is God's servants who are sealed. Who are they? On the one hand they are the 144,000 from all Israel, carefully assembled and enumerated in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham; they're all there, a full and complete number, all counted by God. On the other hand, they are a vast multitude drawn from every nation, Jew and Gentile, including Egypt, Babylon and Philistia, including Afghanistan, Iraq and North Korea. They're a number beyond human ability to count, but they're all carefully enumerated by God.

This great multitude is drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language. Here is another of the many key phrases that are used repeatedly in this book. The order and the actual terms might vary, but it's always a four-fold list, indicating universality; the list is given seven times (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). The beast is given (note again that little word *edothē*, "it was given") authority "over every tribe, people, language and nation" (13:7). But God is plundering the beast's kingdom, assembling people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" around his throne (5:9; 7:9). He does so through the eternal gospel that is for "every nation, tribe, language and people" (14:6). The tyrannical power of the beast is no match for the seeming weakness of the slain Lamb. That's the motivation for missions: that God, through the blood of the seemingly-weak slain Lamb, is plundering the kingdom of the seemingly-powerful dragon, Satan, and his seemingly-powerful henchman, the beast. The message of salvation rings loud through Revelation, louder than that of judgment. In the end there will be a redeemed, renewed and restored cosmos, not a destroyed one. Yet in so many books about Revelation it is the message of judgment that rings loudest. The message of salvation is expansive: God is saving not just a select few, not just a literal 144,000, but a vast multitude, a symbolic 144,000. Yes, when God comes, he comes in judgment, but he also comes in salvation. Indeed, he comes in judgment so that he might come in salvation, for salvation requires ridding his world of evil.

At the center of the universe stands a throne with one seated upon it. Gathered around this throne we have already seen the four cherubim, the 24 elders, and myriad myriad angels. Now John sees that the circle is bigger still. Here are the saints, gathered at the throne. They're standing in the presence of God and the Lamb. Who can stand? God's people can stand! Yet these are the people who are weak in the eyes of the strong and mighty on earth. Indeed, these are the people who have been killed by the strong and mighty on earth.

They are dressed in white robes, a common metaphor in Revelation, signifying their purity and victory. The palm branches which they carry signify joy. In his instructions for the Feast of Tabernacles, the Lord told the Israelites “to take palm fronds...and rejoice before the Lord your God” (Lev 23:40). Jesus entered Jerusalem accompanied by crowds waving palm branches who shouted out, “Hosanna!” (John 12:13). These crowds have entered not the earthly Jerusalem, but the heavenly one, the heavenly Zion, in whose register their names are recorded. They are following in the footsteps of their king, the slain Lamb, to gather at his throne.

We have already seen the cherubim, the elders and the angels singing to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb. These singers are heavenly creatures. Now the chorus increases as a new category of singers join in: earthly creatures who have been made fit for heaven. Their song is that salvation comes from God and the Lamb. It doesn't come from their own power or strength. It doesn't come from the dragon, the beast or the false prophet. It doesn't come from Rome or from Caesar. It doesn't come from their education, their job, their stock options, their position in society. Salvation belongs to God and the Lamb, and to them alone.

**All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:**

**“Amen!**

**Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.**

**Amen!” (7:11-12)**

Throughout Revelation the heavenly worship around the throne is antiphonal. The song of one group spurs another to respond. The song of the saints spurs the angels to fall on their faces in worship. “Amen,” they sing. “It's true, salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb.” They add a seven-fold ascription of praise to God: all praise is due to him, nothing is to be held back.

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

I answered, “Sir, you know.”

And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (7:13-14)

An elder asks John if he knows who these white-robed worshippers are and whence they have come. He is never asked where the cherubim, the elders, or the angels have come from. Since they are heavenly creatures, their presence around the throne is quite natural. But the presence of this multitude is not so. They are not native to heaven. Who are these newcomers, and whence have they come? They have come through the great tribulation. Are these only those who have come through the seven-year Great Tribulation of the End Times? The dispensationalist believes so: the 144,000 are Jews who are converted during the Great Tribulation; this multitude is the vast number of Gentiles who are converted during the same Great Tribulation.

What then of us? Do we who live before that supposed Great Tribulation have no place in that vast crowd? The New Testament cautions us repeatedly that tribulation is the expected lot of the believer. It is only because American Christians have been spared tribulation

that they can think that the Great Tribulation is in the future. It is those who sit in comfortable armchairs who develop timelines of a future Great Tribulation, not those who are in prison for their faith, or those who are being burnt at the stake. Their great tribulation is present. The prospect of martyrdom for their witness is real.

The NIV identifies the crowd as those “who have come out of the great tribulation.” But the verb is a present participle, “those who are coming out.” Throughout the whole period of great tribulation, which I think spans the entire period between the two advents of Jesus, God's people are coming out into heaven. How do they come out? They come out by washing their robes in the blood of the Lamb. On the one hand they are given white robes to wear. On the other, their robes are white because they themselves have washed them. God is at work and his servants are at work. It is the Lamb who redeems them through his blood. But the blood of the Lamb here is probably not the blood of salvation but rather the blood of martyrdom. God's servants are called to follow the Lamb through martyrdom. However, in Revelation the blood of salvation and the blood of martyrdom are scarcely differentiable. The Lamb is the prototype martyr. He is the faithful witness whose faithful witness brought his death. But he is also the firstborn from the dead, for death could not hold him. It is as the slain but risen martyr that he is able to save. Those he saves are called to walk in his footsteps as faithful witnesses. They too will die for their witness, but death cannot hold them either. It is as the slain Lamb that he redeems people unto God. It is as the firstborn from the dead that he leads God's people through death into heaven.

Therefore,

**“They are before the throne of God**

**and serve him day and night in his temple;**

**and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.**

**Never again will they hunger;**

**never again will they thirst.**

**The sun will not beat upon them,**

**nor any scorching heat.**

**For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;**

**he will lead them to springs of living water.**

**And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (7:15-17)**

The elder closes with a wonderful description of the destiny and rewards of those who have followed the Lamb through death into heaven. Here we find the fulfillment of multiple strands of Old Testament imagery. Their greatest reward is welcome before God's throne. There they find that they are home at the end of a race well run. There they find acceptance from the one in whose presence they can stand. There they will serve their God day and night in his temple, just as the temple musicians served him day and night in his earthly temple (1 Chr 9:33). But their song is far richer than the song of the temple musicians, for they have more to sing about. Their song is addressed not just to God, but also to the Lamb.

The one seated upon the throne will spread his tent over them. Throughout the Old Testament God expresses his purposes toward Israel, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” After he had brought Israel out of Egypt and constituted them as his people, he had them build him a tabernacle, a tent in which he might dwell in their midst while they journeyed through the wilderness in their tents, on pilgrimage to the Promised Land. That's what the Feast of Tabernacles commemorates. But having God

dwell among his people in a man-made tent is only second-best, even though a remarkable act of condescension on God's part. But there is another pilgrimage and another tent. After their pilgrimage through this present life God welcomes his people home to his tent in the greater Promised Land. Here they hear the great declaration, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). Here they may truly wave their palm branches and rejoice. They are home!

The goal of Israel's exodus from Egypt was the Promised Land. But, because of Israel's persistent sin, God eventually expelled them from that land, out the other side to Babylon. That was judgment, but, again, God's ultimate goal is salvation not judgment. Therefore, through his prophet Isaiah, he addressed a message of hope and salvation to his people in captivity in Babylon. He told Isaiah

**to say to the captives, "Come out,"  
and to those in darkness, "Be free!"...  
They will neither hunger nor thirst,  
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them.  
He who has compassion on them will guide them  
and lead them beside springs of water. (Isa 49:9-10)**

Revelation likewise urges God's people to come out of Babylon, not to return to Jerusalem, but to journey to the New Jerusalem, of which the earthly Zion was but a picture. There, safe in God's shelter, they will enjoy his protection and provision. Never again will they hunger or thirst. Never again will the elements harm them. Never again: their pilgrimage through the wilderness is over, and they are home.

These pilgrims, who have followed the Lamb to the throne, now follow him to the pastures to which he leads them. Here he shepherds them as they drink from the springs of living water, the fountain of life. He is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep, the sheep whom he has saved by being the sacrificial lamb.

Isaiah told God's captive people in Babylon that when he brought salvation to Mount Zion he would swallow up even death itself,

**On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;  
he will swallow up death forever.  
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;  
he will remove the disgrace of his people  
from all the earth.  
The LORD has spoken. (Isa 25:7-8)**

The first death has been robbed of its sting for all those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, for the Lamb is the firstborn from the dead, leading an innumerable multitude in his train. He leads them to the throne where God himself wipes away all tears: the tears of pain, of sorrow, of suffering, and of death.

Whose are this destiny and these rewards? Only those Gentiles converted during the Great Tribulation? No, these are for all God's people. The 144,000 from all Israel and the innumerable multitude from all nations are two expressions for the same reality: the full, complete and vast company of God's servants. These are the ones

on whose foreheads is placed the seal of the living God. Sadly, the seal of God tends to get forgotten amidst all the speculation over the mark of the beast. Every person in Revelation bears something on his forehead: either the mark of the beast or the seal of God. There is no one who is not so marked. We don't understand God's seal as a literal seal on our forehead. Why then is there so much interest in trying to identify the physical nature of the mark of the beast? It's not a barcode or an imbedded computer chip. Revelation itself identifies the mark of the beast and the seal of God.

As I'll keep on saying, Revelation portrays a black-and-white world. There are only two sets of people, two destinies, two cities, and so on. One set of people bears the mark of the beast, which is his name. They belong to the beast. Bearing his mark is equated with worshiping him (14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). The other set of people bears the seal of God, which is the name of God and the Lamb. They have been liberated from the beast's kingdom and now belong to God and the Lamb. Everyone in Revelation worships: those who bear the mark of the beast worship the beast. Those who bear the seal of God worship God and the Lamb.

Everyone is at home in one of two cities. Those marked by the beast are at home in Babylon, the so-called eternal city of earth. But Babylon will fall. Those sealed by the Lamb are called to come out of Babylon and head to the truly eternal city which is in heaven, the New Jerusalem. They enter that city by coming through death. Because they are sealed by God, this first death cannot harm them.

Everyone is headed to a destiny. Those with the mark of the beast are headed to the second death, eternal separation from God in the lake of fire. Those with the seal of God are headed through the first death, following in the footsteps of the Lamb to the throne. The Lamb takes his seat on that throne, while his followers gather around that throne and add their song to those already being sung by the heavenly creatures.

**"Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb."...  
"Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.  
Amen!" (7:10-12)**

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

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Revelation 8:1-5

14th Message

Bernard Bell

July 27th, 2003

# SILENCE!

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today we come to the seventh and final seal. Last week we saw that there was an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals. At the end of the sixth seal a question was posed: who can stand on the terrible day of the Lord, the day of his wrath, the day when he turns his face on a world that has turned its back on him? Though it seems that the question is rhetorical, we saw that the opening of the seventh seal was delayed so that the question could in fact be answered. There are people who can stand when God turns his face. God's angelic servants stand, ready to do his bidding: to seal God's people so that henceforth they come under God's ownership and protection. The saints now have nothing to fear from the first death. Indeed, the saints who pass through the first death are able to stand in the presence of God, where they add their voices to the ongoing song of praise to God and to the Lamb. Having been reassured about the status of God's people in the face of God's judgments, we are now ready for the opening of the seventh seal.

The opening of each of the first six seals has been a noisy event. Each time the Lamb opened one of the first four seals, John heard one of the four cherubim say, "Come!" The first is described as speaking "in a voice like thunder." Presumably the summons of the other three cherubim was just as thunderous. When the Lamb opened the fifth seal, John saw the martyrs calling out to God in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord?" When the Lamb opened the sixth seal there was a great earthquake (6:12). Four voices like thunder, the martyrs crying out in a loud voice, a great earthquake: these are noisy events. Especially with the sixth seal, it seems we are building to a climax. We expect that the opening of the seventh seal will be even noisier than the other six. We could not be more mistaken!

## A. Silence in heaven

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

Revelation is full of surprises, and this is one of the greatest. Nothing has prepared us for this. Instead of the expected escalation in the noise level, there is complete silence. Why this silence? What does it signify? Why does it last for a half-hour? Why is it in heaven that there is silence and not on earth? These are difficult questions to answer. Our primary source book for understanding the imagery of Revelation is the Old Testament, but here it lets us down; there is nothing comparable. It is true that three of the prophets issue a command to be silent before the Lord: "the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him" (Hab 2:20); "Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD near" (Zeph 1:7); "Be still before the LORD, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling" (Zech 2:13). But these commands are addressed to mankind on earth. They neither command nor describe silence in heaven.

This half-hour of silence is a unique event. I think it serves at least three purposes. Looking back, it is the climax to the worship in

heaven. Looking ahead, it builds suspense, and it sets the stage for the prayers of the saints.

## B. Silence: the climax of worship

Firstly, this silence is the climax to the worship going on in heaven around the throne. The seven seals, together with the seven trumpets and the seven bowls, are part of a sequence of visions which forms the central section of the book, chapters 4-16. This whole sequence of visions is shown to John when he is caught up to heaven in the Spirit in order to be shown "what must take place after this" (4:1-2). Though John is in heaven "in the Spirit," the visions which he is given alternate between events in heaven and events on earth. We have already seen that the dominant feature of the visions in heaven is the worship that goes on around the throne. At the center of the universe stands a throne; John refers to this throne forty times. The throne is occupied: John's usual way of referring to God is "the one seated upon the throne." By referring to him this way he says far more than if he had simply called him God. Also upon the throne is the Lamb, John's usual title for Jesus. Around the throne are gathered several concentric circles of worshipers. Closest to the throne are the four cherubim, God's throne attendants. Next are the twenty-four elders. Next come the myriad myriad angels. We saw last week that these heavenly beings are joined by earthly creatures who have been made fit for heaven: the martyred saints. All these creatures, heavenly and earthly alike, have offered their seven-fold worship to God and to the Lamb: "praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (7:12).

Seven songs have been sung so far. The first two songs are addressed to God, the one seated upon the throne. Day and night the four cherubim sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (4:8). The twenty-four elders respond, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (4:11). The praise expands to include the Lamb, to whom the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders together sing a new song, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (5:9-10). Countless angels join in, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (5:11-12). All creation responds, addressing its praise to both God and the Lamb, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (5:13). To these five songs, the cherubim, who started the chorus, add their "Amen!" (5:14).

The innumerable multitude of saints now joins the chorus, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (7:10). The angels respond, "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and

thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!" (7:12). Having sung their praises, these creatures, both heavenly and earthly, shut up. In silence they worship their Creator and their Redeemer. Silence is the climax of their worship, not an interruption of it. Silence enhances their worship, not diminishes it.

Among other things, Revelation is a book for and about worship. John, exiled on Patmos, sent the book, in the form of a letter, to seven churches of Asia, where it was read aloud to each church. The first of seven beatitudes is addressed to the reader and his hearers: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it" (1:3). The reader is not reading to himself in the comfort of his own living room; it's because people read the book that way that they fail to hear it properly. No, the reader is reading the book aloud to others, to the church gathered in assembly. Revelation is written to be heard by the church gathered together. Perhaps we should have a service like that, where Revelation is read and we pause to sing all the songs. That would be a profound worship experience. It would also profoundly affect how we understand the book. It would enable us, for example, to hear the half-hour of silence in the context of the first seven songs of praise.

Revelation is a book which reorients. Imagine the church in Ephesus, chief of the seven cities. It was a city full of temples: the famous temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world; temples to imported Egyptian gods; temples to the deified Julius Caesar and to *Dea Roma*, Rome deified; the temple to the Roman emperor Domitian, where he was worshiped as lord and god. These temples were filled with statues and priests and incense and worshippers. Also within this city there was a church, a group of Christians who gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They probably met in someone's home. They had no statues, priests, incense or dancing girls; no pomp or circumstance. As religious spectacles go, theirs' wasn't much to behold. They lived in a noisy city, and it's obvious from Jesus' message to his church in Ephesus that the noise was getting to them, for they had forsaken their first love (2:4). The Christians in Ephesus needed reorientation. That's what this circular letter gave them: a series of visions to reorient them, to enable them to hear clearly through the noise, to see clearly in the gray world of Ephesus. Having this book read aloud to them would remind them that they were the church of Jesus Christ; that the true throne stands in heaven not on earth; that the one who is truly Lord and God was not Domitian, but the one seated upon that heavenly throne; that their Savior was not Rome nor Caesar, but the slain Lamb. They would hear of the worship around the heavenly throne. True, their own liturgy wasn't spectacular compared to that conducted in the numerous temples in the city. But Revelation showed them that they were united with the heavenly liturgy of the cherubim, the elders, the angels, and the martyrs.

We live noisy lives. I don't mean just the audible noise to which we are exposed. We are constantly bombarded with more and more items clamoring for our attention: junk email, telephone solicitations, advertising, companies demanding ever more of our time and energy, hectic schedules for our kids. On and on it goes. We feel frazzled, dazzled, overloaded, disoriented. We long for relief, for rest and relaxation. What we need is not a spa treatment or "The Ultimate Relaxation CD." We need something that will cut through all the noise. Nothing does this better than Revelation. Revelation restores our vision, enabling us to see and hear clearly. It clarifies a

confusing grey world into stark black and white. The most appropriate way to encounter these reorienting visions of Revelation is in the church gathered together.

We long for calm and stillness, yet we have a hard time with silence today. Prolonged periods of silence make us uncomfortable. For a generation raised on MTV, "prolonged" is anything over five seconds. Silence is a vital part of worship. But it's not silence for silence's sake that we should seek. If you just want calm repose, then by all means put on the latest "Most Relaxing CD Ever." No, the silence we seek is the silence that forms the climax to our worship. It's the silence that comes in response to an overwhelming vision of God and of the Lamb. We bring our praise and then we shut up, in rapt adoration of the one around whose throne we are gathered. As the hymn says, "we cast our crowns before Thee, Lost in wonder, love and awe."<sup>1</sup> Have you ever had such a vision of God and of the Lamb that, having sung your praises, you are dumbed into silence, "lost in wonder, love and awe"?

### C. Suspense: The seven trumpets

A second effect of the silence is to build suspense. The sixth seal in particular has prepared us to expect a climactic end to the series of seven seals. The opening of the seventh seal has not produced it, but we know that there are only seven seals. Since there are no more seals to open, what now? There must be something more.

**And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets. (8:2)**

There is indeed more to come: seven trumpets are to follow the seven seals. The seven angels to whom the trumpets are given are described as those "who stand before God." These are the Angels of the Presence, the seven Archangels. Two of them are named in the Bible: Michael (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 1:9; Rev 12:7) and Gabriel (Dan 8:16; 9:21; Luke 1:19, 26). Intertestamental Jewish literature gave names to the other five: Phanuel, Raguel, Raphael, Sarakiel and Uriel.

Both the Hebrew word and the Greek word translated "angel" mean messenger. These seven archangels are standing before God as his servants, ready to be sent out on any mission that God commands. Their next mission will be to blow the trumpets. But first there is another delay. The seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls all follow this pattern. After the initial sight of the seven there is an interlude during which John is shown something important in heaven. The three series of seven primarily affect the earth, but if they are viewed merely on the earthly plane they make little sense. They seem like random acts of violence from a vengeful God. It is these intervening visions in heaven that give meaning to the subsequent acts on earth. The seven trumpets are here seen for the first time, but the first one is not blown until 8:6. In the intervening three verses John sees something which explains the significance of the trumpets.

How do the seven trumpets relate to the seven seals? Both the opening of the seals and the blowing of the trumpets bring God's judgments upon a world that has turned its back on him. The standard dispensational futurist interpretation understands the judgments of the seals, the trumpets and the bowls as following sequentially, chronologically one after the other. But this is not how I understand the book. The three sets of seven follow a similar pattern. The initial sight of each set of seven is followed by a vision of something in heaven which provides a heavenly context for the earthly effects.

The first four of each seven form a unified set: the first four seals are four horsemen; the first four trumpets and the first four bowls affect the land, the sea, the fresh water, and the sky, respectively. The fifth and sixth of each set are more loosely arranged. The sixth of each set brings the final climactic act of judgment: the sixth seal brings the terrifying day of the Lord; the sixth trumpet and sixth bowl each unleash an invasion across the Euphrates. Between the sixth and seventh seals and between the sixth and seventh trumpets is another interlude during which we are shown visions which provide answers to troubling questions raised at the end of the sixth seal and the sixth trumpet. These prepare the way for the climactic seventh. The opening of the seventh seal brings a half-hour of silence in heaven. The blowing of the seventh trumpet brings the great cry, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (11:15). The pouring out of the seventh bowl brings the loud proclamation, "It is done!" (16:17).

Trying to read Revelation as a timetable of events that will happen in chronological order creates many problems. The climactic act of judgment arrives three times; so does the climactic seventh. Let me remind you that the chronology of the book is the sequence of visions, not the contents of those visions. There is no need that the contents follow a chronological order. The three series of seven are better seen as three variations on the same theme, like a musical fugue in which the theme is repeated with variations. Alternatively, you can liken Revelation to a tapestry, in which themes are interwoven, reappearing throughout the book.

The opening of the seventh seal contains the seven trumpets. So closely tied together are these that it is difficult to determine where the seventh seal ends and the seven trumpets begin. The trumpets will be a second variation on the theme of God's judgment upon a world that has turned its back on him. But, since it is a variation, there will be something different: the nature of that difference, and hence the significance of the trumpets, is explained in 8:3-5.

#### D. Setting: The prayers of the saints

A third effect of the silence is to set the stage for the interlude between the initial vision of the seven trumpets (8:2) and the blowing of the first trumpet (8:6).

**Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of the saints, went up before God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer, filled it with fire from the altar, and hurled it on the earth; and there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake. (8:3-5)**

In the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament there were two altars. In the courtyard stood the large altar of burnt offering on which the priests offered up sacrificial animals morning and evening. In the Holy Place inside the tabernacle and later the temple stood the much smaller altar of incense, immediately in front of the curtain separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Every morning and every evening the priest on duty was to burn fragrant incense "so incense will burn regularly before the LORD for the generations to come" (Exod 30:8). The incense represented the prayers of the people rising up to God. We see this close connection between the incense and prayer in the story of Zechariah:

**Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.**

**Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. (Luke 1:8-13)**

In Revelation there is only one altar in heaven, the heavenly pattern for both earthly altars. An angel approaches the altar carrying a golden censer, which he uses to offer up before God both the incense he is given and the prayers of all the saints which that incense symbolizes. Who are these saints and what are their prayers? It certainly includes the martyrs under the altar, seen after the opening of the fifth seal. They had cried out, "How long, Sovereign Lord?" (6:10). They had been killed by "the inhabitants of the earth," those who had turned their backs on God. Why was God allowing the death of these martyrs to go unpunished? Why was he allowing evil to flourish on earth? Why did he not visit his judgment upon the slayers of his people? Why? Why? Why? But these are not the only prayers. The angel offers up the prayers of all the saints, which includes the believers on earth. Among other purposes, Revelation is written to encourage the believers on earth to pray. What is their prayer? Seven times Jesus says, "I am coming." The believers are to join John in praying, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). "How long?" and "Come!" These are the prayers of the saints. These are the prayers which are gathered up and offered to God as a pleasing aroma, a sacrifice for his pleasure. The prayers go up before God, meaning that they come to his attention, to the attention of the one seated upon the throne at the center of the universe.

Some say that the purpose of the silence is so that God can hear the prayers of his saints. In reality God doesn't need heavenly silence to hear his people pray. But the silence does provide a dramatic stage for the prayers of the saints. The saints are agitated, "How long? Why? When?" But in heaven all is calm. God is not agitated as he listens to the prayers of his saints. But this does not mean that God is uninterested. Quite the opposite! Having heard the prayers, God does something. The angel fills his censer with fire from the altar, and hurls it to the earth. Immediately there is thunder, lightning and an earthquake, phenomena associated with theophany, with the manifestation or appearance of God. These phenomena occurred when the throne was first seen (4:5). Here they occur as the climax to the seventh seal. They will recur as the climax to the seventh trumpet (11:19) and to the seventh bowl (16:18). God is roused, let the earth beware! The seven angels prepare to sound their trumpets. Now we see the significance of these trumpets: they are God's response to the prayers of the saints. God is there and he is not silent.

How does prayer work? I confess I do not know. It is clear that God wants us to pray, and that he hears us when we do pray. It is also clear that he is sovereign and we are not. Within Revelation the absolute sovereignty of God is never in doubt: he is the one seated upon the throne. Yet here God listens to the prayers of his people, and incorporates answers to those prayers into his will. But he does so without compromising his sovereignty. By faith I hold on to both sides of this seeming contradiction: God is sovereign, but he hears our prayers.

Revelation calls the saints to patient endurance (e.g., 13:10; 14:12). How are the saints to endure? We need vision and we need prayer. We need a vision of the true realities in the unseen world. We need prayer, prayer that these realities become true on earth as they are in heaven. Jesus has given us the model, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...deliver us from evil.” Such a prayer will have effect. In *Reversed Thunder*, his book on Revelation, Eugene Peterson expresses this well:

The Apocalypse is a fusion of vision and prayer. When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. A climax has been reached. The silence prepares the imagination to receive an incredible truth. While conflicts raged between good and evil, prayers went up from devout bands of first century Christians all over the Roman empire. Massive engines of persecution and scorn were ranged against them. They had neither weapons nor votes. They had little money and no prestige. Why didn't they have mental breakdowns? Why didn't they cut and run? They prayed.

It was in order to hear those prayers that there was silence in heaven. Out of the silence, action developed: an angel came before the altar of God with a censer. He mixed the prayers of the Christians with incense (which cleansed them from impurities) and combined them with fire (God's spirit) from the altar. Then he put it all in the censer and threw it over heaven's ramparts. The censer, plummeting through the air, landed on earth. On impact there were “peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (Rev. 8:5). The prayers which had ascended, unremarked by the journalists of the day, returned with immense force—in George Herbert's phrase, as “reversed thunder.” Prayer reenters history with incalculable effects. Our earth is shaken daily by it.<sup>2</sup>

The seven trumpets are God's response to the prayers of his saints, of those who pray, “Thy kingdom come.” The blowing of the seventh trumpet will bring the ringing declaration, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15). The prayers of the saints will have been heard! God's purposes will have been accomplished on earth as in heaven. It will be done!

Let us close by offering up the prayer which our Lord instructed us to pray, confident that God hears and responds, confident that such a prayer changes history.

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy name,  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,  
For ever and ever. Amen.

Hear Thou the prayer Thy servants pray,  
Uprising from all lands today,  
And o'er the vanquished powers of sin,  
O bring Thy great salvation in.<sup>3</sup>

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,  
For ever and ever. Amen.

1. Charles Wesley, *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling*, 1747.

2. Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 87-88.

3. John H. B. Masterman, *Almighty Father Who Dost Give*, 1922.



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# THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today we resume our studies in the Book of Revelation after a break of nearly a year. Last summer we looked at the seven seals. Over the next four weeks we'll look at the seven trumpets. Both the seals and the trumpets represent God's judgments upon his enemies. Everyone agrees on that, but that's about as far as the agreement goes. As for how and when the trumpets have been or will be fulfilled and what all the imagery means, on these matters there is much disagreement.

Revelation is simultaneously a book of great complexity and of great simplicity. But to most people the book is anything but simple. This was true for me for many years: whenever I read Revelation I felt hopelessly lost. But there is hope from two quarters: paying attention to the book's structure and to the book's nature as a sequence of visions. Revelation is one of the most carefully structured books in the Bible; confusion abounds when we lose sight of where we are in the flow. Revelation is a narrative of the visions shown to John; allowing these visions to remain just that, to remain pictures, helps understanding. If we try to tie these visions down too tightly to history, they prove elusive and confusing.

The opening of the first six seals was a noisy business. The four horseman released by the opening of the first four seals rode out in response to a thundering cry, "Come!" The opening of the fifth seal showed the martyred saints crying out with a loud voice for God to bring judgment. The opening of the sixth seal brought a terrifying earthquake. We expected the seventh seal to be noisier still, to be climactic. But instead of noise, the opening of the seventh seal brought a half-hour of silence in heaven. John next saw seven trumpets given to the seven archangels, but they did not blow them immediately. Instead John saw the prayers of the saints offered up to God. These prayers included the prayers of the martyrs shown in the fifth seal, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10). It also included the prayers of God's people still on earth. Revelation shows us what their prayer is: the simple prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). All was quiet as God listened to the prayers of his suffering people. The angel who had offered the prayers of the saints then filled his censer with fire, the same censer which had carried those prayers, and hurled it to earth with cataclysmic results: the thunder, lightning and earthquake that throughout Scripture herald God's appearance. Only now are the angels allowed to blow their trumpets. It is clear that the trumpets are to be understood as God's response to the prayers of his people. God has heard their prayers and he will not keep silent. He returns their prayers to earth with devastating results.

## A. Trumpets

The vision of serene silence had been shattered by the theophany. Now it is shattered again seven times by seven trumpet blasts. Revelation is a multi-media book, full of images, sounds and smells. Too often we neither hear nor imagine the sounds. The piece of music we

have just listened to, the *Tuba mirum* from Berlioz' *Requiem*, conveys something of the terrifying sounds of these trumpet blasts.

Revelation is full of the language and imagery of the Old Testament. To understand the trumpets we first need to turn there to see what trumpets represent. Trumpets feature in numerous settings in the Old Testament, at least three of which are significant to the context here in Revelation. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan River they found a city blocking their entrance into the Promised Land. The city was brought down not by the military prowess of the Israelites, but by seven priests blowing seven trumpets as they marched around the city seven times on the seventh day, leading the ark of the covenant and the people in holy procession. In Revelation the saints are bound for the New Jerusalem, but a city blocks their way. There is not room for both Babylon and the New Jerusalem, the city of man and the city of God. The one must fall to make room for the other. The sixth trumpet precipitates the collapse of a tenth of the city (11:13), but this is just a warning of its impending total collapse. When the seventh trumpet is blown the ark of the covenant is seen in heaven. The seventh trumpet develops into the seven bowls, the seventh of which brings the collapse of the entire city, indeed the collapse of all the cities of the nations (16:19). The next two chapters (17-18) describe the Fall of Babylon in greater detail. With Babylon destroyed the way is clear for the New Jerusalem to descend from heaven.

The second significant use of the trumpet was to proclaim the coronation of the king. For example, when Solomon was anointed king by Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet, "they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, 'Long live King Solomon!' And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound" (1 Kgs 1:39-40). When the seventh trumpet is blown a great cry goes up in heaven,

**"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord  
 and of his Christ,  
 and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15 NIV)**

whereupon the twenty-four elders burst into praise.

The third significant use of the trumpet is as an alarm call, a warning of God's impending judgment upon a sinful nation. See, for example, the text on the cover of the bulletin,

**Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
 sound the alarm on my holy hill.  
 Let all who live in the land tremble,  
 for the day of the LORD is coming.  
 It is close at hand —  
 a day of darkness and gloom,  
 a day of clouds and blackness.  
 Like dawn spreading across the mountains  
 a large and mighty army comes,  
 such as never was of old**

**nor ever will be in ages to come. (Joel 2:1-2)**

This alarm call is echoed by other prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel. Though the trumpet blast is an alarm call, it carries with it a call to repentance. The Day of the Lord is at hand, but it is not too late; there is still time to repent. The first six trumpet blasts carry this same call to repentance.

Here then is the general meaning of the trumpets. They are God's judgments upon a world in rebellion against him, but carrying also a call to repentance. They accomplish the collapse of Babylon, the world city that must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem. They herald the proclamation of God's universal kingdom. And in all respects they are God's response to the prayers of his people.

Like the seals, the first six trumpets are God's judgments against a rebellious world. But God increases the pressure: the seals brought destruction to a quarter of the earth, the trumpets bring destruction to a third (fourteen times in 8:7-9:19). God's judgment is devastating but it is not yet total; that stage will be reached with the bowls.

So much for the general meaning of the trumpets. What sense can we make of the individual trumpets?

## **B. Trumpets 1-6**

The first four trumpets form a set, just like the first four seals and the first four bowls. It is more helpful to think of these four trumpets as four portrayals of God's judgment rather than four sequential acts of judgment. The four trumpets affect the four realms of the created world: the earth, the sea, the fresh water, and the heavenly bodies. There is no realm that is unaffected. The imagery is drawn, as we might expect, from the Old Testament, especially from the narrative of the plagues of Egypt: hail, waters turned to blood, the sun darkened. Those plagues, though they were ecological disasters affecting the natural world, were targeted against Pharaoh who held God's people in captivity. God had heard the cry of his people in Egypt (Exod 3:7; 6:5) and swung into action to liberate them. The plagues were God's warnings to Pharaoh to let his people go. Similarly, the trumpets show that God has heard the cry of his people and is doing something about it. He will judge their oppressors and win their liberty.

After the first four judgments John heard an eagle, or perhaps better a vulture, flying in midair, crying in a loud voice, "Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!" (8:13). "Woe!" is a common expression in the Old Testament prophets, warning of God's imminent judgment. The first four judgments have been terrifying enough, but are as nothing compared to the terror of the three remaining trumpets. The first four trumpets targeted the four realms of the created world. The last three will target "the inhabitants of the earth." This phrase is used repeatedly in Revelation to describe those who are opposed to God, those who are at home in the present world order, those who live their lives with no reference to God. Though they pay no attention to God, he is about to shake their world.

The fifth and sixth trumpets unleash judgments that are terrifying almost beyond description: a vast army of locusts and a vast army of cavalry. Again the imagery is drawn from the Old Testament, this time principally from the book of Joel. The prophet Joel warned of God's impending judgment upon his people, likening it to a swarm of locusts and a mighty army of horsemen. In the Ancient Near East the most terrifying natural disaster was the locust swarm. This was the year that Brood X cicadas emerged throughout the Midwest after

17 years underground. I was in Indiana in May just as they started to appear. The numbers were unfathomable: up to 1.5 million per acre, that's a billion per square mile; trillions in Indiana alone. Fortunately, these cicadas were relatively benign, other than the noise of the mating calls of the males. Locusts are not benign. Their swarms can number billions and stretch tens of miles. They consume everything in their path. In 1954 fifty swarms invaded Kenya, the largest swarm estimated at 10 billion insects covering 200 sq km.<sup>1</sup> Locusts can eat their own body weight every day; that's 20,000 tons per day for that one swarm. In the biblical world there was no more powerful image of total devastation than a swarm of locusts.

The locusts emerge from the Abyss, unleashed by a star fallen from heaven. This fallen star is familiar Biblical imagery for Satan. The Abyss is the antithesis of heaven, the realm of the chaotic forces who are opposed to God and his people. The locusts are portrayed as demonic, Satanic forces who wreak havoc on earth. Their ruler is the angel of the Abyss, Satan himself, named Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek. Both names mean Destroyer. That's what Satan is: a destroyer. He can never be constructive; he has no creative power. His work is limited to seeking to destroy that which God has created.

Does this mean that Satan is an independent agent, able to work his mischief according to his own plan? Not for a moment! Notice that Satan is given the key to the Abyss, and that the locusts are given their power and their orders. Who gives Satan the key? Who gives the locusts their authority? The verbs are deliberately put into the "impersonal" passive: literally, "it was given to him" (9:1), "it was given to them" (9:3), "it was said to them" (9:4), "it was given to them" (9:5). Who is the unseen authority behind these verbs? These "impersonal" verbs are a frequent device employed by John to remind his readers that behind everything is God. It is God not Satan who calls the shots. It is God who is always in control. He is sovereign even over the chaotic forces from the Abyss. He is constantly subverting Satan's destructive efforts to his own greater purposes, which are ultimately constructive. It is because it is God who is calling the shots that he can order the locusts to harm only those who do not bear God's seal on their foreheads. Those without God's seal are the same as the inhabitants of the earth. God's people are off-limits; they are protected. Satan and his demonic forces cannot harm them. It is because it is God who is calling the shots that he can order the locusts not to kill the rebels, but only torment them. So great is their torment, though, that they will long to die. God, in his sovereignty, uses Satan's destructive nature to work destruction upon those who are opposed to God.

With the sixth trumpet God steps up the pressure. A cry is heard from the altar. This is the altar beneath which the martyrs had cried out, "How long, O Lord?" (6:10). This is the altar upon which the prayers of the saints had been offered up to God (8:3-4). Again we are being told that God is responding to the prayers of his people. His response is to release four angels. Again God increases the pressure: unlike the locusts the angels are ordered to kill not just harm. The agent they use is an enormous army of 200 million horsemen which comes pouring across the Euphrates River. Again the imagery is from the Old Testament. The Euphrates was the direction from which God brought judgment upon his people: the Assyrians upon Israel, and the Babylonians upon Judah. An army coming from beyond the Euphrates could mean only one thing to someone familiar with Biblical imagery: God's terrible judgment. This would also be a terrifying image to people in the Roman Empire at the end of

the first century. Beyond the Euphrates lay the Parthians, the only neighboring people that Rome failed to conquer. They were a fierce people who repeatedly launched attacks across the Euphrates into Roman territory.

These are the events unleashed by the first six trumpets: one-third devastation of all four realms of the natural world, and one-third devastation of humanity through locust plague and invasion. The devastation is limited to one-third, warning of total judgment yet to come. But the warning is unheeded. The rest of the people, that is the two-thirds not killed by the sixth trumpet blast, still did not repent. They respond to these latter-day plagues just as did Pharaoh to the earlier plagues in Egypt, hardening their hearts against God's warnings.

### C. The Message of the Trumpets

When do these events happen and what do they look like? I have been deliberately vague on the details of these six trumpets. Probably I've disappointed some of you: you were hoping I would identify the locusts or the army of 200 million. Many preachers devote individual sermons to each of the fifth and sixth trumpets, going into great detail about John's descriptions of the locusts and the horsemen. I have deliberately covered all six trumpets at once. This is not just because I want to finish this series before 2010. Today I want us to see all six trumpets as a set, and in these four weeks I want us to see everything from the first vision of the seven trumpets at the opening of the seventh seal through to the blast of the seventh trumpet as a set.

If you want to know what individual elements of the trumpets vision mean, you can turn to the commentators. The good ones will identify the great wealth of Old Testament allusions. Many will try to tie John's visions down to history, but they'll each tell you something different, and you'll be none the wiser as to how the trumpets fit into the flow of John's visions. You'll find the commentators differ as to when these events occur. Preterist commentators believe that the trumpets depict God's judgment upon Jerusalem in AD 70 or upon Rome in the fifth century. Historicists think they describe God's judgments upon the corrupt medieval church. Futurists see them as God's future judgments during the Great Tribulation after the church has been raptured out of the earth. All three agree that the trumpet judgments follow chronologically after the seal judgments. All three agree that the judgments are not happening today: for the preterist and the historicist the judgments are in the past; for the futurist they're in the future. The only relevance for today is in getting our timetables and charts filled in correctly.

If you've been following my series on Revelation, you'll know that this is not how I understand the book. I read the book as a revelation of what is going on throughout history. The chronology is very simple: the kingdom of this world must become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ. Babylon must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem. The dragon, the beast, the false prophet, even death and Hades itself, must all be removed to make way for the new heavens and the new earth in which all is holy and God dwells with his people. At some point the great cry will go up, "It is done!" (16:17). Meanwhile, God's people follow the Lamb in faithful witness, they are opposed by Satan and his forces, and God sends repeated warnings of judgment.

You might find it helpful to think of Revelation as an art gallery. Each vision is a picture hanging on the wall. The pictures are grouped together into rooms. These rooms in turn are grouped together into

wings of the museum. Chapters 4-16 form one wing of the gallery; we enter the wing at chapter 4 and will not leave it until chapter 16. The subject matter of the paintings in this wing is "the things which must take place" (4:1). Entering the first room we see two massive paintings, each depicting a throne and someone upon the throne who is worshiped. The first shows God worshiped as Creator. The second shows the Lamb standing as though slain, worshiped as Redeemer. In John's day at the end of the first century, the eyes of the world were on the emperor in Rome. But John's eyes are lifted to see the true ruler of the universe. These two pictures must stay with us as we tour the other rooms in the gallery.

In the second painting there is a scroll sealed with seven seals. We find that this painting, while hanging in the first room, is also the doorway into the second room, the room of the seven seals. The things which will happen must happen because the heavenly throne is occupied, but the key to the way in which they will happen is the Lion-Lamb who conquers by being slain.

In the room of the seven seals hang paintings depicting terrible judgment. The painting of the seventh seal contains seven trumpets, and forms the doorway into the third room, the room of the seven trumpets. The paintings in this third room are to be understood in the context of that doorway. The trumpets are God's response to the prayers of the saints. They are a new set of seven, but also form the seventh of the previous set.

It is more helpful to allow John's visions to remain pictures in our imagination than to try to translate those visions into events at any particular point in history. This does not make the message of Revelation remote. Far from it! It is by tying the visions too closely to history that the book is made remote. If I believe that the trumpets describe events in the distant past, be it the first, fourth or fifteenth century, or in the indeterminate future, then the visions have no meaning for me today. But if I allow the trumpets to remain pictures of devastating judgment then I can see them being fulfilled throughout history: whether it be Jerusalem in AD 70, or Rome in the fifth century, or Europe in 1348 when the Black Death killed a third of the population, or World War I. But this lack of historic specificity doesn't allow me to make the visions mean anything I want them to mean. My imagination must be well-furnished with Biblical imagery. Then I can allow John's visions to form biblically-rich pictures in my mind, which help me understand what is going on in this world throughout history.

The Book of Revelation is a pastoral letter, written by John to seven churches for whom he cares but with whom he cannot be present during his exile in Patmos. How might these six trumpets have been read in these seven cities? Like all good pastoral counsel, Revelation comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. For all seven churches, John lifts their eyes above the earthly horizon, above the plane of visible realities, to show them the unseen realities of what is happening and must happen.

Two of the churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, were already suffering for their faithful witness to Jesus. The vision of the trumpets shows that their prayers are being heard, that God will bring judgment upon those who persecute them. They are assured that the targets of God's judgments are not they, but the inhabitants of the earth, those who do not bear God's seal. Those who oppress them may seem invincible and sovereign, but their operations are circumscribed by God. The vision of the trumpets gives these two churches courage to endure.

For the other five churches, the message of the trumpets is not so positive. Two of the churches, Pergamum and Thyatira, were struggling with compromise. False teachers within these churches had persuaded at least some of the Christians that they could have an easier life by diluting their Christian distinctives, by becoming more involved in the surrounding world. John warns these churches that they have their eye turned in the wrong direction. Their compromise is motivated by a fear of Roman hostility and opposition. But it is divine judgment not Roman judgment which they must fear.

Two churches, Ephesus and Sardis, had the outward appearance of vitality, but it was a sham. Ephesus had a passion for truth but had lost its first love. Sardis had a reputation of being alive, but was dead. Both churches were in a false state of complacency, confident that their quest for doctrinal purity and their reputation for thriving life marked them as healthy churches. To each church Jesus promises that he will come, but it is clear that this coming will be in judgment. Revelation is a warning to these churches to shake them out of their complacency, to remind them that they are part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, to remind them that the church is about Jesus. Just because they have a reputation for life does not guarantee that they will be immune from judgment.

The final church, Laodicea, was far ahead of Ephesus and Sardis in its complacency. Confident of its own resources, the church boasted that it needed nothing. But it had forgotten that it needs Jesus. Comfortable and complacent in its own self-sufficiency, I suspect this church had ceased to pray for Jesus to come.

Compromise, complacency, comfort. The trumpet blasts should be heard in these five churches as warning calls not as reasons for confidence. It is only the victor in each church who is promised a successful pilgrimage through to the promised blessings of the New Jerusalem. The victor is the one who heeds what the Spirit is saying to the churches. The churches are not to think smugly that they are immune when God comes in judgment upon his enemies. Those churches which in one way or another have lost sight of their identity as a colony of heaven, as the followers of the Lamb, will find that when Jesus comes to them, he does so in judgment.

In all the many books I have read on Revelation, one sentence stands out. Commenting on the trumpets, G. B. Caird writes, “The idea that life on earth is so infinitely precious that the death which robs us of it must be the ultimate tragedy is precisely the idolatry that John is trying here to combat.”<sup>2</sup> With the trumpets we stare death in the face. Revelation challenges all that it is not the first death which matters but the second death, not death at the hand of the Romans, but death at the hand of God. The churches must beware lest in their efforts to avoid judgment at the hands of the Romans, they fall into the judgment of God.

Fortunately, judgment is not God’s last word. The awful events unleashed by the six trumpets fail to bring repentance: “The rest of mankind...still did not repent of the work of their hands” (9:20). But the sixth trumpet is not over until the pronouncement that the second woe is ended (11:14). Immediately prior to that, “the rest... gave glory to the God of heaven” (11:13). What is it that finally makes idolatrous mankind pay attention to God? In 10:1–11:13 we have an interlude in the sixth trumpet wherein God shows John his purposes beyond judgment, his purposes to bring salvation to an earth hostile to him. That’s what we’ll look at the next two weeks.

Meanwhile, Revelation should encourage us to pray. Earlier we sang,

Hear Thou the prayer Thy servants pray,  
Uprising from all lands today,  
And o’er the vanquished powers of sin,  
O bring Thy great salvation in.<sup>3</sup>

Is that your prayer? Do you long for Jesus to come, and for God to bring his kingdom to earth? Do you long that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven? Or are you too busy doing your own will? Are you too comfortable here on earth? Would you rather that Jesus not appear soon? These are some of the troubling questions that Revelation raises.

Our Lord has instructed us in how to pray. Let us close by offering up this prayer, confident that God hears and responds, confident that such a prayer changes history.

Our Father, Who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be Thy name,  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,  
For ever and ever. Amen.

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy — to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)*

1. Hussein Sanchez-Arroyo, 1997. “Largest Swarm.” Chapter 27 in *University of Florida Book of Insect Records*, 2001. Online: <http://ufbir.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

2. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 113.

3. John H. B. Masterman, *Almighty Father Who Dost Give*, 1922.



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## SWEET AND SOUR

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Last week we saw that the first six trumpet blasts announced God's terrifying judgment upon a rebellious world. In John's visions he saw that God poured out these judgments in response to the prayers of his people: the prayers of the martyrs under the altar who cried out, "How long, O Lord?" (6:10), and the prayers of the saints still on earth who cry out, "Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). The martyrs appealed to God for justice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" They had been killed for their faithful witness. If measured by death, the good guys had lost and the bad guys had won. This is a dilemma which has troubled people down through the ages. Why do the wicked seem to prosper? It troubled Asaph the psalmist. He begins Psalm 73 with a statement of faith, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (73:1), but immediately admits that it does not always look this way.

**But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
 I had nearly lost my foothold.  
 For I envied the arrogant  
 when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.  
 They have no struggles;  
 their bodies are healthy and strong.  
 They are free from the burdens common to man;  
 they are not plagued by human ills.  
 Therefore pride is their necklace;  
 they clothe themselves with violence.  
 From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
 the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.  
 They scoff, and speak with malice;  
 in their arrogance they threaten oppression.  
 Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
 and their tongues take possession of the earth.  
 Therefore their people turn to them  
 and drink up waters in abundance.  
 They say, "How can God know?  
 Does the Most High have knowledge?"  
 This is what the wicked are like—  
 always carefree, they increase in wealth. (Ps 73:2-11 NIV)**

Asaph is simultaneously attracted by the prosperity of the wicked and appalled by their arrogant and callous evil. They thumb their nose at God and seem to get away with it. He wonders if he has made the right choice. If the bad guys win, why has he chosen the side of good?

**Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;  
 in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.  
 All day long I have been plagued;  
 I have been punished every morning. (73:13-14)**

It is only when Asaph lifts his eye above the visible world that he is able to find composure:

**If I had said, "I will speak thus,"**

**I would have betrayed your children.  
 When I tried to understand all this,  
 it was oppressive to me  
 till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
 then I understood their final destiny. (73:15-17)**

With his eyes heavenward he finds rest amidst the grievous things happening in the world around him:

**But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
 I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;  
 I will tell of all your deeds. (73:28)**

Who has not experienced that same emotional and spiritual turmoil? Who has not envied the prosperity of those who pay no attention to God? Who has not wondered if they have made the right choice, following God's way? The motto of my boarding school in England (St Lawrence College, Ramsgate, Kent) was *in bono vince*, "conquer with good," drawn from the Latin translation (Vulgate) of Romans 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Vg *noli vinci a malo sed vince in bono malum*). It's a noble sentiment, but the opposite so often seems true. All over the world people overcome with evil, and, to add insult to injury, they seem to get away with it.

We naturally long for justice. We are outraged when immoral or unjust people get away with it. We want the Enron executives to go to jail. We want the power companies to give money back to California. We want the camera to catch the red-light runner. We want the police to show up when motorcycles race down our street at 2 am. We want justice to be done, and when it is not done we get agitated. We also agitate: the world is full of people crusading for justice. The law courts are full of people demanding justice.

The first six trumpets have been all about justice and judgment. It was in response to the cries of his saints for justice that God poured out his judgments upon the earth. The Scriptures are clear that God is a God of justice, who will not allow evildoers to get away with their wickedness for ever. Without divine justice this would be a very sorry world. Without divine justice, evil would proliferate. The clear testimony of Scripture and of history is that humanity left to its own devices does not advance to greater and greater good, but descends into greater and greater evil. For his own reasons, God tolerates wickedness in his world up to a certain point, until he steps in to restrain the spread of evil. Divine justice is necessary if God is to extend his own holiness to earth.

But if justice were the only side to God's character then hell would be full and heaven empty. We want the camera to catch the other red-light runner, not us. We want the CHP to catch the other speeders, not us. If we're honest, we have to admit with Pogo, "We have met the enemy and he is us." If obedient submission to God be the standard, then we are all guilty. Nor do we respond well to our own errors being pointed out. The judgments unleashed by the first six

trumpets brought only limited devastation; they were not yet final. They carried an implicit call to repentance, but the world failed to repent (9:20-21).

Both the presence of evil and the divine response to it are popular targets for those who wish to discredit God. If God is pure and holy, why does he allow evil, why does he allow bad things to happen, why does he allow the wicked to prosper? Materialists conclude there is no god. Others suppose that there must be good gods and bad gods competing for control. Some Christians come dangerously close to this mindset, but the Bible in general and Revelation in particular never allow that option. God is sovereign even over the forces that agitate against him. Skeptics ask, If God is kind and loving, why does he condemn people? Why doesn't he just save everyone? But in that case his justice would mean nothing.

The much-discussed problem of evil is actually not hard to understand: we need only look into our own hearts. Peter France was a convinced agnostic who prided himself on his rational skepticism and hard-nosed realism which showed that "nice guys in our world finish last." But he was finally forced to conclude that "the Problem of Goodness is far harder for the agnostic to handle than the more publicized Problem of Evil is for the believer."<sup>1</sup> If we're honest, it's not hard to understand how hell gets full. What is hard to understand is how heaven gets populated. The seventh trumpet will proclaim that God's kingdom has come to earth as it is now in heaven. Will that kingdom have many residents, or will everyone have been banished to destruction?

The sixth trumpet, which is the second woe, is not over until 11:14, by which point there has been a change in the response of humanity. The rest of humanity which had refused to repent (9:20-21) now gives glory to God (11:13). What brings about this change? An interlude in the action gives us the answer. Interrupting the drama of the sixth trumpet, John is given a vision of an angel with a scroll and of two witnesses. Today we'll look at the angel and the scroll, next week at the two witnesses.

In chapter 10 John is shown an angel holding a scroll. He is told to eat the scroll and that he must prophesy. The imagery is drawn primarily from two Old Testament prophets: Ezekiel's instructions to eat a scroll (Ezek 2:9-3:3) and Daniel's instructions to seal a scroll (Dan 12:4-7).

### A. The Little Scroll (10:1-3a)

**Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven. He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs were like fiery pillars. He was holding a little scroll, which lay open in his hand. He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, and he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. (10:1-3a)**

Revelation is full of angels, but only three of them are described as mighty. It was the first mighty angel who asked, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" (5:2). Now a second mighty angel descends from heaven. Though he is still only an angel, he appears in the splendor that is normally used to describe God himself. He is robed in a cloud and his legs are like fiery pillars, reminiscent of God's presence with his people during their wilderness wanderings, when he accompanied them as a cloud and as a pillar of fire. When they were settled he dwelt in their midst in the cloud of his glory which filled the tabernacle and the temple. The angel has a rainbow above his head, reminiscent of the rainbow that encircled

the divine throne (4:3). His face is like the sun, reminiscent of John's vision of Jesus (1:16). No other angel in Revelation appears in such splendor. Clearly this is an important angel who has come from very close to God's presence. Who is he?

An angel is a messenger. This angel is a messenger sent from God to John. This book is "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw... Blessed is the one who reads...and blessed are those who hear" (1:1-3). Notice the chain of revelation. It all begins with God. God gives the revelation to Jesus, Jesus gives it to an angel, the angel gives it to John, John writes it in a book, the book is read in the seven churches in Asia, where it is heard by the saints. The angel, John, the reader, the hearers, are the servants of God. The angel whom John sees here in 10:1 is the angel who brings him the revelation from God and Jesus. He will be referred to again at the close of the book in the epilogue. The angel who shows John the New Jerusalem tells him, "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (22:6). Jesus himself tells John, "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches" (22:16). Recognizing the identity of this angel explains why he is more splendid than any other angel in the book, and helps us understand this difficult chapter.

The first mighty angel asked a question concerning a scroll which lay sealed in God's hand. This mighty angel carries an open scroll in his own hand. Commentators disagree as to whether these are the same scrolls. Increasingly I side with those who identify them as the same. The scroll which once lay closed in God's hands now lies open in the angel's hand.

The angel planted one foot on the sea and one foot on the land, indicating that he is addressing all the earth. He then shouted with a shout so loud it is compared to the roar of a lion, perhaps a reference to Amos, where the word of the Lord through his prophet is likened to the roar of a lion (Amos 3:8).

### B. The Seven Thunders (10:3b-7)

**When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down."**

**Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay! But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets." (10:3b-7)**

We're not told the content of the angel's loud roar, but we are told the response: the seven thunders roar back. Probably the imagery is drawn from Psalm 29, with its seven-fold reference to the voice of the Lord which thunders throughout the world.

**The voice of the LORD is over the waters;  
the God of glory thunders,  
the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.  
The voice of the LORD is powerful;  
the voice of the LORD is majestic.  
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars...**

The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.  
 The voice of the LORD shakes the desert...  
 The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare.  
 And in his temple all cry, "Glory!" (Ps 29:3-9)

We are not told what the thunders say, but we can hazard a guess. Seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, all proclaiming God's judgments upon a rebellious world. Seven thunders would fit into this sequence. The seven seals brought devastation to a quarter of the world, and the seven trumpets to a third. The seven bowls will bring total devastation. Might the seven thunders not have pronounced judgment upon half the world? We don't know, for John is told to seal the message of the seven thunders. The reason for doing so is given by the angel's subsequent actions.

Referring back to the source of the imagery in Daniel helps understand what is happening here. Daniel was told to seal up the scroll containing the matters revealed to him "until the time of the end" (12:4). In response to the question, "How long will it be?" (12:6), the angel who had given Daniel the revelation lifted his hands to heaven and swore "by him who lives forever," "It will be for a time, times and half a time" (12:7). The time of the end would be marked by a period identified as "a time, times and half a time." It was because that period had not yet arrived that Daniel was told to seal the scroll.

In John's vision this is all turned upside down. Whereas Daniel was told to seal up his scroll because the end had not yet come, John is told to seal up the message of the thunders because they represent a delay in the arrival of the end. Instead the angel declares, "There will be no more delay!" The end is at hand. The seventh trumpet blast is imminent. The angel's authority to issue this declaration lies in "him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it," the one who has sovereignty and authority over all realms.

The blowing of the seventh trumpet will bring the mystery of God to fulfillment. The angel tells John that God has already revealed this to the prophets. This is probably a reference to Amos 3:7, "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets." It is significant that John has rendered "revealing his plan" with "announcing his mystery."

The mystery of God is not his judgments. These judgments, which are God's response to wickedness, have been writ large in the pages of Scripture since Genesis 3. The Old Testament is full of God's response to rebellious humanity. God permits humanity to have its own way, up to a certain point, but then he steps in to restrain the spread of evil. The mystery is not how anyone ends up in hell, the mystery is how anyone ends up in heaven. The mystery is not how God brings judgment but how he brings salvation. The mystery is not how humanity persists in its rebellion, but how it is brought to the point of giving glory to God. The blast of the seventh trumpet brings the declaration of God's universal reign, of the transfer of all sovereignty to him. The mystery is how that can be good news not bad news, of how rebellious humanity can be the beneficiary of that rule rather than the condemned. Good news it is, for the verb "announce" is *euangelizō*, "proclaim good news," from which we get evangel, "the gospel," and evangelize. What is being announced is not just the sobering news of judgment but also the good news of salvation.

### C. John Eats the Scroll (10:8-11)

Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me once more: "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land."

So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, "Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey." I took the little scroll from the angel's hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." (10:8-11)

The voice which had told John to seal the message of the seven thunders now instructs him to take the scroll from the angel. As John does so, the angel further instructs him to eat it, but warns that it will be bitter-sweet. Though it taste sweet in his mouth, it will turn his stomach bitter. Here we are back to the imagery of Ezekiel's commissioning. Ezekiel was told to take a scroll and eat it. Though the scroll contained "words of lament and mourning and woe" yet he found it to be "as sweet as honey" in his mouth. Why would a document so obviously full of judgment against God's own people taste sweet? The scroll was sweet to Ezekiel presumably because its message of judgment meant that God was no longer willing to allow the flagrant disobedience of his people to go unpunished. God was about to restore justice.

For John, just as for Ezekiel, the eating of the scroll functions as a call to prophetic ministry. Each is to absorb the message of the respective scroll and then pronounce it. Having eaten the scroll, each is told to prophesy, to speak the word of the Lord. In John's case he is told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings." This is John's second commissioning to prophetic ministry. In chapter one, after receiving an overwhelming vision of the risen Jesus, John was commissioned, "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (1:19). Now John is commissioned again. What he must prophesy is presumably the content of the open scroll which he had taken from the hand of the angel, the scroll which the Lamb had opened.

### D. The contents of the scroll

John's recommissioning to prophetic ministry is immediately followed by a description of the work and fate of two prophetic witnesses (11:1-13). Their faithful prophetic witness costs them their life. No matter your opinion on whether or not the scroll John eats is a second scroll, all agree that this account of the two witnesses explains why the scroll is bitter-sweet. But those who see this scroll as the same scroll opened by the Lamb see that the proclamation of the scroll goes far beyond chapter 11. Indeed, the account of the two witnesses in chapter 11 introduces the scroll in brief. The full proclamation of the scroll begins in 12:1. This helps explain why there is such a sharp disjuncture between chapters 11 and 12. All agree that 12:1 marks a major step back in time; fewer can explain why. The declaration of the contents of the scroll cover more than ten chapters (12:1-22:6), giving a comprehensive sweep through history from the rebellion of Satan through to the new heavens and the new earth.

The Book of Revelation can be divided up in several different ways. One is to divide it into two halves, each of eleven chapters, and each building to a climactic declaration. The first declaration is, "The kingdom of the world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). There's

no mystery about that. God's holiness, justice and truth require it. The second declaration is, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). That's the mystery. That the declaration of God's kingdom in 11:15 is good news not bad news. That once-rebellious people will be included in that kingdom. That the universal reign of God brings salvation not just judgment. That the extension of God's holiness to earth embraces once-unholy people. That the story ends not with a hell that is full to overflowing, but with a new heavens and a new earth where God dwells with his people.

John is commissioned to bear prophetic witness against "many peoples, nations, languages and kings." This four-fold phrase implies all humanity, four being the number of universality. It is surely not accidental that this and similar four-fold phrases occur seven times in Revelation. Subsequent chapters will show that the beast is given authority over all humanity (13:7), that Babylon the world-city spreads herself over all humanity (17:15), and that all humanity gloats over the death of God's faithful prophets (11:9). The whole world is sinful and worthy of God's judgment. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). But that's not the whole story. A few chapters later John will be shown an angel who has "the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people" (14:7). It is from precisely this sinful humanity that the Lamb redeems a people for God to gather before his throne (5:9; 7:9). That's the astonishing scandal of the gospel. It's not the righteous whom God saves, but the rebels. In the memorable words of Robert Capon, it's "the last, the lost, the least, the little, and the dead"<sup>2</sup> whom the Lamb saves.

### E. Bitter-sweet

The scroll is sweet indeed. But it will also prove to be bitter. In accomplishing his purposes, his mystery, God chooses to allow his saints to suffer. No, it's more than that: God specifically employs the suffering of his saints in his plan to spread his kingdom. Chapter 11 shows that it is a costly thing to be a faithful witness. Remember that this is a pastoral letter. The seven churches are called to just this sort of faithful witness. Some of the churches are already experiencing the cost of faithful witness: Antipas of Pergamum has been killed for his witness; the saints in Smyrna and Pergamum are already suffering, and martyrdom is just around the corner. Others of them are in peril for they are diluting their witness in order to avoid suffering. Revelation calls the faithful to endure and the wavering to repent.

The suffering of God's people is not a surprise; it is encompassed within his very purposes. He himself has set the pattern. The Lord Jesus Christ was killed for his faithful witness, but God raised him from the dead as the conqueror. God's people are to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, through death and into new life, emerging victorious. It is in apparent weakness that God triumphs over the powers of this world. That is the astonishing thing about the gospel! That's why only the slain but victorious Lamb can open the seals. The mystery is that the conquering Lion is the slain Lamb. If it were only the conquering Lion who opened the seals then there would be only judgment. But the seals are opened by the Lamb, who with his own blood has redeemed people for God "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). The trumpets proclaim God's terrifying judgment, but judgment is not his last word. The story ends not with an overflowing hell, but with a new heaven and earth where God dwells with his people. Thanks be to God!

**Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!**

**How unsearchable his judgments,**

**and his paths beyond tracing out!**

**Who has known the mind of the Lord?**

**Or who has been his counselor?**

**Who has ever given to God,**

**that God should repay him?**

**For from him and through him and to him are all things.**

**To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)**

1. Peter France, *A Place of Healing for the Soul: Patmos* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2002), 148.

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.



Catalog No. 1517

Revelation 11:1-14

17th message

Bernard Bell

August 1st, 2004

## FAITHFUL WITNESS

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

For many of us there are certain pieces of news which had such an impact on us that we can remember exactly where we were when we received them, even after the passage of many decades. For me, one of those moments occurred in January 1978, when I was 17 and had just finished high school in England. I was living in Edinburgh with my parents who just a month previously had returned from the mission field in Thailand for a year's furlough. One evening I was sitting in the living room with my parents. The phone rang in the hallway and my father went to answer it, closing the door behind him. He returned ashen-faced to report the news. A group of missionaries from the rural hospital where my parents were based in Thailand had gone on a picnic. A horrific road accident on the way home left twelve of them dead: seven adults and five children. These were my parents' close colleagues and friends. They had been with them just a month before. These were people who had dedicated their lives to serving the Lord, who had sacrificed much to serve him overseas. Why did the Lord allow their lives to be snuffed out so suddenly? Surely God would want to be building up his community of witnesses in that land rather than decimating it. We sang, "Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill he treasures up his bright design and works his sovereign will."<sup>1</sup> What sort of "bright design" was this? Why? Why? Why? There are many things that God does that seem to run counter to all common sense. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Ps 116:15), but it's hard to see how that can be so when the Lord seems to cut down the saints in the prime of life. The Christian life can indeed be bitter-sweet.

Last week we saw that John was given an open scroll, the same scroll which the Lamb had opened. He was told to eat the scroll and proclaim its contents, which concerned the fulfillment of the mystery of God, the good news of salvation which he formerly announced to the prophets. But John was warned that the scroll would be bitter-sweet, and he found it to be so. Chapter 11 now shows why it is bitter-sweet. The passage divides into two unequal parts: instructions to John to measure the temple (11:1-2), and a narrative concerning two witnesses (11:3-13).

### A. Measuring the Temple (11:1-2)

**I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, "Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count the worshipers there. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months."** (11:1-2 NIV)

John is given a measuring rod and instructed to play the role of a surveyor, imagery that occurs twice in the Old Testament. In exile in Babylon after the destruction of the temple, Ezekiel was given a vision of an angel measuring the temple (Ezek 40-42), an indication that God would restore his presence among his people. That same imagery of restoration is used at the end of Revelation, where John sees an angel use a golden measuring rod to measure the New Jeru-

salem. Sixty years after Ezekiel's vision, after some of the exiles had returned to Jerusalem but while the city was still in ruins, Zechariah was given a vision of an angel measuring the city for the purpose of protection, for building new walls. John's measurements here in chapter 11 serve this purpose of protection. He is to measure the temple, the altar and the worshipers who are gathered there; they are under protection. He is not to measure the outer court; it will not be protected.

What is this temple? Preterist interpreters (those who say most of Revelation has already been fulfilled) say it is the Second Temple, the temple from Jesus' day which was destroyed in AD 70; this implies the book was written prior to that year, during the reign of Nero. Futurists (those who say most of the book will be fulfilled in the future) say it is a Third Temple yet to be built in Jerusalem. Others, myself included, say it doesn't refer to a physical building at all. Every other reference to the temple in Revelation clearly refers to a heavenly entity. Caird comments, "in a book in which all things are expressed in symbols, the very last things the temple and the holy city could mean would be the physical temple and the earthly Jerusalem."<sup>2</sup> But if this is the heavenly temple, why is only the temple protected while the courtyard is left unprotected? Several different suggestions have been offered by those who accept the imagery as symbolic, but to me, only one proposal makes sense of the whole book. The temple and its altar and the worshipers refer to God's people as a heavenly entity; the courtyard refers to God's people as an earthly entity. The Church is betwixt heaven and earth. As a heavenly entity the Church is protected; as an earthly entity it is not. The message given here in the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets is the same as that given in the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals (Rev 7): the saints are sealed in heaven but must nevertheless go through tribulation on earth.

The outer court, the holy city, the church as a visible, earthly entity will be trampled on. It is God who allows this; his is the unseen hand behind that impersonal passive, "it has been given." It is unfortunate that the NIV identifies the tramples as "the Gentiles." This is not a conflict between Jew and Gentile; it's a conflict between God's people and his enemies. In the other 22 uses of this noun in the book, the NIV correctly identifies it as "the nations." We saw last week that the nations are hostile to God, but also that it is from the nations that the Lamb redeems a people for God.

The church will be trampled on by God's enemies for 42 months. Forty-two is the answer; the challenge is to find the question. This is one of a set of three numbers which John uses in the next three chapters: 3½, 42 months, and 1260 days, all referring to the same period of time. Last week we saw that Daniel was told that the time of the end would be marked by a period identified as "a time, times and half a time" (Dan 12:7, cf 7:25). John tells us that during this time, the outer court will be trampled (11:2), the witnesses will prophesy (11:3), the witnesses will lie slain by the world (11:9), the woman will

be preserved in the wilderness (12:6), and the beast will have authority to war against the saints (13:5). This is the current experience of the church. The 42 months is the entire period from Pentecost until the end of the age, what elsewhere is called the last days. The church is betwixt two worlds: it is a heavenly entity but it is present on earth. As a heavenly entity it is protected, but in its earthly presence it lies open to attack. This is the clear teaching of Revelation.

## B. The Two Witnesses (11:3-13)

### 1. The mission of the witnesses

“And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want. (11:3-6)

The Lord informs John that throughout this period when the church lies open to attack, he will empower two witnesses to prophesy for 1260 days. We’re not told their message, but their garb of sackcloth identifies it as a warning of judgment with an implicit call to repentance.

Verses 4-6 describe these two witnesses using numerous images from the Old Testament. There are two witnesses because valid testimony requires two witnesses (Deut 19:15). They are portrayed as two olive trees and two lampstands, imagery drawn from Zechariah 4, where Zechariah was shown a seven-wicked lampstand flanked by two olive trees. In Zechariah’s vision the two olive trees were Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel, the governor. The context of Zechariah’s vision is instructive. He received his vision in 520 BC, eighteen years after Cyrus allowed the Jewish exiles to return home to Jerusalem. The city and the temple lay in ruins, the people were few and had little power. They had no king; Zerubbabel, though of Davidic descent, was only the governor of Judea, a minor outpost in the vast Persian Empire. Satan rightly accused Joshua the high priest of being defiled (Zech 3). What hope was there for God’s people? The Lord showed Zechariah that the light had not gone out on earth. He had raised up two witnesses. It didn’t matter that they didn’t have might or power; that’s not how recovery would come. “Who despises the day of small things?” he asked (Zech 4:10). It’s in this context that we find the famous verse, “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty” (Zech 4:6).

The two witnesses are presented also in the guise of Moses and Elijah, the two greatest prophets of the Old Testament. It was Elijah who shut up the heavens so it would not rain, and Moses who turned the waters into blood and struck Egypt with every kind of plague. Moses brought God’s prophetic word against Pharaoh who held God’s people in captivity. Elijah confronted Ahab and the prophets of Baal with their idolatry.

These two witnesses represent the Church, commissioned to bear witness to God and to Jesus. In Revelation, to prophesy and to bear witness are the same thing. Repeatedly we are told that the witness concerns “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” The word of God is Jesus himself. The testimony of Jesus is either the truth about who he is or the revelation which he entrusts to his servants, i.e. the revelation of what must happen. The Church is commis-

sioned to bear faithful witness. In the context of the late first century this meant insisting that it is Jesus not Caesar who is Lord, that the throne at the center of the universe lies in heaven not in Rome, that it is God and the Lamb not Caesar who are worthy of worship. Bearing this faithful witness is a costly mission.

### 2. The fate of the witnesses

Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days men from every people, tribe, language and nation will gaze on their bodies and refuse them burial. The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts, because these two prophets had tormented those who live on the earth. (11:7-10)

The two symbolic witnesses have operated under God’s protection throughout the symbolic 1260 days of their testimony, but then God removes that protection, allowing the beast to overwhelm them. This is our first sight of the beast; we’ll have to wait until chapter 13 to learn more about him. He comes from the Abyss, the antithesis of heaven, the home of Satan the destroyer and of his destructive forces. Three key verbs describe the beast’s assault on the witnesses: he wages war, he conquers, and he kills. In chapter 13 the beast will be shown to have tyrannical power; he is *T. rex*, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the tyrant king. The witnesses have no power to withstand him; they are overcome by his overwhelming power. But though the residents of the Abyss look fearsome, Revelation regularly reminds us that they are ultimately under the sovereignty of God. They can do nothing outside of God’s will.

The two witnesses are insulted and shamed by the refusal of burial, one of the deepest insults in the Ancient Near East. Instead their bodies lie in the open for all to see and gloat over. This is the ancient equivalent of the bodies of American soldiers being hung on a bridge in Baghdad or dragged behind a jeep in Mogadishu. The city where this abuse occurs is identified in four different ways. It is the “great city,” which elsewhere in Revelation always refers to Babylon. But Babylon in turn is a metaphor for the world city, the city of “the inhabitants of the world,” the home of those living their lives in autonomy from God. The city is also Sodom and Egypt. Sodom is used throughout Scripture as a symbol of utter depravity. Egypt is the empire which held God’s people captive, ruled by a tyrant who refused to let them go. Finally, the city is the place where their Lord was crucified, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the city where God’s prophets were killed. Jesus understood this as he set his face toward the city, and said, “I must keep going...for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you” (Luke 13:33-34). Jerusalem had rejected God’s word and his prophets. Finally it rejected his last and greatest prophet, Jesus. Jerusalem had become indistinguishable from the rest of the world, from Sodom, Egypt, Babylon. It had become the great city, the antithesis of the holy city. It was because the old Jerusalem was corrupted that there was a need for a New Jerusalem.

Two familiar terms describe the residents of the world city: “men from every people, tribe, language and tongue” and “the inhabitants of the earth.” With God’s troublesome prophets out of the way, they rejoice and exchange gifts. No longer need their consciences be tormented by the warnings of judgment and call to repentance.

### 3. The vindication of the witnesses

**But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here.” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. (11:11-12)**

The abuse of the prophets by a rejoicing world lasts for 3½ days, after which they are raised to life by God. John has taken the three days that Jesus lay in the tomb and expanded it into the apocalyptic period of 3½ marking the last days. God vindicates his faithful witnesses in full view of the world. The world’s response is terror, perhaps better translated as “fear” or “awe,” which can have positive and negative connotations. The world is astonished at the vindication of the witnesses. In their world, these weak people had lost, they had been conquered. Now it is evident that they have won, that they have emerged the conquerors. This has dreadful implications for their own world.

**At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. (11:13)**

The mighty earthquake which occurred at the very hour of the witnesses’ resurrection and ascension both attests to their vindication and heralds the end of the age. This is the eschatological earthquake foretold by the prophets, the earthquake which shook Jerusalem at the very moment of Jesus’ death (Matt 27:51-53), one of the events marking the coming of the Lord in judgment and salvation. The first six trumpets showed that God’s judgment is fearsome indeed, but God’s ultimate purpose is salvation not judgment, a restored cosmos not a destroyed one. His judgments are therefore tempered with grace. This is shown in the effects of the earthquake. In the Old Testament, the remnant who had not bowed the knee to Baal in the days of Elijah numbered only 7,000 (1 Kgs 19:18), and the remnant of Israel whom God would preserve through his judgment upon his own people would be only one-tenth (Amos 5:3). But here it is the opposite. In his grace, God preserves nine-tenths and all but 7,000. This large remnant was “terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.” What does this response signify? Elsewhere in Revelation, to fear God is a positive response, especially in conjunction with giving him glory (11:18; 14:7; 15:4; 19:5). Conversely, to refuse to glorify God is the same as refusing to repent (16:9). The response of fear and giving glory can only mean that the remnant genuinely repents.

Remember that at the end of the terrible judgments unleashed by the first six trumpets, the rest did not repent (9:20-21). Because the judgments were only partial (a third) not total, they served as warnings with an implicit call to repentance. But those opposed to God refused to heed his warnings. Nevertheless, the Lord is a “compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exod 34:6-7). He is not content for the nations to die in their rebellion. His desire is a full heaven not a full hell. If the nations do not repent when God sends warnings of judgment, how will he bring them to repentance? He does so through the witness of his saints. They have no power, they are despised, they are rejected by a hostile world which rejoices in their death, but they are vindicated by God. Surely “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.”

**The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon. (11:14)**

Only now, with the nations converted through the prophetic testimony, death and vindicating resurrection of God’s faithful witnesses is the sixth trumpet complete. Now we are ready for the seventh trumpet, which proclaims the transfer of all sovereignty to God and to his Christ, the unveiling of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We’ll look at that next week.

### C. Not by might nor by power...

This chapter calls the Church to a life of prophetic witness. Such witness will be costly, for it will be rejected by the world, which will kill the witnesses and rejoice in doing so. The Church is not alone; she follows in the footsteps of the Lamb. He was killed for his faithful witness, but God raised him from the dead and took him to heaven. The saints are to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, in life, in death, in resurrection, and in ascension to glory.

Remember that this is a pastoral letter, addressed to seven churches. For those churches suffering for their faithful witness, it is a call to endure. For those churches which have abandoned their faithful witness in order to avoid suffering, it is a call to repent. In Pergamum, Jesus’ “faithful witness” Antipas has already been killed (2:13). In Smyrna and Philadelphia the saints are suffering opposition and death is imminent. But death is not the end; if it were then the early Church was but a bunch of losers.

Around AD 200, little over 100 years after Revelation was written, Tertullian, a brilliant lawyer from North Africa and an adult convert to Christ, wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the “Rulers of the Roman Empire.” He said of the Church, “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”<sup>3</sup> From this last statement was developed the famous saying, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” In just a century and in the face of violent persecution the Church had grown to fill every corner of the Empire. The early church had no strength of its own but it prevailed over mighty Rome, for it is “‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

When Western missionaries withdrew from China following the Communist takeover in 1949, the Chinese Church numbered a half-million or so. The missionaries feared for the survival of the native church, all the more so as reports filtered out about the horrors of government persecution and the Cultural Revolution.

By 1958 the government had closed all visible churches. Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, told foreign visitors, “Christianity in China has been confined to the history section of the museum. It is dead and buried.” In the 1970s a visiting Christian delegation reported, “There is not a single Christian left in China.”<sup>4</sup>

Did the church die out in China? Quite the reverse. It seems that the church in China has grown a hundred-fold and now numbers 50 million. Now the Chinese church is sending out missionaries into Central Asia along the Silk Road. The Chinese church had no strength of its own but it prevailed over the Cultural Revolution, for it is “‘not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

As a pastoral letter, Revelation comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. To suffering churches it is a message of comfort, a call to endure. But to churches that are compromised and comfortable it is a call to repent. I see two great warnings for the American church, one for the evangelical church and one for the liberal church.

For the evangelical church, the warning is that it is “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty.” The early church grew not because it had any power, but because it bore faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, even unto death. The church grew so rapidly that in less than 300 years it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. But this status was a mixed blessing, for the church now had power. I fear that the evangelical church too often relies upon power and might, upon programs and techniques, upon building “a lean, mean kingdom machine” as it markets its religious goods and services.

For the liberal church, the warning is that the paradigm for the church’s life and mission is the Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified for his faithful witness. “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). The message of the cross is offensive to the world; sadly it is offensive also to the liberal wing of the church. Richard Niebuhr described the message of liberal Protestantism this way: “A God without wrath brought me without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without the cross.”<sup>5</sup> There’s no gospel in that! Liberal Protestantism is enamored with the so-called “missing gospels” such as The Gospel of Thomas. Sir Leigh Teabing in *The DaVinci Code*, tells Sophie that these hidden gospels are very different from the four canonical gospels.<sup>6</sup> They are indeed different but not for the reason which Teabing gives. Thomas is a collection of purported sayings of Jesus, the wise teacher, but there is no mention of the cross. That’s why it’s attractive to modern scholars. The four canonical gospels are very different. Each builds up to a lengthy passion narrative describing the arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is presented as God’s faithful prophet sent to his people to warn of judgment, call to repentance, and offer salvation. He was killed for his faithful witness, but God vindicated him by raising him from the dead and raising him to glory. And then he used that very death of Jesus to bring salvation to the rebellious world that caused that death. That’s the gospel!

Death is not the end. I shared this quote with you two weeks ago, and it generated considerable comment, so I’ll share it again. Commenting on the trumpets, G. B. Caird writes, “The idea that life on earth is so infinitely precious that the death which robs us of it must be the ultimate tragedy is precisely the idolatry that John is trying here to combat.”<sup>7</sup> The General Director of OMF sent a telegram to the grieving missionaries in Thailand, “Don’t allow questions you can’t understand to detract you from the glorious certainties you already know.” There are many things about God’s ways which we cannot comprehend, for he “moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.” If we attempt to understand the world from the position of human power and wisdom we will fail to comprehend God’s purposes: “Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan his works in vain. God is his own interpreter and he will make it plain” (Cowper). The cross proclaims that “the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Cor 1:25). “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom 11:33). Thanks be to him!

We come now to the Lord’s table. By eating the bread and drinking the cup we express the centrality of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The bread is a symbol; it has no power of its own, but that which it represents has great power. It represents the body of Jesus, broken by a hostile world, but through which God brings healing to that same world. The cup likewise is a symbol; it has no power of its own, but that which it represents has great power. It represents the blood of Jesus, shed by a rebellious world, but which God uses to bring forgiveness of sins to that same world.

**May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)**

1. William Cowper, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* (1774).
2. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 131.
3. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.
4. Xu Yongze, “Preface.” Brother Yun and Paul Hattaway, *The Heavenly Man* (London: Monarch Books, 2002), 7.
5. Quoted in Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 162.
6. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 234.
7. Caird, *Revelation*, 113.

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 Bernard Bell  
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# LONG LIVE THE KING!

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

With the Democratic convention in Boston ten days ago the election campaign moved into high gear. John Kerry reported for duty as the Democratic candidate and is now out on the campaign trail reassuring the electorate that “help is on the way.” On November 2 the nation will go to the polls, and on January 20 either Bush or Kerry will be inaugurated as the president of the United States.

In my homeland the UK we don't have presidential inaugurations; we have royal coronations. There are several major differences between a presidential inauguration and a royal coronation. Coronations are much less frequent. The last coronation in the UK was that of Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953 (she acceded to the throne on February 6, 1952). Coronations are occasions for great public joy. In 1727 Handel wrote four anthems for the coronation of George II; at least one of these anthems has been sung at every British coronation since. Perhaps the best known of these is *Zadok the Priest*, which takes its words from the coronation of Solomon (1 Kgs 1:39-40),

All the people rejoiced and said,  
 “God save the king,  
 long live the king,  
 may the king live for ever!”

It would seem very odd to sing that at a presidential inauguration: “Long live the president!” At a coronation all the people rejoice. At a presidential inauguration only half the people rejoice. At a coronation all the people cry, “Long live the king!” At an inauguration half the people want the new president to live only four years. Even the other half want him to live only eight years and then vacate the scene for the next candidate. Ex-president Clinton's appearance on the stage in Boston ten days ago was a little problematic: he delighted the crowd but detracted attention from Kerry.

A president campaigns for office, is elected by the will of the people, and serves for a fixed term. A monarch does not campaign for office, but accedes to the throne by right and serves without term. The UK has had the same monarch since 1952. In Thailand, where I spent my childhood, King Bhumipol has ruled since 1946. Imagine Truman still being president!

This is not an argument for the US to become a monarchy, but a call for us to put presidential notions out of our mind as we come to today's text, which describes not a presidential inauguration but a coronation.

## A. The Seventh Trumpet: Long Live the King! (11:15)

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,  
 and he will reign for ever and ever.” (11:15 NIV)

To properly understand the seventh trumpet it is important that we understand the flow of the last six chapters (6-11), the account

of the seven seals and the seven trumpets. The opening of the first six seals unleashed terrifying scenes of God's judgment upon a rebellious world. The sixth seal closed with the question, “Who can stand on the day of God's wrath?” (6:17). An interlude consisting of two visions into heaven gave us the answer to that question: the angels stand, restraining judgment till the saints are sealed (7:1-8), and the saints themselves, having endured tribulation on earth, stand in God's presence, offering him their praise (7:9-17). Only then, with the assurance of the security of the saints, did we proceed to the opening of the seventh seal. We expected a climactic end to the judgments, but the opening of the seventh seal was totally unlike the first six seals. Instead of a tumultuous final act of judgment, there was silence in heaven as God listened to the prayers of his saints.

The opening of the seventh seal unleashed the seven trumpets, which have unfolded in a manner similar to the seven seals. The first six trumpets unleashed terrifying scenes of God's judgment upon a rebellious world. These judgments were in response to the prayers of the saints, and were also calls to repentance. But at the end of the sixth trumpet we saw that “the rest,” those left alive after these judgments, still did not repent (9:20-21). This raised another question: if the world rejected God's call to repentance issued through his judgments, how would the world ever be brought to glorify God? Another interlude, again consisting of two episodes, gave us the answer to that question. In chapter 10, John was given a bitter-sweet scroll to eat, with instructions that he must prophesy to the nations its contents: the mystery of God, the good news of salvation. Last week we saw why the scroll containing this mystery was bitter-sweet. The church is called to a life of faithful prophetic witness to God and to Christ. Such witness will be costly, for the faithful witnesses die, but God vindicates his saints by raising them to new life. Remarkably, it is this which brings “the rest” to repentance (10:13). Only now, with this assurance of the conversion of the nations, do we proceed to the blowing of the seventh trumpet.

Again we expect a climactic end, a final act of judgment. Instead we find that the blowing of the seventh trumpet is totally unlike the other six trumpets. Instead of a tumultuous final act of judgment, a great shout of victory goes up in heaven. The end has come, but not the way we were expecting it. The end has come not with the destruction of the world but with the coronation of the King.

It is important that we heed these two interludes, between the sixth and seventh seals and between the sixth and seventh trumpets. The first six seals and the first six trumpets are all about judgment as God poured out his wrath on a rebellious world. There have been twelve scenes of devastation upon every corner of the world. The wrath of God on a rebellious world is an important truth; if God does not call the wicked to account, then this is a very sad world. But if you focus attention on these acts of devastation you get a very distorted view of God, a one-sided caricature of God as an angry judge dispensing harsh punishment. Sadly, this is the God portrayed

in too much of the popular Christian analysis of Revelation. Books like the *Left Behind* series and *The Late Great Planet Earth*, movies such as *Like a Thief in the Night*, focus great attention on the devastation which God visits upon the earth during the Great Tribulation. They are full of violence, gore and suffering, of pilotless aircraft plowing into the ground, of weaponry used on all sides, not least by God's people. The result is a ruined and devastated earth. These books and movies arouse two diametrically opposed responses: fear and fascination. People are afraid that they or their loved ones will be left behind. Or they're fascinated trying to figure out the military hardware or the Armageddon battle plan.

Is this the message of Revelation? Is this the correct portrayal of God? It is if you edit Revelation down to just the "interesting stuff": the first six seals, the first six trumpets, the mark of the beast, the seven bowls (which include the single verse about Armageddon), etc. We need to read all of the book. We need to counterbalance the first six seals and the first six trumpets with both the interludes and the seventh of each series. They give a needed corrective to any lopsided view of God.

In the first interlude, between the sixth and seventh seals, we're assured that God's people have nothing to fear. The saints are called to endure the tribulation which is the expected lot of all God's people throughout time, but this means simply following the Lamb. The saints are sealed, and will one day stand in God's presence. Their destiny is to gather around the throne of God and the Lamb singing their praises. The second interlude shows us that God's way of salvation is not the way of the gun-slinging hero but the way of the slain servant. God will win the nations through the faithful suffering witness of his saints, who follow in the footsteps of Jesus the archetypal faithful suffering witness. The seventh seal depicts silence in heaven as God hears the prayers of his saints. The seventh trumpet shows noisy acclamation in heaven as God and his Messiah are acclaimed King. We should be fascinated with Revelation, but the object of our fascination should not be military hardware and battle plans. Instead it should be God and the Lamb.

With the blowing of the seventh trumpet we again find ourselves in the heavenly throne room, where loud voices sing a song of victory, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." God is acclaimed King not because he won a popular vote, nor because he beat out rival claimants through brute force. He is, by right, King of the universe because he created the universe. Similarly, the Lamb did not win a popular vote; indeed, he was despised and rejected. But God has installed him as King over his kingdom because he accomplished the task God gave him, to be a faithful and obedient servant, even to the point of death, and thus win a great victory over death, sin and Satan. He is the victor, vindicated by God in resurrection, ascension and enthronement. Eugene Boring comments,

This does not mean that the throne of the universe is occupied by two persons, but that God, the ruler of the universe, has functionally defined his rule with his act in Jesus...God rules, but God has definitively manifested his rule in Jesus...who turned out not to be the Lion who devoured our enemies but the Lamb who was slain.<sup>1</sup>

The whole universe is the Lord's, but his sovereignty has not been universally acknowledged. The kingdom of this world is the world in opposition to God, the realm of "the inhabitants of the earth," of "the nations," of "the kings of the earth." In the next few chapters we'll be introduced to the ringleaders of the rebellion, portrayed as a counterfeit trinity of dragon, beast and false prophet. To the earthbound

eye it seems that these three have total power, that their sovereignty is universal. But the heavenward eye of faith sees that in heaven God's sovereignty has been acknowledged all along, and that one day it will be acknowledged on earth as well. Following the instruction of the Lord himself, God's people pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The trumpets are God's response to the prayers of the saints, prayers which have been heard in heaven. Now we see the accomplishment of those prayers: the transfer of all sovereignty from the imposters to the rightful owners.

Revelation was written around AD 95, during the reign of emperor Domitian (81-96). He built himself a large palace in Rome, complete with an impressive throne room. He insisted on being addressed as *dominus et deus*, "Lord and God." In John's hometown Ephesus a huge temple was built dedicated to him as *sebastos*, as worthy of worship. Here and throughout the empire he was worshiped as Lord and acclaimed as worthy. But it was all a smoke and mirrors act. Domitian's reign was not eternal. In 96 he was assassinated and the Senate passed a resolution of *damnatio memoriae*, damnation of his memory. His name was blotted out and worship of him ceased.

Domitian was an imposter and his throne in Rome a counterfeit. Again and again Revelation shows us that the real throne is in heaven, where God and the Lamb are acclaimed as truly worthy. Revelation is filled with the songs being sung in heaven around this throne. Sadly, too many Christians are unaware that these songs are even there. This coronation song is perhaps more familiar because Handel uses it in the Hallelujah Chorus of the *Messiah*, together with two verses from chapter 19,

Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. (19:6)

The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever. (11:15)

King of kings and Lord of lords. (19:16)

Hallelujah!

The *Messiah* is not only a great piece of music, but also a great piece of theology. The oratorio, whose text is nothing but Scripture juxtaposed from both Old and New Testaments, is in three parts. Part 1 covers the prophetic promises of the Messiah, plus his birth and ministry. It begins with God's call, "Comfort ye my people" (Isa 40:1) and ends with Messiah's invitation, "Come unto him all ye that labor...his yoke is easy" (Matt 11:28-30). Part 2 covers his passion and vindication: his suffering, death, resurrection and ascension. It begins with "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:29) and ends with "Hallelujah!" Part 3 covers the ramifications of Messiah's victory over death: because Messiah has triumphed over the grave, death has lost its sting, thanks be to God. It begins with "I know that my Redeemer liveth" (Job 19:25-26) and ends with "Worthy is the Lamb!" (Rev 5:12-14). The Hallelujah Chorus is the climax to Part 2; the Messiah's coronation completes God's vindication of the passion of his obedient servant. In light of what God has done through his Messiah it is only fitting that the whole work end with another song from Revelation,

Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His blood, to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen. (Rev 5:12-14)

To appreciate Revelation you would be far better off to put away the *Left Behind* books, and instead listen to the *Messiah* a few times. The Lamb is enthroned because he has won a great victory, but that

victory has been won without military hardware, not as a conquering Lion but as a slain Lamb. The Lord's Army wins not by the use of power but by maintaining their faithful witness and by following the Lamb wherever he goes. The story ends not with a devastated earth in ruins but with everyone gathered around the throne singing, "Worthy is the Lamb!"

### **B. The Response of the Elders: It's Time! (11:16-18)**

Most of the heavenly songs in Revelation are antiphonal, as the various groups gathered around the throne sing back and forth, stirring one another up to praise God and the Lamb. These songs are sung by the four cherubim, the 24 elders, the countless angels, the countless saints, even all creation. No one is silent. Now the twenty-four elders respond to the lead of the loud voices, by offering up a song of thanksgiving. But first they must assume the appropriate posture. These elders, who form God's heavenly court, have thrones and crowns, but these are inappropriate when it is time to worship one who is vastly superior to them. Repeatedly John sees them vacate their thrones, falling on their faces before the throne (4:10; 5:8,14; 11:16; 19:4).

**And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying:**

**"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,  
the One who is and who was,  
because you have taken your great power  
and have begun to reign.  
The nations were angry;  
and your wrath has come.  
The time has come for judging the dead,  
and for rewarding your servants the prophets  
and your saints and those who reverence your name,  
both small and great—  
and for destroying those who destroy the earth."**

The elders give thanks to the "Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was." Lord God Almighty is the same as Lord God of Hosts in the Old Testament, the God who has overwhelming resources at his disposal. He is the Almighty, but the Greek word *Pantocrator* implies not so much all power but all rule. God is the ruler of all; all sovereignty is his. He also is "the One who is and who was." No longer is he "the One who is and who was and who is to come" (1:4; 8; 4:8). Now he has come, just as his saints have prayed for.

All worship in Revelation is responsive, reacting to something that is seen or heard about God and the Lamb. We can't "just praise the Lord." We need to be given reason to praise. We need to see God and Christ in the splendor of their being and deeds. Then the worship should flow naturally. The worship of the elders is responsive. They respond to the coronation song by acclaiming God, they give reason for their acclamation, and they add commentary. We would do well to follow their example in our worship.

The elders give thanks because God has come and commenced his reign. God has never ceased being sovereign. This world continues to function because of God's sovereign superintendence and providence. Revelation offers no room for open theism, for God being contingent upon the behavior of mankind, for God being vulnerable in the development of his plans for the world he has made. He is and always has been the King, though that sovereignty has usually not been acknowledged on earth. Now in Revelation, we have reached

the end, when his kingdom is come on earth as it has been all along in heaven.

The elders follow their acclamation of God with a commentary on the significance of the coronation, starting with a reference to Psalm 99:1, "The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble." The contrast between the uproar of the nations and God's effortless exercise of his sovereignty is a frequent theme in Scripture, notably in Psalm 2:

**Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the Lord  
and against his Anointed One...  
Then he rebukes them in his anger  
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,  
"I have installed my King  
on Zion, my holy hill." (Ps 2:1-6)**

The nations, which we've seen is one of John's terms for those in opposition to God, agitate against God's purposes. But nothing can thwart those purposes; when God calls, "Time!" it is time. In a case of poetic justice he exercises his wrath against the wrathful. Though it seem harsh and cruel, the wrath of God is a very necessary belief. If at some point God does not call, "Time!" then it is true that "might is right."

The arrival of the day of God's wrath means it is time for doing three things: judging the dead, rewarding the saints, and destroying the destroyers. The day of the Lord is a day of judgment. All will be brought before the judgment throne of God, where two sets of books will be opened: books in which are written the deeds of each person, and the book of life in which are written names. The dead will be judged according to what they have done as written in the books, but only those whose names are not written in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire (20:12, 15).

The day of the Lord is a day of salvation, dispensing rewards to those whose names are in the book of life. These people are described with three synonymous terms: his servants, his prophets and saints, and those who reverence or fear his name. Their rewards include those promised the victor in each church: access to the tree of life in God's paradise (2:7), immunity from the second death (2:11), hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name (2:17), authority and the morning star (2:29), white robes, an indelible name in the book of life, and Jesus' acknowledgement before his Father (3:5), incorporation into God's temple (3:12), and the right to sit beside Jesus on his throne (3:21). The greatest reward of all will be to see the face of God (22:4).

The day of the Lord is a day for purging the world of evil, the day when he will destroy the destroyers. God's purpose is not the destruction of the earth, but the removal of the destroyers. The destroyers are led by their captain, Abaddon, Apollyon, the Destroyer (9:11). Subsequent chapters will tell us more about him, Satan, the dragon. Contrary to what some Christians teach, the world is not "headed to hell in a handbasket." It is the destroyers of the earth, not the earth itself, who are headed to hell. As for the earth, God will restore it so it can be part of the new heavens and the new earth.

### **C. Theophany: God's Loyalty to Covenant (11:19)**

**Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of light-**

**ning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.**

After the elders' hymn of thanks, John sees God's heavenly temple opened. The earthly temple was only ever a copy of the heavenly reality of God's dwelling place. Moses was shown a heavenly pattern for the tabernacle (Exod 25:9 etc). God himself gave David the plans for the temple (1 Chr 28:12, 19). The earthly temple was only ever temporary. It was a very precious and gracious gift, for God put his presence among his people on earth. But the temple was less than perfect; it confined God's earthly presence to a physical locality to which access was limited.

Inside the temple, in the Holy of Holies, was the ark of the covenant. The ark was a wooden chest covered in gold; inside were three memorial items: the Ten Commandments, a pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded (Heb 9:4). The chest was covered with a solid gold lid, the atonement cover or mercy seat, on which stood two golden cherubim. This was God's earthly throne, seated on the mercy seat between the two cherubim, with the ark as his footstool. It was called the ark of the covenant or the ark of the testimony, because God gave Moses his testimony to put inside it. That testimony was the ten commandments, the treaty document between God and his people whereby he entered into covenant with them, binding himself to them as their God, and binding themselves to him as his people, as expressed in the statement that lies at the heart of the covenant, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." It was here at the mercy seat, the atonement cover, that God met with his people through the intermediary of the high priest. It was here that the sins of his people were atoned for through the blood of a sacrificial lamb on the Day of Atonement. It was here that God put his presence among his people. But the ark, just like the temple which contained it, was only a copy of a heavenly reality. The copy is no longer on earth for Indiana Jones to find. The heavenly reality behind the earthly copy has been unveiled for the eye of faith to see now, and for all to see at the end of the age. God has made a new covenant with his people, Jew and Gentile together, a covenant sealed with the blood of the sacrificial lamb, the Lamb that was slain. The sins of God's people have been atoned for through that same blood.

Yes, God is a God of judgment. Yes, he will destroy those who destroy his earth. But at the heart of his purposes lies not judgment but covenant. His purpose is a full heaven not a full hell. Yes, all the nations are in tumult, but his covenant purpose still stands. From these very nations he is redeeming a people for his presence through the blood of the Lamb, a people with whom he will dwell in his kingdom, a realm free from evil and in which his sovereignty is acclaimed and enjoyed.

When we started this series on the trumpets three weeks ago, we saw that trumpets convey three messages as understood against the Old Testament background. The trumpets warned of God's judgments and called to repentance. That's the message of the first six trumpets. They also heralded the coronation of the king. That's the message of the seventh trumpet. But there's more. Seven trumpets leading the ark of the covenant in holy procession brought down the walls of Jericho, the great city which blocked the entrance of God's people into the Promised Land. The seventh trumpet has now unveiled the ark of the covenant. The fall of the great city must be

imminent. We were prepared for the seventh trumpet to be the third woe, but so far the seventh trumpet has been all about rejoicing. But just as the seventh seal encompassed the seven trumpets, so does the seventh trumpet encompass the seven bowls. The seventh bowl brings the collapse of the great city (16:19) and the three-fold pronouncement, "Woe! Woe, O great city" (18:10, 16, 19). With Babylon the great city removed, New Jerusalem the holy city can descend from heaven and the great cry go up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). Beyond judgment lies the fulfillment of God's covenant.

This vision into the heart of heaven is accompanied by dramatic thunder and lightning. These are phenomena associated with a theophany, with the manifestation of God's presence. They occurred at Mount Sinai when God came down to meet with his people (Exod 19:16-19). They occur four times in Revelation in increasing intensity: during the initial throne room vision (4:5), with the seventh seal (8:5), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and the seventh bowl (16:18). In each case, God makes his presence felt. Whether that presence is good news or bad news depends on whether or not you have been praying for God's kingdom to come.

With the blowing of the seventh trumpet we have reached a great climax. Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Long live the King!

Many people think that Revelation is primarily about the terrible devastation of the Great Tribulation. No, Revelation is primarily about God. Again and again we see into heaven; there at the center is a throne with one seated upon it. He is acclaimed as worthy of worship for he has created all things. There beside him is the Lamb, who also is acclaimed as worthy of worship, but in his case it is because he was slain and has redeemed a people unto God through his own blood. You cannot properly understand God's kingdom unless you see that the one whom he installs as King of kings and Lord of lords is the slain Lamb. Long live this King!

**Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power  
and the glory and the majesty and the splendor,  
for everything in heaven and earth is yours.  
Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom;  
you are exalted as head over all.  
Wealth and honor come from you;  
you are the ruler of all things...  
Now, our God, we give you thanks,  
and praise your glorious name. (1 Chr 29:11-13)**

1. M. Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation: The Lord our God the Almighty Reigns," *Interpretation* 40:3 (July 1986): 266.

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Revelation 12:1-6

19th Message

Bernard Bell

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# ENTER THE DRAGON

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

We all know that Revelation tells us what is going to happen in the future. In the very first sentence we're told that this is "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" (1:1). Later in the first chapter, Jesus commissions John to write "what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (1:19). After seven messages addressed to seven churches in the province of Asia, the main sequence of visions begins in chapter 4 when John is summoned up to heaven: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (4:1). At the end of the book John is assured, "These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place" (22:6).

At its most basic level, then, Revelation concerns the things which are now and the things which must happen. It addresses the tension between these two, the tension between the way things are and the way things ought to be, the tension between reality and the vision. The world is a certain way, but it will not always remain that way. Certain things must happen, which will transform it into the world which ought to be.

These are matters which are of great concern to us. We know that all is not right in the world, but why? Why are things the way they are? What is wrong? What will happen next? How will things turn out? How will it all end? These questions have been even more on our mind since 9/11. The London bombings of July 7th have reminded us afresh of the threat of terror. Can we ever be safe? Why do the terrorists hate us so much? What motivates the suicide bombers? One answer is that they are motivated by exactly this dissonance between reality and the vision, between the way they perceive the world to be currently and the way it ought to be. Furthermore, they have been persuaded that their death in holy war puts them on the fast track to paradise, where they will receive the martyr's reward of 72 virgin brides.

Since Revelation is about the things which must happen, many people assume that it gives us the information we need to prepare our timelines and charts. A multi-billion dollar industry of books and movies rides upon this perception. Those who have followed this series will know that I do not read Revelation this way. Indeed, I am concerned about the effect that this perception of the book has on people. It engenders two very different responses: fear and fascination. Neither of these is pastorally helpful. Fear engenders great anxiety and can lead to loss of faith and spiritual and psychological paralysis. Fascination diverts people into a preoccupation with timelines and can produce arrogance and a critical spirit toward those who develop different timelines. Revelation is a deeply pastoral book, intended to produce confidence and hope among God's people. It is a pastoral message from Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, "to show his servants what must soon take place" (1:1) and addressing seven churches of which he is the Lord. It is a pastoral message from John to those seven churches for whom he cares deeply while he is in

exile in Patmos. He is their "brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" (1:9).

Revelation does address both the present and the future. It does so by revealing to us the deep structures of the cosmos. I don't mean the macro- and micro-structures probed by cosmologists and particle physicists. The deep structures of the cosmos are not visible to the most powerful space telescope or particle accelerator. But Revelation reveals them, drawing back the veil to show us the world unseen to the human eye. This is why I have called this series "The Seen and the Unseen."

We see these deep structures at the beginning of John's vision when he is caught up into heaven to be shown "what must take place" (4:1). There in heaven he sees a throne and one seated upon it. Everything else is described in relation to this throne. The throne is surrounded by four cherubim who cry out "Holy, Holy, Holy" (4:8) and by 24 elders who fall down and say, "You are worthy" (4:11). Here is the first deep truth. There is a single throne at the center of the universe, and its occupant rightly receives worship because he is the creator of all things. The world is not out of control. The one who created it is still actively sovereign.

But there is a second truth. Also on the throne is a Lamb "standing as though slain" (5:6). This is the Lion of Judah who has conquered, and thereby has the key to God's plan of history. Here is the second deep structural truth: the key to history is this mixed metaphor of the conquering Lion who is the slain Lamb. He has conquered by being slain and raised to new life. At his feet the cherubim and the elders also fall down and say, "You are worthy" (5:9). They are joined by all the angels, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain" (5:12).

The revelation of "what must take place" begins with this two-fold vision of the heavenly throne room. Without this, nothing else makes sense. Because God is actively exercising his rule and because the Lamb has conquered certain things must happen: God's enemies must be defeated. The subsequent visions of seven seals and seven trumpets show God's judgments upon those opposed to him.

These judgments build to a climax with the seventh trumpet when the great cry goes up in heaven, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). A climax has been reached and it seems that the end has come. There is a sense in which the book could end at this point, but we're only half-way. I have another five years to go!

The 24 elders continue the theme, falling down in worship:

**"We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,  
the One who is and who was,  
because you have taken your great power  
and have begun to reign.**

**The time has come...**

**for destroying those who destroy the earth" (11:17-18 NIV)**

Though we have been shown certain key truths in chapters 4 and 5, there are many unanswered questions. If God's kingdom has come, why are things still out of order? Why is there still evil in the world? More specifically, why does evil befall God's people? Or, as Rabbi Kushner asks, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Who are these destroyers and why are they bent on destruction? For John at the end of the first century, Why is Rome dominant? Why? Why? Why? How do we reconcile God and evil? For the past 300 years this question has gone under the title of theodicy, the justice of God. It's an age-old problem which continues to exercise the minds of philosophers and theologians today. Revelation 12 helps us address this very problem.

**A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days. (Rev 12:1-6)**

What strange vision is this? A pregnant woman, a child and a dragon. How does this help us understand the deep realities of the cosmos, especially the problem of evil? What is a dragon doing in the Bible? The dragon belongs on the Welsh flag (what is it doing there?) and in works of fantasy—*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and the Harry Potter novels. We recognize those as works of fiction, of make-believe, but the Bible is different. The Bible is true, so what's a dragon doing in it?

These images might seem very strange to us, but they would not have seemed so strange to a reader at the end of the first century, to a reader who knew both his Old Testament and the prevailing Greco-Roman culture.

Both the pregnant woman and the great red dragon are described as signs. This means that they are symbolic, that they represent something. What do they represent? Of the three figures, the child is the easiest to identify. His destiny to rule all the nations with an iron scepter (12:5)—a quote from Psalm 2:9—identifies him as the Messiah. The woman is his mother, but which mother? Catholics understand her to be Jesus' physical mother Mary. Clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head, she is the Queen of Heaven, whom Catholics address as *Regina*, Queen. But in verse 17 the woman has other offspring, so this cannot be Mary.

Many interpret the woman as Israel. The number twelve suggests that the figure has something to do with the people of God, and the sun, moon and stars are reminiscent of Joseph's vision (Gen 37:9). The Old Testament prophets portrayed Israel or Zion as a woman in labor, suffering the pain of God's judgment but about to birth a new age. Israel does indeed birth the Messiah, but the objection still stands that this woman has other offspring, "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17), which clearly means the followers of Jesus.

If the woman is not Mary and is not Israel, who is she? She is the community of God's people, which both births and is birthed by the Messiah. A few weeks ago I was asked what PBCC's position is on "replacement theology": the idea that the Church has replaced Israel as the people of God. As I see it, there is one people of God. In the Old Testament this was primarily national Israel, descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, into which a few Gentiles were incorporated. But it became increasingly clear that within ethnic Israel some had faith and some did not, that within God's people who were physical descendants of Abraham there was a subset of God's people who were the spiritual descendants of Abraham. In Christ, God has now opened wide the doors of this spiritual family to encompass both Jews and Gentiles who are justified by faith, as was Abraham. There is only one people of God. This one people both births the Messiah and is birthed by the Messiah. It is this one people that is represented by the woman.

What about the dragon? He is Leviathan (Greek *drakōn*), one of a collection of mythical beasts which populate the Old Testament. His companions include Nahash the serpent and Tannin the sea monster. These are creatures borrowed from the mythologies of Israel's neighbors. Myth is a term as slippery as Nahash the mythical serpent. Myths arise out of an attempt to explain the world: how and why was the world created? Why were humans created? Why is the world the way it is? How will it all end? These are questions which have exercised every generation. Twenty-first century Western society asks the same questions, though it no longer answers them using images of dragons and sea monsters.

Israel's neighbors had their creation stories, or cosmogonies, explaining the genesis of the cosmos. The most famous of these is the *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation story. But the mythical animals of the Old Testament, including Leviathan, come from the Ugaritic and Canaanite stories. These creation stories of the Ancient Near East share certain features in common. The earth was created after a great primeval battle between good and bad gods, what scholars call the Combat Myth (in German, *Chaoskampf*, "chaos struggle"). Humans were created as an afterthought, after a squabble among the gods. These myths, which attempt to explain the world, reflect a profound unease over man's place in the cosmos. The world is a scary place, populated by capricious gods whom you cannot trust. That's why you have to try to placate and manipulate them with sacrifices. You can never really be sure that in the end good will prevail over evil, that the world will not sink into chaos. In this uncertain cosmos, humans are but tiny cogs who matter little to the gods.

Does the presence of these same mythical beasts in the Bible mean that the Bible reflects the same understanding of the cosmos? If you took any religious studies classes in a secular college this might be what you were taught. But it is increasingly recognized that the Bible makes use of these myths in order to disarm them. For example, Genesis 1 is not simply a copy of Babylonian or Canaanite creation stories, but a powerful polemic against them.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). There is no hint of any struggle, of any primeval combat. God effortlessly calls the cosmos into being: he speaks and it happens. The sea monsters are not independent agents which he has to battle; he created them (1:21). The human is not an afterthought, but created according to God's express purpose, in his image, and for relationship with him (1:26). The whole creation is very good (1:31). What a different picture this gives us of the one God, of his creation, and of our place in it. Nevertheless, as we look around the world today,

there is much that seems out of our control. Chaotic forces seem poised to overwhelm order. But the Bible shows us repeatedly that nothing is outside of God's control. When God later questioned Job, he asked him,

**“Can you pull in Leviathan (Gk. *drakōn*) with a fishhook?...  
Can you make a pet of him like a bird  
or put him on a leash for your girls?” (Job 41:1, 5)**

That which seems terrifying to Job, God has complete authority over. There is nothing so draconian that God is not sovereign over it.

Returning to Revelation, Leviathan the dragon is identified with Satan, the devil, the ancient serpent (12:9; 20:2). But who is Satan and where did he come from? The Bible tells us surprisingly little about him, though that has not prevented authoritative descriptions of his origin and downfall. We are not told the origins of the serpent in Genesis 3, other than that he was one of the creatures God had made. Nowhere are we told where Satan came from, though we can perhaps infer that he is an angel who rebelled against God. Satan is a Hebrew word, meaning accuser. He appears in only a few places in the Old Testament. In both Job 1-2 and Zechariah 3 the Satan, the Accuser, has access to God's heavenly court where he brings accusations against God's people. There is a certain merit to these accusations: it is true that Job has lived a charmed life; it is true that Joshua the high priest has been defiled by the exile in the pagan land of Babylon. God permits Satan to bring these accusations but rebuts him.

When it comes to thinking about Satan, there are two opposite dangers: belittling him and magnifying him. Many deny the existence of Satan, dismissing him as the product of superstitious pre-modern minds. But how then do you explain the presence of evil in the world? Evil must be blamed on the environment. It can therefore be educated or legislated or medicated or constructed or managed out of existence by enlightened people. But I do not know how people can continue to believe this after the last hundred years.

The other danger is to magnify Satan, to grant him more power than he really has. I fear that this is what can happen in evangelical communities that read too many books about Satan and demonic forces. We get dangerously close to the ancient mindset of fearing that chaos will overwhelm order, that there are two gods duking it out, one good and one bad. The success of God's purposes hangs in the balance, and we have to give him a helping hand by binding the Satan and the demons. But the Bible is very clear that Satan has already been bound. I think that the reason the Bible tells us very little about Satan and very much about God is to avoid the risk of us focusing too much attention on Satan. We are shown over and over again that God is sovereign. Where does evil come from? Where does Satan come from? We're not told. These are matters hidden within the inscrutable purposes of God, and we must be content to leave them there.

There is a second danger facing the evangelical church, one which arises from faulty thinking about God, though it arises from this same attempt to reconcile God and evil. A theology known as Open Theism, which arose within liberal circles, has begun to infiltrate the evangelical church. God cannot be truly sovereign without denying human free will. Therefore God must be limited. Because he can't know the future, he has to take risks with people, waiting to see how humans act. Sometimes they make evil choices, which pains him for his goal is love, but he modifies his plans accordingly and moves on.

Somehow it all works out in the end. This is less than the God we see revealed in Scripture. God is sovereign, all-knowing and unchanging. He is sovereign over evil without being responsible for it. Satan is the architect of evil, but God is sovereign over Satan, and, as the hymn says, “God is working his purpose out.”

The dragon is blood-red, for he causes the death of many; he is the supreme destroyer. He has seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns. The heads represent authority, the horns power, and the crowns honor that he arrogates to himself. From an earthly perspective his power and authority seem total. He stood in front of the woman to devour the child as soon as it be born. Here an ancient drama nears its climax.

When God pronounced judgment on the man, woman, and serpent following the Fall, he began with the serpent,

**So the LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this,**

**“Cursed are you above all the livestock  
and all the wild animals!**

**You will crawl on your belly  
and you will eat dust  
all the days of your life.**

**And I will put enmity  
between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel.” (Gen 3:14-15)**

The serpent had persuaded the woman that he was her friend and God the enemy. But God was not content to let it remain that way. He would insert enmity between the serpent and the woman and between their seed. Though death had entered the world, God would ensure that life would continue through the birth of offspring. This text is often called the ProtoEvangelium, the First Gospel. Much of the rest of the Old Testament can be read as the outworking of this promise, of God ensuring the birth of the seed: narrowing the line down through Shem, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David; overcoming the barrenness of Sarah, of Rebekah, and of Rachel; the spiritual barrenness of Israel in the days of Ruth; the adultery and murder of David.

Since Satan knows that this seed will mortally crush him, it's in his best interest to try to prevent the birth of the seed. This he does repeatedly. But God has cursed him, meaning that everything that he does will be futile and frustrated. While God will restore blessing to his world, Satan will end up in a dead-end. Again and again we see God overturn the evil purposes of Satan, especially his attempts to destroy the seed. When Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys, they feared God not Pharaoh and let the baby boys live (Exod 1:15-21). When he ordered his people to throw every baby boy into the Nile, Moses was found and rescued by his own daughter (Exod 1:22-2:10). When Athaliah, daughter of King Ahab of Israel and wife of King Jehoram of Judah, tried to kill all the royal line of Judah, her own daughter Jehoshaba hid Joash away (2 Kgs 11:1-3; 2 Chr 22:10-12). When Herod ordered the Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem, the Holy Family fled to Egypt, Joseph having been warned in a dream of Herod's evil intent (Matt 2:13-18). Behind all these human actions was Satan seeking to destroy the line. But every time, God thwarted the purposes of Satan.

In John's vision, the child was born and snatched up to heaven out of the dragon's reach. There was nothing the dragon could do about

it. The Messiah has been born and has successfully discharged his mission. He has been installed as King of kings and Lord of lords, for his destiny is to rule all nations, a quote from Psalm 2. That psalm begins,

**Why do the nations conspire  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the LORD  
and against his Anointed One.  
“Let us break their chains,” they say,  
“and throw off their fetters.”  
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them.  
Then he rebukes them in his anger  
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,  
“I have installed my King  
on Zion, my holy hill.” (Ps 2:1-6)**

In his sermons following Pentecost, Peter repeatedly drew the contrast between the evil, destructive, Satanic purposes of man and the overturning of those purposes by God: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36); “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead” (3:15); “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead” (4:10); “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior” (5:30-31). Since Satan’s efforts to prevent the birth of the Messiah were thwarted, and his attempts to divert Jesus from his mission by testing him in the wilderness were also thwarted, he moved Jews and Gentiles to join together in unholy alliance in slaying the Messiah. But that proved to be his final undoing: God turned the evil intent of his opponents to his own great purposes.

Finally, the woman fled into the desert. Since this is after the completion of Christ’s mission on earth, the woman is now the Church, though still the one people of God. The desert or wilderness is the land of pilgrimage, the in-between land which must be traversed on the journey from the land of bondage and death to the land of promise and rest. It is the land of testing and provision. Israel had to make that journey, and she didn’t like it. Frightened by the trials of pilgrimage, she kept wanting to go back to Egypt.

The duration of this sojourn in the wilderness is the symbolic period of 1260 days, or 42 months and 3½ years. During this symbolic time several things happen: the Church is taken care of by God (12:6, 14), God’s enemies trample his people (11:2), the believers bear their prophetic witness (11:3), and the dragon’s henchman, the beast, exercises blasphemous authority (13:5). This is the entire Church Age, from the day of Pentecost till Christ’s return. It is a time of testing: “battered on the east, and beaten to the west” but one day we will arrive “Safe in your Harbour.”

David experienced life in the wilderness. Many of his psalms record the testing and provision which he found there. In Psalm 34 he wrote, “Fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing” (Ps 34:9). In 1696 Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady published a collection of metrical psalms for singing. Psalm 34 they turned into the hymn, “Through all the changing scenes of life.” Here’s how they rendered verse 9:

Fear him, ye saints, and you will then  
have nothing else to fear;  
make you his service your delight;  
your wants shall be his care.

If you do not fear God, if you have too large a view of Satan or too small a view of God, or if you deny their existence altogether, then the world is a very terrifying place. Fear God and you will have nothing else to fear. Don’t fear God, and you will have everything else to fear.

Revelation is a pastoral letter, written to seven churches during this time of pilgrimage, calling them to fear the Lord and not their circumstances. Some of these churches had taken their eyes off Jesus and were looking at the world around them. They saw a very scary world, and, out of fear, compromised their witness in the hopes of an easier life. But they were laying themselves open to the judgment of Jesus. Conversely, the churches that were the most faithful were the churches facing active persecution. They stared their dangers in the face and received Jesus’ assurance, “Do not be afraid” (2:10). It’s a message we need to heed today.

There is no denying that there is evil present in the world. Why does God allow it? I do not know. What I do know is that God is sovereign and is effortlessly thwarting the purposes of Satan. In the words of another hymn, “All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew.”

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 Bernard Bell  
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## WAR OF THE WORLDS

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Our Scripture reading this morning began with the verses printed on the cover of the bulletin:

**Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. (1 Pet 4:12-13 NIV)**

But we *are* surprised at the trials we suffer, and we *do* think something strange is happening to us. Scott Peck began the first chapter of his best-seller *The Road Less Traveled* with these memorable words:

Life is difficult.

This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.

Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy. They voice their belief, noisily or subtly, that their difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon them, or else upon their families, their tribe, their class, their nation, their race or even their species, and not upon others. I know about this moaning because I have done my share.

Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them?<sup>1</sup>

We can identify with Scott Peck: we have all moaned about our problems. We easily buy into the mindset that “life *should* be easy.” It is easy to fall into a victim mentality. But few, if any, of our trials arise specifically because we follow Christ. This was not so when Peter wrote his first letter or when John wrote Revelation.

It was in the 60s, during the despotic reign of Nero, that Peter wrote from Rome to Christians “scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1:1), provinces in Asia Minor, in what is today Turkey. Within a few years both Peter and Paul were dead, killed during Nero’s persecution of Christians in Rome. It is evident from Peter’s letter that the believers in these provinces were also facing active persecution.

Fifty years later, in A.D. 111, when Pliny the Younger was appointed governor of Bithynia, he found himself confronted with the problem of what to do about Christians brought before him for trial. He wrote to the Emperor Trajan, seeking approval for his actions:

I have never participated in trials of Christians. I therefore do not know what offenses it is the practice to punish or investigate... Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a

second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished. There were others possessed of the same folly; but because they were Roman citizens, I signed an order for them to be transferred to Rome.<sup>2</sup>

Trajan replied,

You observed proper procedure...they are to be punished, with this reservation, that whoever denies that he is a Christian and really proves it—that is, by worshiping our gods—even though he was under suspicion in the past, shall obtain pardon through repentance.<sup>3</sup>

This is the backdrop of Revelation, written just fifteen years before Pliny’s governorship of Bithynia. In Pergamum Antipas had been killed for his faithful witness to Jesus (2:13). The Christians in Smyrna were suffering for their faith, and Jesus warned that death was close at hand (2:9-10). But not all seven churches were suffering. Some of them had avoided persecution by softening their witness.

A major problem we have in trying to understand the book of Revelation is that we are not facing the sort of persecution faced by Christians in the first century. Following Christ is not a life and death issue in the West. But it is in some countries today: Indonesia, Pakistan, China, to name but a few. In these countries following Christ can be costly. Christians can be under intense pressure to forsake Christ and so save their skin. Why does God allow this to happen?

Last week we sought to reconcile the thorny problem of God and evil. We are not told where evil ultimately came from, but we are shown what God is doing about it. We are not told the origins of Satan, but we are shown that God is constantly thwarting his evil purposes, working them to his own good purposes. He did this supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ. Satan repeatedly tried to prevent the birth of the promised seed, but God ensured that the line would continue. God ensured that the seed was born, and there was nothing Satan could do about it. Satan inspired an unholy alliance of Jew and Gentile to join in putting Jesus to death. But God turned the tables, raising him to life and installing him in heaven at his right hand as King of kings and Lord of lords. Again, there was nothing Satan could do about it.

But if God has won the decisive victory at the cross, and has installed his King, why do God’s people still suffer? Hasn’t the battle been won? This week we’ll look at the more specific problem of the continuation of evil against Christians after the decisive victory of the cross. This is an equally thorny problem. In the Old Testament God delivered his people *from* their suffering in Egypt. He brought them into the Promised Land where they would enjoy rest and blessing if they walked in his ways. Subsequent generations found that the reality did not match the promise, but they had only themselves to blame. Israel suffered only because she kept forsaking the Lord.

In the New Testament the rules seem to have changed. It seems that God has delivered his people not *from* suffering but *into* suffering. It is faithfulness to Christ which brings suffering, while forsaking Christ avoids suffering. Why? Not just why is there evil in the world? But why do God's faithful people suffer? This is the question we take up in the rest of Revelation 12.

This chapter divides into three sections, in which the dragon Satan makes four separate assaults upon God, his purposes and his people. In 12:1-6, which we looked at last week, Satan tried to overwhelm the Messiah. In 12:7-12 he wages war in heaven in an attempt to preserve his place there. In 12:13-17 he wages war on earth, first against the woman (13-16) and then against the rest of her offspring (17).

### A. War in Heaven (12:7-12)

**And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (Rev 12:7-9)**

After the installation of Jesus at God's right hand as King of kings and Lord of lords, war broke out in heaven. On one side is the archangel Michael, described in Daniel as the angelic protector of God's people (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1). Here he is depicted as the commander of God's heavenly armies, who leads the assault upon Satan and his armies. Satan fights back, desperate to maintain his place in heaven. But he is defeated and thrown out of heaven down to the earth. This does not depict some primeval fall of Satan—we never are told the origins of Satan or of evil. This is the ejection of Satan from God's court after the installation of Christ on God's throne.

The ejection of Satan from heaven elicits a heavenly song of praise:

**Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:**

**“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God,  
and the authority of his Christ.**

**For the accuser of our brothers,  
who accuses them before our God day and night,  
has been hurled down.**

**They overcame him  
by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
they did not love their lives so much  
as to shrink from death.**

**Therefore rejoice, you heavens  
and you who dwell in them!**

**But woe to the earth and the sea,  
because the devil has gone down to you!**

**He is filled with fury,  
because he knows that his time is short.” (12:10-12)**

This song interprets the vision of Satan's ejection from heaven, giving us its meaning and significance.

Satan's name means “accuser.” In the Old Testament he had access to God's court, where he brought accusation against God and his people. These accusations had merit, and God permitted them to be made. It was true that Job had led a charmed life (Job 1-2). It was true that Joshua the high priest was defiled (Zech 3). But the time for

such accusations is over. The accuser has been thrown out of heaven. Why? Because at God's right hand he has now installed an advocate for us, even the Lord Jesus Christ. As we sang,

Before the throne of God above,  
I have a strong, a perfect plea,  
A great high priest whose name is Love,  
Who ever lives and pleads for me.<sup>4</sup>

As Paul told the Romans,

**there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. (Rom 8:1, 33-34)**

This is indeed cause for great rejoicing. Satan no longer has access to God's court, there to bring accusation against us. Even when we still sin he cannot bring any accusation against us. As John wrote, “if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:1-2).

The song next celebrates the victory of the saints. It is clear that the saints have been killed, yet they are considered victorious. Their victory over Satan has two causes: the blood of the Lamb, and their faithful witness even unto death. In the visible, earth-bound world, it seemed as though the dragon had defeated them by killing them. But in the unseen, heavenly world it is the faithful saints who emerge triumphant over the dragon. This is possible because death is not the end, or rather the first death is not the end.

The expulsion of the dragon from heaven, and the victory of the saints over the dragon, is cause for rejoicing by the residents of heaven. Those who dwell in heaven include not just the four cherubim, the 24 elders, the countless angels, but also the martyred saints. Throughout the book John consistently uses two different verbs for “live” or “dwell,” one for those who dwell on the earth, one for those who dwell in heaven. It is one of his ways of dividing humanity into two sets of people. The earth-dwellers (“the inhabitants of the earth” NIV) are opposed to God and his people. The saints, though they might now be present on earth, are bound for heaven where they will dwell and God will dwell with them. The saints are to be willing to die on earth, but their mindset is the antithesis of suicide bombers today. Both believe that martyrdom puts them on the fast track to heaven, but there the similarity ends. The Islamic suicide bomber wants to destroy as many infidels as possible; his weapons are violent; his eye is on the self-centered reward of 72 virgin brides. The Christian allows himself to be slain by the infidel rather than deny Christ; his only weapon is his faithful witness to “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”; his eye is on the prospect of seeing God's face and of hearing these words, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev 21:3).

The expulsion of the dragon from heaven to earth elicits rejoicing from heaven but the pronouncement of woe upon the earth. Since Satan no longer has access to heaven, he will wreak his destructive purposes on earth. His activity on earth is a sign not of his great power but of his limited power. His great rage is due to his awareness that “his doom is sure.”

Three times in Revelation, Satan the dragon is hurled down: from heaven to earth (12:9), from earth to the Abyss (20:2), and from the Abyss into the lake of fire (20:10). Why doesn't God just hurl him straight into the lake of fire? That would have spared the earth a lot of trouble. In particular, it would have spared God's people on earth a lot of trouble. But God has chosen not to throw Satan directly into the lake of fire. He allows him to rampage across the earth, "like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8).

### B. War against the Church (12:13-16)

So far Satan is 0-2. He has not prevented God from installing the Messiah at his right hand, and he has been thrown out of heaven. But he does not give up. He launches a third attack, taking out his fury on the earth, specifically on God's people on the earth:

**When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. (12:13-16)**

Satan's next target is the woman, mother of the Messiah. Last week I argued that this woman is the community of God's people, the one people of God. Since this is after the exaltation of the woman's son, the woman must now be the Church. Unable to destroy Christ, Satan seeks to destroy the Church. But again he is thwarted: the woman is carried away on eagles' wings to the desert.

When God delivered his people from Egypt he carried them on eagles' wings into the desert and brought them to himself (Exod 19:4). For Israel the desert or wilderness was a place of both testing and provision. God provided her with food, water, guidance and victory in battle. But Israel was constantly tested. She had to trust God's provision, and she wasn't very good at doing this. Constantly she took her eyes off the Lord's promises of his presence, protection and provision. Looking at the world around her, she kept losing faith and wanting to go back to Egypt. Israel's pilgrimage in the wilderness lasted forty years.

The Church's pilgrimage through the desert lasts a symbolic "time, times and half a time" or 3½ years. For the Church, just as for Israel, this pilgrimage in the desert is a time of testing and provision as she makes her pilgrimage to the Promised Land of rest. Will the Church keep her eyes on Jesus, trusting God for provision? Or will she look around, respond in fear to the scary world she sees, and want to turn back?

Though Satan's pursuit of the woman is thwarted by her escape to the desert, still he persists in his efforts. He tries to overwhelm the woman with a torrent of water, the destructive waters of chaos. Yet again God frustrates Satan's efforts. There is nothing he can do to overwhelm the woman.

The message of these verses is that there is nothing that Satan can do to destroy the Church. The Church is inviolate for she is the bride of Christ. This is not at all the same as saying that individual churches are secure. While God ensures that the Church of Christ continues, he makes no guarantees to individual congregations. One has only to travel through Europe and the Middle East to realize this truth.

Throughout Europe vast cathedrals are now devoid of worshippers and serve only as tourist attractions. Throughout North Africa and the Middle East ruins testify to once-thriving Christian communities. In the past four years I have led two PBCC tours to Turkey. It is sobering to see so many abandoned churches in that Moslem land. All seven ecumenical church councils were held in what is today Turkey. Many of the Church Fathers lived here. Last year we visited Cappadocia where there are hundreds of churches carved into the solid rock. All are now long-abandoned. North America is not immune to church decay. Mainline denominations are in steep decline. Many churches are largely empty on Sunday mornings.

Nevertheless, while the Church diminishes in one part of the world, God is raising up new life in another. The Church is growing by leaps and bounds throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. There is a deep irony here. For years the mainline Church in the West, in pursuing its liberal cause, has said we need to listen to the developing world. Now the Church in the developing world is speaking, accusing the Western Church of liberal theology, of loss of faith, of materialism. Witness the recent debate over homosexual ordination within the Anglican Church. The tables have been turned: the developing world is sending missionaries to the West. Faithful evangelical Anglicans, unable to find ordination under liberal bishops in the US and Canada, are seeking ordination from African bishops.

Let this be both a warning and an encouragement. The Church can never be destroyed, but individual congregations can and will fizzle out when they take their eyes off their Lord. Jesus had no qualms at all about warning some of the seven churches of impending judgment. He threatened even to remove the lampstand from Ephesus. It is sobering that of the seven cities, only Smyrna still has a Christian presence today. It is more sobering that the Smyrnan church, which was spiritually the healthiest church to which John wrote, was also the most persecuted.

### C. War against the Saints (12:17)

With his attack on the woman thwarted, the dragon is now 0-3. Still he does not give up:

**Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring—those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (12:17)**

The dragon's final target is the rest of the woman's offspring, who are further defined as "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus." These are the saints, the Christians. Again we read that God thwarts the purposes of Satan. No! We don't read that.

Satan went after the child, the Messiah, but God snatched Christ up to his throne. Next Satan tried to retain his place in heaven so he could continue to bring accusation against God's people, but he was thrown out for God had installed an advocate on his throne. Next Satan tried to devour the Church, but God is protecting the Church of his dear Son. Lastly Satan goes after the individual believers. Does God prevent this attack? No! God allows Satan to proceed. In fact, God allows Satan to call up reinforcements. In the next verse John sees the dragon standing by the sea (13:1), which in the imagery of Revelation is the same as the Abyss, the home of all which is chaotic and destructive, of all which opposes God. The dragon summons up two assistants, the beast from the sea thereafter known simply as the beast, and the beast from the land, thereafter known as the false prophet. God allows Satan to go after the believers and he allows

him to use these two assistants. In the next two weeks we'll look at how these assistants operate: the beast with brute force and terror, the false prophet with deception. And we'll look at how believers are to respond.

Our question for today is the same as last week: Why? Why does God allow his saints to be fair game for Satan? Why have the rules changed? In the Old Testament, faithfulness brought blessing and unfaithfulness brought suffering. For the churches at the end of the first century, faithfulness brought suffering, even death, while unfaithfulness allowed one to save one's skin. Why?

None of this makes any sense without the double vision of God's throne room in chapters 4-5. Last week I said that Revelation reveals to us the deep structures of the cosmos. These are not the physical structures that explain the physical fabric of the cosmos. They are the structures which explain the spiritual and moral fabric of the universe. In chapter 4 John is caught up into heaven to be shown "what must take place" (4:1). There in heaven he sees a throne and one seated upon it. Also on the throne is a Lamb "standing as though slain" who is announced as the conquering Lion. The first truth is that God is sovereign over all the affairs of the universe, bar none. He is sovereign even over Satan. The second truth is that the key to history lies in this mixed metaphor of the conquering Lion who is the slain Lamb. The path to victory lies through apparent defeat. Sadly, many readers don't pay enough attention to chapters 4-5, so eager are they to get on to the "good stuff" of the seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls. They don't pay enough attention to chapter 12, so eager are they to get on to the identity of the beast and the number 666 in chapter 13. Without the two visions of chapters 4-5, the two deep truths of the sovereign Lord and the conquering Lamb, none of the rest of the book makes sense, and none of the world makes sense. Without chapter 12, chapter 13 doesn't make sense.

Satan has been thrown out of heaven, but God allows him a free hand to go after the saints, even to the point of death. Why? There are two answers, the same two truths given to us in chapters 4-5. God allows Satan to go after the saints because he is sovereign and because the path to victory is through apparent defeat.

Firstly, God is sovereign. God works this way because it pleases him. I must be content in that. As we sang earlier in the words of William Cowper, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform."<sup>5</sup> In a few minutes we'll sing, "Whate'er my God ordains is right."<sup>6</sup> It's right because it's ordained by the one who sits upon the throne. As another of my favorite hymns puts it, "This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought."<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the slain Lamb has shown us the way. At the beginning of the book John describes Jesus Christ as "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). These are the key roles of Jesus. The path to the throne lay through faithful witness, death, and resurrection to new life. The saints are called to follow him; "they follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (14:4). The saints are called to bear faithful witness to God, regardless of the cost. For many in the early church this meant death. In the visible world, the seen world, it seemed that the dragon had conquered the saints. But in the unseen world, the saints were celebrated in heaven for conquering the dragon:

**They overcame him  
by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
they did not love their lives so much  
as to shrink from death. (12:11)**

Tens of thousands of Christians were killed in the first three centuries. The Church had no physical power in the face of Rome. Its only weapon was the gospel. Yet the more Christians Rome killed the more the Church grew.

Around A.D. 200, little over 100 years after Revelation was written, Tertullian wrote a defense of the faith addressed to the "Rulers of the Roman Empire." He said of the Church,

"We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods... The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."<sup>8</sup>

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church. This is a hard message for the Western Church, especially for the American Church. This nation is constitutionally committed to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Yet God does not seem as committed to these values for his own people.

Why does God allow his people to suffer even to death? Because he is sovereign and chooses to work this way, and because the Lord Jesus Christ has set the pattern. He bore faithful witness to God, he died for that faithful witness, and he was raised to new life.

Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.

1. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 15.
2. Pliny, *Letters* 10.96. Internet Medieval Sourcebook: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/pliny1.html>.
3. Pliny, *Letters* 10.97.
4. Charitie L. S. Bancroft, *Before the Throne of God Above* (1863).
5. William Cowper, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* (1774).
6. Samuel Rodigast, *Whate'er My God Ordains is Right* (1675; trans. from German by Catherine Winkworth, 1863).
7. Maltbie D. Babcock, *This Is My Father's World* (1901).
8. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.

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Revelation 13:1-10

21st Message

Bernard Bell

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# T.REX

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Next Saturday marks the 60th anniversary of dropping the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Within just ten days, World War II was over. The war is long behind us but the debate over the bomb is not. Was America justified in dropping the bomb? For nearly six years the Allies had fought an axis of three nations, each headed by a totalitarian ruler in whose person was concentrated power and authority: Hitler over Germany, Mussolini over Italy, and Hirohito over Japan. The Führer, Il Duce and the Divine Emperor received the adulation and loyalty of their people. Not content to have total rule only at home, they sought to expand their empires in offensive war. What response is permissible in the face of such evil? How far can the state go? In mid-1945 Japan showed no sign of surrender, and plans were being made for the invasion of Japan. Was America justified in responding with such power? Beyond that question, and regardless of how you answer it, is it permissible for Christians to respond to evil with power? How should Christians respond to evil? How far can they go?

Two weeks ago we looked at the problem of evil and God; evil is present in the world because Satan is present. We are not told where evil or Satan originated. What we are shown, over and over again, is that God is sovereign over both. Last week we looked at the problem of why Christians suffer evil even though Christ has already conquered Satan, sin and death. The saints suffer because Satan is hopping mad that he no longer has access to God's throne room and that he can't destroy the Church. God allows Satan to pursue the saints, allowing him even to call up reinforcements. How are Christians to respond to these Satanic attacks as the dragon pursues the saints? The nature of these attacks and the Christian's response to them will be our topic for the next two weeks as we look at Revelation 13.

## A. The Dragon's Assistants (13:1a)

**And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. (Rev 13:1a NIV)**

This statement serves as a transition between chapters 12 and 13. The versions are divided on whether it is the last sentence of chapter 12 (Greek, NRSV, HCSB) or the first sentence of chapter 13 (NASB, NIV, ESV). Either way, it is important to recognize that chapters 12 and 13 are tied together. In chapter 12 the dragon Satan made a four-fold assault on God's kingdom. Three of those assaults were thwarted by God: Satan could not prevent the enthronement of the Messiah, he could not retain his place in heaven there to accuse the saints, and he could not destroy the Church. But God allows him to proceed in his fourth assault, his pursuit of the saints. Satan does not overtly attack the saints. Instead he works through two intermediaries.

John sees the dragon standing beside the sea. Throughout the Bible the sea represents chaos that threatens to overwhelm the order of God's world. In Revelation the sea is the same as the Abyss, the antithesis of Heaven. In the War of the Worlds, earth is in the middle between Heaven and the Abyss. Both Heaven and the Abyss have colonies on earth, and both seek to expand those colonies. Which side will prevail? The dragon stands beside the sea, the Abyss, to

summon up two henchmen to assist him in his pursuit of the saints: the beast from the sea, hereafter known simply as the beast (13:1-10), and the beast from the land, henceforth known as the false prophet (13:11-18).

## B. The Beast (13:1b-8)

First John is shown the nature of the beast:

**And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" (13:1b-4)**

Even people otherwise unacquainted with Revelation know that the book contains a beast whose number is 666. Everyone wants to know the identity of this beast and the nature of his mark. The tendency is to look around the world today for someone we can label as the beast, someone whose name means 666. But why does John use the imagery of a beast? For the answer we need to return to John's sourcebook, the Old Testament, and specifically to the book of Daniel.

In Daniel 7, the prophet saw a series of four beasts emerge from the sea: a winged lion, a bear, a leopard with four wings and four heads, and a ten-horned beast which was unlike the other three, indeed unlike any known beast, so terrifying and frightening and very powerful was it (7:3-7). Daniel is told that "The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth" (7:17). There is widespread agreement on the identity of the first three kingdoms. The lion represents Babylon, one of whose motifs was the winged lion. The bear represents Persia which conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. The leopard represents the empire of Alexander the Great who swept swiftly through the Persian Empire in 334-331 B.C. Alexander died as a still young man in Babylon and his empire was carved up between four successors. There is disagreement on whether the fourth beast represents the Seleucid Empire or Rome; I personally favor its identification with the Seleucid Empire. What are these beasts doing in Daniel 7?

The Book of Daniel is all about the conflict between God's Kingdom and the kingdoms of the earth. Daniel was one of the Jewish exiles in Babylon. What had happened to God's kingdom on earth? The temple was destroyed, the king dethroned, the people taken captive. God's kingdom had been defeated by an idolatrous, pagan kingdom. God's people had no power; the pagan kingdom had all the power. But there was worse to come. Daniel was shown a succession

of kingdoms. Each kingdom seems invincible, but each kingdom will fall, only to be replaced by another one. The fourth kingdom is terrifying beyond description. But still it gets worse. From amongst the ten horns of the fourth kingdom arises a little horn who wages war against the saints (7:21). The saints are handed over to him for a time, times and half a time (7:25).

Meanwhile, Daniel is shown the heavenly court of the Ancient of Days, into whose presence comes one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. “He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting kingdom that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (7:14).

Daniel 7 was written to give God’s people hope in their suffering and captivity. Their eyes are opened to see realities that are not evident to the naked eye. They are shown the true nature of these kingdoms in whose midst they must spend the next few centuries. These kingdoms are counterfeit kingdoms because they are beastly kingdoms. God’s kingdom is to be headed by a human, by one in God’s image and likeness. The first such ruler was Adam, commissioned to rule over all creation, but to do so as a steward responsible to God, tending and guarding his garden. The second such ruler was David, the man after God’s own heart, the shepherd whom God appointed to shepherd his people. That’s God’s model for rule over his kingdom. The rulers of these kingdoms are beastly not human. They are counterfeit kingdoms which cannot stand; though they seem invincible they must fall. In their place is coming one like a son of man, a true human being. God will give him an eternal kingdom, and at his feet every knee shall bow. This is the vision which God gave his people through Daniel to enable them to persevere.

You should recognize how similar the message of Daniel 7 is to that of Revelation. The beast which John sees is a composite of the four beasts seen by Daniel. He is the lion, bear, leopard, and ten-horned beast all rolled into one. He is even more powerful and seemingly invincible than the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Seleucid Empires. This is confirmed by his ten horns, seven heads and ten crowns. The horns represent power, the heads authority, and the crowns honor. He has seven and ten of these, for his power and authority seem absolute. In this he is like his master the dragon who has seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns (12:3). This power and authority is given him by the dragon. The beast is the totalitarian ruler *par excellence*. He is *T.rex*, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the tyrant king, ruler of the world. John’s readers at the end of the first century would have recognized this world empire as Rome, the superpower of the day. This is confirmed in chapter 17 where John is told that the beast’s seven heads are seven hills. Everyone knows that Rome was built on seven hills. All authority and power was concentrated in the Emperor, who arrogated to himself blasphemous divine titles.

The beast seems to have recovered from a seemingly fatal wound. If we accept the beast as Rome, there are several possible interpretations of this fatal wound. It could be a reference to Nero. After the Senate bravely condemned him as a public enemy, Nero committed suicide. But there was a widespread rumor that he had not really done so; instead he had gone into hiding in the East in Parthia, whence he would return at the head of a great army. In the next few decades several individuals claimed to be the returned Nero. The emperor Domitian, under whose reign I think Revelation was written, was widely regarded as a second Nero.

A second possible explanation of the fatal wound is that it refers to the chaos into which Rome was plunged by Nero’s death, which brought an end to the dynasty established by Julius Caesar. In the next year, Rome had four different emperors as army generals competed for the crown. The fourth, Vespasian, held on to power and restored the empire to an even keel. The Roman Empire recovered. Vespasian was succeeded by his elder son Titus, and then by his younger son Domitian, the new Nero.

There is a third possibility. This recovery is typical of Satanic beastly rule. Each beastly empire seems invincible, yet each falls suddenly, only to be replaced by another empire. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Seleucids, Rome, and so the story continues. The beast is Rome, Rome has fallen, but the beast is alive and well. He has continued to raise his tyrannical head. It was naively thought that the First World War was the war to end all wars. But within less than twenty years not just one beast but three beasts had raised their head. These beasts fell, but then from among the Allies, Stalin emerged as a beastly ruler, even more tyrannical than Hitler. And so it continues. The beast seems invincible. After the demise of each manifestation he reappears elsewhere. Because the beast seems to possess all power and authority and because he seems invincible, he and the dragon are worshiped.

More important to John’s purpose, the beast is presented as a parody of the Lamb, part of a counterfeit Trinity. The dragon, the beast and the false prophet are counterfeits of the one seated on the throne, the Lamb, and the seven-fold Spirit. The dragon seats the beast on his throne, and gives him power and authority; the dragon and the beast together receive the worship of the inhabitants of the earth. The beast has arrogated to himself blasphemous titles, titles which the Roman emperors bore. The beast’s fatal wound, literally “slain to death,” is a parody of the Lamb’s wound.

“Who is like the beast?” his worshipers ask, and “Who can make war against him?” This parodies the question Israel asked of God after he delivered her from Egypt, “Who among the gods is like you, O Lord?” (Exod 15:11). The expected answer to both questions is “No one.” No one is like the beast. He is incomparable in his power and authority.

But the alert reader will recognize that John is exposing the beast as the counterfeit Lamb, as the anti-Christ. The beast’s throne, authority, power are all counterfeit. The worship he receives belongs to God and the Lamb alone. It is they alone who are worthy to receive all praise. The beast is exposed for who he is to enable the saints to resist him, to enable them to realize that following the beast will necessarily mean forsaking the Lamb.

Next John is shown how the beast rules, or misrules:

**The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. (13:5-8)**

The beast is allowed to exercise his authority for 42 months, that period of time representing the tribulation of God’s people. During this period of 3½ years, or 42 months, or 1260 days, the holy

city (Zion, God's people) is trampled upon (11:2), the faithful witnesses (the saints) bear their prophetic witness (11:3) for which they are killed, the woman (God's people) is preserved in the desert (12:6, 14), and the beast wages war on the saints (13:5). I take this as representing the entire Church Age, during which God calls his saints to bear faithful witness in the face of Satanic attack. The individual saints may die, but God preserves the Church. The beast seems to be successful in his war against the saints: he conquers them by death. But the beast cannot conquer the saints by death, because death has already been conquered. The saints have nothing to fear from the first death, mere physical death. Instead it is the saints who emerge victorious, having conquered the dragon and the beast by the blood of the Lamb and by their faithful witness.

Note that the beast was given a mouth to blaspheme, and he was given power to wage war against the saints, and he was given authority over all the inhabitants of the earth. Who gives him this power and authority? On one level it is the dragon who has given power and authority to the beast. But this little word "it was given" is a frequent reminder throughout Revelation that all power and authority rest in the one seated on the heavenly throne. Nothing happens outside his authority.

### C. Responding to the Beast (13:9-10)

John does not tell the saints about the beast to pique their curiosity as to the beast's identity. He tells them about the beast in order to give them pastoral counsel, in order to tell them how to live in the midst of a beastly empire. It is vital that we remember that Revelation is a pastoral letter. It is a pastoral letter from Jesus, the Lord of the Church, to seven churches which are representative of all churches. It is a pastoral letter from John to seven specific churches whom he knows and for whom he cares deeply as a fellow sufferer during his exile on Patmos.

John closes with pastoral advice to the saints on how to respond to the beast:

**He who has an ear, let him hear.**

**If anyone is to go into captivity,  
into captivity he will go.**

**If anyone is to be killed with the sword,  
with the sword he will be killed.**

**This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. (13:9-10)**

"He who has an ear, let him hear" is a call to listen up, similar to the call at the end of each message to the seven churches, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." What word does John have for the saints?

What he says next is surprising. He uses language drawn from Jeremiah. In response to the false prophets who were assuring the people of Judah that no harm would befall them, that God would never bring judgment upon them, God warned them through Jeremiah that indeed he was planning calamity: captivity and the sword (Jer 15:2). A few years later some of the residents of Jerusalem fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them. God said he would pursue them even to Egypt with captivity and the sword (Jer 43:11). Captivity and the sword were inevitable for God's people because they had forsaken him. John uses this imagery, but with a major difference: God's people again face captivity and the sword, but now it is God's faithful people. The rules seem to have changed. In the Old

Testament, faithfulness to God brought blessing, and faithlessness brought suffering. But under the New Covenant it seems that God has delivered his people not from but into suffering. It is faithfulness to God and to Christ which brings suffering, while faithlessness allows you to save your own skin.

This is a hard word for us to hear. We are committed to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But God doesn't seem very committed to these values for his people. He is quite content to allow them to suffer at the hands of the beast.

How are the saints to respond to the beast and to death? How are the saints to respond to evil? Their response is to be patient endurance and faithfulness, two key terms in Revelation.

The saints are called to faithfulness. We are to be faithful to Jesus Christ even to death. The saints are not to give their loyalty to the beast. John unmasks the beast to enable the saints to see clearly. The Roman emperor did not seem like a beast. True, he demanded the loyalty of his people, and certain emperors demanded adulation as well. Loyalty to Rome brought great advantages. That's why it was so appealing for Christians to soften their witness. But John shows that loyalty to Rome meant disloyalty to Christ. You could not serve two masters. As Hitler rose to power he successfully co-opted much of the German Church. In 1933 he declared the Third Reich, the Third Kingdom, which would last for a thousand years. Biblically-alert Christians should have recognized it as a counterfeit kingdom which would surely fall. The Church failed to see clearly, failed to see the true nature of Hitler and his kingdom. But a few people did, men such as Bonhoeffer and the other founders of the Confessing Church who in 1934 signed the Barmen Declaration. They called for the Church to disassociate itself from Hitler and to remain loyal to Christ. It was a brave and costly stance. The Third Reich did not last for a thousand years; after just a dozen years it fell, but before it fell, many of the Christians who remained faithful to Christ had died.

Secondly the saints are to endure. Remaining faithful to Christ will inevitably intensify the hostility against them. They must endure their suffering. How do you endure? Again we come back to the double throne-room vision of chapters 4-5. God is sovereign, and his chosen path to victory is the path of the slain Lamb. The saints are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the faithful witness, first-born from the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth. His path to the throne lay through death.

What the saints are not to do is respond in kind. They are not to fight back. They are not to agitate and insist on their rights. Yet sadly throughout Church History we see that the Church has frequently chosen power. When the Church chooses the way of power, the Church becomes beastly in turn. That was not the path chosen by the Church in the first few centuries. Remember the quote from Tertullian I read last week. He wrote to the Roman rulers, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."<sup>1</sup> That's how the early church grew.

Our Scripture reading today was from Romans 12:

**"Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:**

**"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink..."**

**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:17-21)**

I recently came across a remarkable illustration of these verses. A few weeks ago I watched the movie, *To End All Wars*, about Allied prisoners forced by the Japanese during the Second World War to build the so-called Railroad of Death between Thailand and Burma. The movie is based upon a book by Ernest Gordon, a young Scottish officer who worked on the railway.<sup>2</sup> I was so struck by the movie that I immediately bought the book.

The Japanese captors were brutal beyond description. They did not abide by the Geneva Convention. They viewed their prisoners as expendable labor. Gordon reports, “four percent of prisoners held by the Germans and Italians died, as compared to twenty-seven percent of those in the hands of the Japanese” (48). Here was a regime more brutal, more beastly than even Hitler’s Germany. How would you have responded to the beast?

Ernest Gordon tells a remarkable story. Shortly after arriving in the camp he fell very ill. The Japanese provided no food ration for the sick, and made very limited provision for medical care. Gordon was taken to the “Death House” to die. But, to his astonishment, two men cared for him, nursing him back to health. Their attitude of self-sacrificial love was strikingly different from the other prisoners who had degenerated into a state of each looking out for himself. They were motivated by their deep faith in God. Through their influence a new spirit spread through the camp:

It was dawning on us all—officers and other ranks alike—that the law of the jungle is not the law for man. We had seen for ourselves how quickly it could strip most of us of our humanity and reduce us to levels lower than the beasts. Death was still with us—no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip. We were seeing for ourselves the sharp contrast between the forces that made for life and those that made for death. Selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, self-indulgence, laziness and pride were all anti-life. Love, heroism, self-sacrifice, sympathy, mercy, integrity and creative faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life, turning mere existence into living in its truest sense. (105-106)

After he recovered, Gordon was approached by some Australian prisoners who asked him to lead them in a study of Christianity. They asked him because he was one of the few men with a university education, and because he seemed “real.” Prior to entering the prison camp Gordon had had no interest in God, indeed was put off by what he saw of the church. He finally agreed to teach the men, reckoning that he would learn alongside them.

[T]he thing for me to do was to find out as much as I could about Jesus... Through our readings and discussions we gradually came to know Jesus. He was one of us. He would understand our problems, because they were the kind of problems he had faced himself. Like us, he often had no place to lay his head, no food for his belly, no friends in high places. He, too, had known bone-weariness from too much toil; the suffering, the rejection, the disappointments that make up the fabric of life... As we read and talked, he became flesh and blood. Here was a working-man, yet one who was perfectly free, who had not been enslaved by society, economics, politics or religion. Demonic forces had existed then as now. They had sought to destroy him but they had not succeeded... He had remained free and alive, as the Resurrection affirmed. What he was, what he did, what he said, all made sense to us. We understood that the love expressed so supremely in Jesus was God’s love—the same love that we were experiencing for ourselves—the love that is passionate kindness, other-centred rather

than self-centred, greater than all the laws of men. It was the love that inspired St Paul, once he had felt its power, to write, ‘Love suffereth long and is kind.’ (116-118)

Gordon had come to faith in God and in Christ, but still he struggled over the gospel’s call to forgive our enemies. That would mean forgiving the Japanese captors. Near the end of the war, as a group of Allied prisoners were being moved from one camp to another, their train ended up on a siding alongside a train full of wounded Japanese troops who were suffering terribly.

These were the enemy, more cowed and defeated than we had ever been. Without a word, most of the officers in my section unbuckled their packs, took out part of their ration and a rag or two, and, with water canteens in their hands went over to the Japanese train to help them. Our guards tried to prevent us...But we ignored them and knelt by the side of the enemy to give them food and water, to clean and bind up their wounds, to smile and say a kind word. An Allied officer from another section of the train had been taking it all in. ‘What...fools you all are!’ he said to me. ‘Don’t you realize that those are the enemy?’ ‘Have you never heard the story of the man who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho?’ I asked him. ‘But that’s different!’ the officer protested. ‘That’s in the Bible. These are the swine who’ve starved us and beaten us. They’ve murdered our comrades. These are our enemies.’ ...I regarded my comrades with wonder. Eighteen months ago they would have joined readily in the destruction of our captors had they fallen into our hands. Now these same men were dressing the enemy’s wounds. We had experienced a moment of grace. (197-198)

After liberation Gordon was eager for news of the two men who had nursed him from death’s door. He learned that Dusty Miller had been crucified by a Japanese guard who was driven to an intense hatred of him because he couldn’t break him.

Dusty—the man of deep faith and warm heart—the man who was incapable of a mean act, even against a brutal tormentor. His goodness, it is true, had been recognized, not in sympathy, however, but in hate. Condemned by such radiant goodness, the warrant officer must have gone berserk. There on that tree, like his Master, he died, so far from his homeland, so far from everyone, yet so near to God. (211)

It is this responding to evil with good that saves the Christian from mere fatalism. The Moslem says “Imshallah,” God wills it, and shows indifference. The Buddhist blames suffering on previous sins and will not lift a finger. But the Christian, while saying, “God wills it,” knows that the pattern that God has set is the pattern of the Lamb. He has given his own Son in responding to evil with good. It is chapter 5 which keeps us from viewing the enthroned God of chapter 4 as a remote deity. God is not unconcerned about our suffering. The presence of the slain Lamb on his throne testifies to that.

How are we to respond to evil? With endurance and faithfulness, following in the footsteps of Jesus who walked this path before us. He has shown us how to overcome evil with good. Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.

1. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.

2. Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). Previously published as *Through the Valley of the Kwai* (London: Collins, 1963) and *Miracle on the River Kwai* (London: Fontana, 1965).



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 Revelation 13:11-18  
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 Bernard Bell  
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# THE GREAT DECEPTION

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

We live in a world of numbers. We start collecting them as soon as we are born: date of birth, hospital chart number, Social Security Number. We continue to collect them as we go through life: drivers' license number, numbers for bank accounts and credit card accounts, telephone numbers aplenty, customer numbers for all sorts of businesses, PINs and passwords galore, even IP addresses. In one way or another these numbers define and identify us. Of all the numbers ever issued, one is famous above all others: that issued by John to the beast. His number is 666. No number has ever attracted as much attention as this one. No verse in Revelation has received as much attention as 13:18 in which this number is given. People who know nothing else about Revelation know that it contains the number 666. Today we will try to make sense of this number, how it identifies and characterizes the beast, and what it means for us today.

It is vital that we pay attention to the context of the number. Chapters 12 and 13 belong together. In these chapters John is shown a series of visions which unveil deep realities about the present state of the world. Every generation has sought to make sense of the world. Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why is the world the way it is? How will it all end? Peoples of the ancient world developed myths to explain the world. Their myths were expressions of their understanding of the cosmos. Among the creatures populating the myths of the Ancient Near East were two fearsome monsters which threatened to plunge the ordered world into chaos: a sea-monster and a land-monster. These monsters reflected a profound unease over the cosmos: would order prevail or would the world sink into chaos? These two monsters make an occasional appearance in the Bible as the sea-monster Leviathan and the land-monster Behemoth. God draws them to Job's attention:

**"Look at behemoth...**

**Can anyone capture him by the eyes,  
 or trap him and pierce his nose?**

**Can you pull in leviathan with a fishhook...**

**Can you make a pet of him like a bird  
 or put him on a leash for your girls?" (Job 40:15b, 24; 41:1, 5)**

Some interpret leviathan and behemoth as the crocodile and the hippopotamus. But it is clear that the two beasts are much more terrifying than those animals. The whole point of God's argument is that these are monsters who appear totally beyond Job's control. But God shows that they are under his control.

All is not right in the world. There is evil, and there is an evil one, Satan, who lies behind the evil. We are never told the origins of Satan or of evil. What we are told is that God is sovereign over Satan and evil, and that he will eventually banish both from his world. Knowing what God is doing about evil is far more important than knowing where evil comes from.

In chapter 12 we learned that Satan has been repeatedly thwarted in his attacks upon God's kingdom. He has failed to prevent the installation of the Messiah as King; he has failed to retain his place as

Accuser in God's court; he has failed to devour the Church. But God allows him to go after the individual saints, and he allows him to call up two assistants. John casts these assistants as the two monsters: the sea-monster Leviathan and the land-monster Behemoth. He shows two ways in which the dragon Satan seeks to destroy the saints: the way of the sea-beast, and the way of the land-beast. The way of the sea-beast is the way of raw power, of tyrannical rule. John calls the saints to respond with faithful endurance. They are not to return evil with evil, but to overcome evil with good.

Today we'll look at the second way that Satan seeks to destroy the saints: the way of the land-beast, the false prophet. We'll find that it's much more dangerous because it's the way of deception.

## A. The Second Beast (13:11-15)

**Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. (13:11-15 NIV)**

The second beast arises from the earth, dressed as the mythical land-monster Behemoth, threatening to overwhelm the order of God's kingdom with chaos.

The first beast has seemingly unlimited power and authority, as indicated by his ten horns, seven heads and ten crowns. This great power and authority is granted also to the second beast to use on behalf of the first beast. His function with respect to the first beast is that of a prophet. This is made explicit later in the book when he is called a prophet. He exercises similar power and authority to that exercised by the great prophets of the Old Testament. Like Moses, he can perform great and miraculous signs. Like Elijah and Elisha, he can call down fire from heaven. These authenticate his ministry, so that the world responds to his message.

His prophetic ministry has a single purpose: to lead the whole world into worshipping the first beast. To that end he orchestrates the erection of an image in honor of the beast. He is even able to breathe life into this image so that it can speak. Failure to worship before this image is a capital offense.

The second beast is very successful in his ministry, but it is all a deceptive charade. Everything he is and does is deceptive. His very ap-

pearance is deceptive. He looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. He looks innocent, but his every word is Satanic.

The prophet is deceitful because that's the *modus operandi* of Satan and therefore of all his agents. Paul saw through all the subterfuge of his opponents in Corinth, whom he labeled as deceitful false prophets. He was not surprised at such deception: "no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade" (2 Cor 11:14-15). Jesus said of Satan, "there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

Because the second beast is deceptive, he is later called not simply the prophet, but the false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). He is a counterfeit of the true prophets. In Revelation the prophets are not a select few of God's people. John considers all the saints to be prophets. He calls them to hold fast to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. This is their prophetic witness to the world. That it is the one enthroned in heaven and the Lamb enthroned beside him who are worthy of worship. The testimony of the false prophet is that it is the beast who is worthy of worship. The true prophet par excellence is Jesus Christ himself. His very names include Faithful and True (19:11). He is the forerunner of the saints, blazing the trail for them to follow. He bore faithful witness to God, for which he was killed, but he was raised to new life. The whole book is a prophecy. This doesn't mean that it gives us detailed timetables for the future. It is a proclamation from God to his people, a revelation of Jesus Christ.

It is not only the second beast who is deceptive; the first beast is also deceptive. Three times in chapter 13 we are told that the beast has a fatal wound from which he has recovered (13:3, 12, 14). Whether we take this miraculous recovery as Nero's return, or the recovery of the Roman Empire after the chaotic year following Nero's death, or the phoenix-like ability of a new beastly empire to arise on the ashes of the previous fallen one, one thing is clear: the first beast is a counterfeit of the Lamb. John saw one of the beast's heads "as slain" to death (13:3), yet the beast "lived" (13:14). Previously John had seen the Lamb standing in heaven "as slain" (5:6), the Lamb who died and yet "lived" (2:8). As the counterfeit of the Lamb, the beast is the antichrist.

The true prophets proclaim that it is Christ who is Lord, who is worthy of worship. The false prophet proclaims that it is the beast who is Lord, who is worthy of worship. The false prophet's tool is deception. He deceives the inhabitants of the world by getting them to look only at the visible realities in the world.

Revelation is a revelation because it opens our eyes to the unseen realities. It is supremely the revelation of Jesus Christ, the revelation of who he is and also the revelation which he gives to his servants, the saints. Our eyes are lifted above the earthly plane, above all earthly powers to see God enthroned in heaven above, before whom all cry, "Thou art worthy." Our eyes are lifted above all earthly tyrannical rule and beastly behavior to see the slain Lamb, also enthroned in heaven, before whom all cry, "Thou art worthy."

Everyone in Revelation worships, everyone that is except for the two trinities: the true heavenly Trinity of God, Lamb and seven-fold Spirit, and the counterfeit infernal trinity of dragon, beast and false prophet. Apart from these six there is no one in the book who does not worship. The inhabitants of the earth worship the dragon and the beast. The dwellers in heaven, and those who are on pilgrimage to that dwelling-place, worship God and the Lamb.

I think the first readers of Revelation, living in Asia at the end of the first century, would have had no difficulty identifying the two beasts in their world. The first beast was the Roman Empire or the Roman Emperor; they would not have distinguished the two: the Emperor was the Empire. The emperor was the world ruler, acclaimed and worshiped as divine. The second beast was the imperial cult, dedicated to the worship of the emperor. Some try to be more specific, suggesting the second beast represented the officialdom of the Asian cities who competed with one another for the honor of building temples to the emperor, or the empire-wide priesthood of the imperial cult. I don't see the need to be that specific. The second beast is the system which promoted and enforced the cult of the emperor. It might be helpful to think of it as a vast propaganda machine. Failure to comply was costly. Two weeks ago we saw that Pliny, governor of Bithynia just fifteen years after Revelation was written, was killing Christians for their refusal to worship the Emperor. Forty years after that, Polycarp, the aged bishop of Smyrna and a disciple of John of Ephesus, was martyred for the same reason.

This was not new. This had happened before in the Old Testament. In the time of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar had set up a huge image of himself, and issued a proclamation that all should worship the image. Daniel's three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace for their refusal to do so (Dan 3).

Sadly, deception had infiltrated the church at the end of the first century. False prophets were at work in the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira under the guise of the prophetess Jezebel and the teaching of Balaam, the prophet who sought to lead Israel astray (Num 22-24). In both churches it was the same two issues: the eating of food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. The former involved participation in idolatrous practices in the temples; the latter is a metaphor for idolatry. In both cases, false prophets were teaching the churches that it was OK to compromise. The churches could thus enjoy an easier life.

None of this should have been a surprise to the early Church. Jesus warned his disciples to beware of false prophets who would come in sheep's clothing, but inwardly be ferocious wolves (Matt 7:15); they would even be able to perform great signs and miracles (Matt 24:24).

That's all well and good, but what does this mean for us today? The Roman Empire is long since gone. Just as there is more to the first beast than Rome, so there is more to the second beast than the Roman imperial cult. The beast was Rome, Rome is dead, but the beast is alive and well. The false prophet was the Roman imperial cult, that cult is dead, but the false prophet is alive and well. To understand the deeper significance of the two beasts we need to understand the mark, name and number of the beast.

## B. The Mark of the Beast and 666 (13:16-18)

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

**This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666. (13:16-18)**

The second beast forces all the inhabitants of the earth, regardless of social standing, to receive on their forehead or right hand the

mark of the beast, which is the same as his name or the number of his name.

Three things are here equated: the mark, the name, and the number of the name. Suggestions abound for all three.

### 1. The Mark of the Beast

The mark of the beast is placed upon the forehead or right hand of every person. What is this mark? Is it Gorbachev's birthmark? Is it a tattoo or brand on the forehead? The most popular current suggestion is that it is a RFID microchip implanted under the skin.

I don't think it's very difficult to figure out the mark if we just pay attention to the whole book. Just as everyone in Revelation worships, so everyone has something on their forehead. In the very next verse (14:1) John sees the heavenly saints with the name of the Lamb and the name of his Father written on their foreheads. Elsewhere this is called the seal of God. Yet no one speculates as to what this seal looks like!

Just as John is careful to use two different verbs for those who inhabit the earth and those who dwell in heaven, so he is careful to use two different words for what is on the forehead. On their foreheads the saints carry the seal of God, while the inhabitants of the earth carry the mark of the beast. There is no one who is not covered. The seal represents protection from judgment (7:3). The mark implies the opposite: destined for judgment. Above all, the mark and seal indicate ownership and belonging. In the binary, black and white world of Revelation, everyone belongs to one of two kingdoms: you belong to God or to the dragon, to the Lamb or to the beast. There's no middle ground.

### 2. The Name and Number of the Beast

John suggests a tight connection between the name and number of the beast. The number of the beast is the number of his name. It is also the number of man or the number of a man. The number is 666. I'm sure that there are more than 666 suggestions of the meaning of the number. There are two approaches to figuring out this number.

The first approach is to view the number 666 as somehow encoded within the mark of the beast. Perhaps 666 is integrated into one's Social Security Number which is then tattooed onto one's forehead. Perhaps it's part of a UPC code branded onto the forehead. A few years ago there was a widespread scare that 666 was encoded into every UPC label; this turned out to be completely unfounded.

The other approach to the number 666 is to find a single individual on whom to hang the label. Is it Ronald Wilson Reagan, each of whose three names contains six letters? Probably the most popular target of the last 500 years has been the pope. If you take one of the pope's supposed titles, *vicarius filii dei* (vicar of the son of God), and count only those letters that the Romans used for numbers (since the title is in Latin), remembering that first-century Latin used V where ecclesiastical Latin uses U, you do indeed obtain 666 (VICarIVs fLII Del). But there are multiple problems with this, not least of which is that *vicarius filii dei* is not a papal title; he is *Vicarius Christi* (vicar of Christ), which does not add up to 666. Furthermore, applying the same rules to CVte pVrpLe DIInosaVr, you can prove that Barney is the beast.<sup>1</sup>

The problem with so many suggestions is that people already know who they want the beast to be, then try to prove it. Consider this means of identifying Hitler as the beast, from the website revelation13.net: "if you take the cosine of Hitler's birthplace coordinate of 48.25 N you have .666."<sup>2</sup>

John didn't give the number 666 in order to fuel 2000 years of wild speculation. He gave the number in the context of pastoral counsel. Note the similarity between verses 10 and 18. After writing about the first beast, John concludes, "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints" (13:10). How are the saints to respond to the brutal tyranny of the beast, the world ruler? With patient endurance and faithfulness, neither following the beast nor responding in a beastly manner. After writing about the second beast, John concludes, "This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast" (13:18). How are the saints to respond to the deception of the false prophet? With wisdom, using insight to calculate the beast's number. So the number of the beast has to make pastoral sense to Christians living at the end of the first century. Beyond that, it has to make pastoral sense to us today.

John says that the one with insight is to calculate the number of the beast. In the ancient world numbers had both symbolic and gematric value.

Most of us are familiar with the symbolic value of certain Biblical numbers: 7 represents perfection, 10 completion, 12 the people of God, 40 a period of testing, and so on.

Numbers also had meaning in gematria. Though the characters of the Western alphabet are the Roman alphabetic characters, our numerals come from the Arabic world. The Romans, like the Greeks and Hebrews, had no separate symbols for numbers; instead, they used alphabetic characters. Both the Hebrews and the Greeks used the same method, using successive letters of the alphabet for the first ten numbers, then increasing by tens up to 100, then increasing by hundreds. Gematria is the practice of counting the numeric value of a word.

There is near-universal agreement that John expects the saints to use gematria to calculate the number of the beast's name. Furthermore, the puzzle should be understandable. Who are the ones with wisdom and insight? Context requires that they be all the faithful saints. If you're a faithful saint, you should be able to calculate the number. The problem is that we're given the number, not the name. It's easy to calculate the number from the name for there is a single solution, but very difficult to calculate the name from the number from there are multiple solutions.

I think the most convincing solution, which has widespread support, is Nero Caesar transliterated into Hebrew. Furthermore, the Greek word for beast, when transliterated into Hebrew, also yields 666.

The name Nero Caesar fits well for an audience at the end of the first century. Though Nero had been dead for nearly thirty years, his spirit was alive and well in Domitian. Nero was an antichrist. He was the first Roman emperor to engage in a systematic persecution of Christians, though one that was restricted to Rome. Both Peter and Paul were killed under Nero's assaults. Though previous emperors had been declared divine on their death, Nero claimed divinity while he yet lived. He styled himself as the Greek god Apollo, slayer of Python, the dragon figure of Greek mythology. Two decades later, Domitian ruled in the model of Nero. He claimed divinity, calling on people to worship him as "Our Lord and God." In Ephesus a large temple was built to him, where he was worshiped. In the first instance, then, I think the number 666 refers to Nero Caesar. John encourages the saints to remain steadfast in their affirmation that it is Christ, not Caesar, who is Lord.

This is all well and good for an audience at the end of the first century. But Nero and Domitian are long dead. The Roman Empire is long dead. Does the number of the beast have any pastoral significance for us today? Indeed it does. Not only does the number 666 have gematric meaning, it also has symbolic meaning. Six is one less than the perfect number 7. It is the number of incompleteness and chaos; it is the number of man, who falls short of perfection.

The three-fold 666 therefore means a three-fold falling short of perfection. This interpretation fits well with a major thrust of this chapter, that the two beasts are counterfeit. The first beast has set himself up as the universal ruler, before whom every knee should bow. The second beast ensures that this is what happens, using powerful propaganda to orchestrate this worship of the beast. But it's all counterfeit. The beast is not worthy to be worshiped, for he is less than perfect. The false prophet's propaganda is all deception. The beast awes the world into worship through fear. The false prophet achieves the same end through deception. Brute fear-inducing force and subtle deception: these are Satan's two tools in his pursuit of the saints, his attempt to get them to forsake Christ and return to his infernal kingdom.

The number 666 shows us that this is all a smoke and mirrors act. The dragon and the two beasts might seem to have all the power, but it's all a sham. Like Toto pulling back the curtain to reveal the little man behind the powerful voice of the wizard of Oz, so John pulls back the veil to show us the unseen realities behind the visible appearances. He does so to encourage us to remain true to Christ.

The beast is antichrist, the one who sets himself up as Christ. His number is 666. In the late first century the expression of antichrist was Nero followed by Domitian. Nero and Domitian are both dead, but antichrist keeps rearing his head. He is a counterfeit of the true Christ. The name of Jesus adds up to 888, one better than perfection. The two are opposed: antichrist, 666, one less than 7, and Jesus, 888, one more than 7.

The world is deceived into worshiping the wrong person. We were once all enmeshed in this deceptive tangle. As Paul wrote in our Scripture reading, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." But, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Therefore, said Paul, we proclaim "Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:4-6).

Revelation is a book about worship. Everyone worships. It's not a matter of whether or not you worship, but whom you worship. Revelation portrays a black and white world, dividing humanity into two sets of people. One people inhabits the earth where its city is Babylon, it worships the dragon and the beast, and it bears the mark of the beast. The other people dwells in heaven where its city is the New Jerusalem, it worships God and the Lamb, and it bears God's seal. There are only these two sets of people.

Revelation is sent to the churches at the end of the first century to remind them of this, to clarify their vision, to encourage the saints to remain true to the kingdom to which they belong, and to chastise the saints who have been deceived into lessening their witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a book of both comfort and rebuke. Comfort for those who are suffering at the hands of the beast for their refusal to worship the beast. Rebuke for those who are not suffering because they have compromised their witness.

## C. Resisting deception

We don't face tyrannical rule by Caesar or antichrist today. But we are all open to this Satanic deception to worship the wrong person or the wrong things. How do we resist Satan's deception today? Two things that we are doing this morning enable us to resist his deception.

### 1. Worship

We are gathered for worship. Throughout this past week our minds have been preoccupied with many things. One way or another, subtly or not so subtly, we have taken our eyes off the Lord. We gather to remind ourselves of who we are and who we follow. We reorient ourselves onto the heavenly throne, where we see God sovereign over all, and we see the Lord Jesus Christ, the slain Lamb. Because our vision gets cloudy, it is vital that we gather for worship and remind ourselves of these otherwise unseen realities.

### 2. Communion

In a few minutes we will come to the Lord's Table to engage in a deeply symbolic act. The early church, from the very beginning, celebrated the eucharist whenever it met. This was a profoundly subversive act in the first century. The believers were saying that their source of life and salvation was not Rome nor the Emperor, but the Lord Jesus Christ. As we come to the communion table we remind ourselves that our source of life and salvation is not Silicon Valley, our stock options, our job, our family, our dreams, but the Lord Jesus Christ, slain for us. We nourish ourselves afresh on him and reorient ourselves. Having reoriented and nourished ourselves, we go out into the world with a different outlook on how this world works.

Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.

1. Craig Keener, *Revelation* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 359.

2. T. Chase, "Revelation 13: Adolph Hitler, Predecessor to the Antichrist—a Bible prophecy and New Age analysis." Online: [www.revelation13.net/hitler.html](http://www.revelation13.net/hitler.html).



Catalog No. 1523

Revelation 14:1-5

23rd Message

Bernard Bell

August 14th, 2005

## FOLLOWING THE LAMB

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

These past eight days the world has been remembering the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan. Two weeks ago I generated a stir with my comments about the bomb. Many people have asked me about those comments. Am I a pacifist? Was America right to drop the bomb?

I am not a pacifist. Governments have the responsibility to uphold justice and restrain evil. At times, regrettably, this requires going to war. I have no problem with Christians serving in the military. In fact, there ought to be Christians in the military. And they ought to serve as good soldiers, airmen and seamen. In this, as in all matters, Christians should seek to do their job well. At times this will require them taking life. Loss of life is a regrettable but inevitable consequence of war. The Allies were right to go to war against the Axis powers. I don't have a problem with the dropping of the atomic bomb. The bombs were dropped on a nation persisting in its evil by a nation seeking to terminate that evil. The loss of life was tragic. War is tragic, but that doesn't make it unavoidable.

Terrorism, like piracy, is evil and governments have a responsibility to fight it. Failure to do so is a failure to meet their responsibility to govern, to uphold justice, to restrain evil. This nation is now engaged in a war on terror.

Just a few days after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush announced that "this crusade, this war on terror, is going to take a while."<sup>1</sup> His reference to the war on terror as a crusade, though it went initially unnoticed here in the USA, caused immediate outcry in Europe. It evoked memories of the medieval Crusades when European knights, marching under the banner of the cross and with the backing of the Church, fought the Moslem rulers of the Holy Land. The word crusade is derived from the Latin *crux*, cross. The Crusaders were those marked by the cross.

The Crusaders were not the first to march into battle under the sign of the cross. In 312, Constantine won the Battle of the Milvian Bridge to become sole ruler of the western half of the Roman Empire. The previous day, after praying for divine help, he had seen emblazoned across the sky a cross of light, and the words "in this sign conquer" (Greek *en toutō nika*, Latin *in hoc signo vince*). The sign was confirmed to him in a vision that night. The next day he ordered that the Chi-Rho symbol of Christ replace the dragon on the military standards, and that it be emblazoned on every shield. Marching into battle behind his new standard, Constantine won a great victory. For good or for ill, the Western world and the Church have not been the same since.

It is necessary for governments to use force to restrain evil. But my sermons these past few weeks have not been about how the state is to respond to evil. They have been about how God's people are to respond to evil. The world has a 1700-year legacy of problems arising from the state and/or the Church following the Constantinian model, marching into battle under the sign of the cross. Sometimes

it has been the state co-opting the Church; sometimes the Church co-opting the state.

It is undeniable that there is evil in the world. Revelation 12-13 has given us a symbolic explanation of this evil. These two chapters portray a battle between two kingdoms. On one side is the infernal trinity of the dragon and two beasts. On the other side is the heavenly Trinity of God, Lamb and seven-fold Spirit. The dragon is implacably opposed to God's purposes and is constantly attacking them. But God has thwarted his every turn—up to a certain point. He has thwarted his assault upon the Messiah. He has thwarted his assault upon heaven. He has thwarted his assault upon the Church. But he does not thwart his assault upon the saints. John sees this assault on the saints in the guise of the two mythical monsters of destructive chaos, the sea monster and the land monster. One uses tyrannical power, the other uses deception. Dragon, beast and false prophet seem all-powerful and invincible. What is God's response? Revelation 14:1-5 gives us the antithesis to the visions of chapters 12-13. It gives us the heavenly vision to set against the earthly visions of dragon, beast and false prophet. It is the Unseen against the Seen. In the "seen" world, visible to the unaided eye, "the wrong seems oft so strong." But in the unseen world, visible to the eye of faith, "God is the Ruler yet."<sup>2</sup>

Gazing into this world that is unseen to the unaided eye, John writes,

**Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless. (14:1-5 NIV)**

John describes what he *sees* (v 1) and what he *hears* (vv 2-5). We shall observe that this is not the first time that he does this, setting what he sees against what he hears.

### A. What John Sees (14:1)

John sees, standing upon Mount Zion, the Lamb and with him 144,000. Where is this Mount Zion? Zion originally referred to the fortress which David captured when he took Jerusalem, but the word came to have a much more expansive meaning. It acquired a symbolic, theological meaning in addition to its geographical meaning. Zion has theological significance for three reasons. It is the city of God, the place where God put his Name, the earthly dwelling-

place of the heavenly King. It is the city of David, where God has installed his king over his kingdom on earth. And it is the city of God's people; indeed, the word is often used to refer to the people rather than the city. Temple, palace, and city: Zion is the place where God and his people dwell together in his kingdom. Though Zion lay at the symbolic heart of Israel, Zion was not just for Israel. The Old Testament looked ahead to the day when the Gentiles, even Israel's enemies, would come streaming into Zion, as for example in Psalm 87:

**He has set his foundation on the holy mountain;  
the LORD loves the gates of Zion  
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.**

**Glorious things are said of you,  
O city of God.**

**"I will record Rahab and Babylon  
among those who acknowledge me—  
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—  
and will say, 'This one was born in Zion.'"**

**Indeed, of Zion it will be said,  
'This one and that one were born in her,  
and the Most High himself will establish her.'**

**The LORD will write in the register of the peoples:  
'This one was born in Zion.'**

**As they make music they will sing,  
'All my fountains are in you.'** (Ps 87)

Verse 3 gave John Newton the opening line for his hymn,

Glorious things of thee are spoken,  
Zion, city of our God;

He whose word cannot be broken  
Formed thee for his own abode.<sup>3</sup>

The glorious things said of Zion are that it would be the destination of world pilgrimage. Even the archetypal enemies of Israel—Egypt (Rahab), Babylon, Philistia and Tyre—would be incorporated into God's kingdom. It's a breathtaking vision.

In the Old Testament, Zion was the physical city Jerusalem. But in the New Testament, the apostles realized that the earthly Zion mirrored a heavenly Zion. In the Old Testament, God brought his people to Mount Sinai, there to constitute them as his people. But, as we saw in our Scripture reading this morning, we have come not to Mount Sinai, but to a much greater mountain:

**But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:22-24)**

Mount Zion is the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city of which the earthly Jerusalem was an earthly counterpart. Though the venue has changed, the theological symbolism is the same: temple, palace and city where God and his people dwell together in his kingdom. But the venue has not really changed: the earthly Zion was only ever an earthly counterpart of a heavenly reality. They are the poles of the heaven-earth axis.

Here on Mount Zion, God has installed his king, as announced in Psalm 2:6, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." Since

the heavenly Zion is greater than the earthly Zion, we expect a king greater than the earthly David, a king who is the fulfilment of all the Messianic promises, a king who is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, great David's greater Son. But what John sees is the Lamb.

In chapter 5, John juxtaposed what he saw and what he heard: he *heard* that the Lion of the tribe of Judah had conquered, but he *saw* a Lamb standing as though slain (5:5-6). He thus equates the conquering Lion and the slain Lamb. The Messiah's path to victory and enthronement lay in sacrificial death. Here in chapter 14, we are again shown that the one whom God has installed as King of kings and Lord of lords is the slain Lamb. This Lamb is God's answer to the dragon and the two beasts.

With him John sees 144,000, each inscribed on the forehead with the name of the Lamb and the name of the Lamb's father. These are the heavenly antithesis of the inhabitants of the earth, each inscribed with the mark of the beast (13:16-17). Everyone in Revelation is marked: the inhabitants of the earth bear the mark of the beast, the dwellers in heaven bear the seal of God. Everyone belongs to one kingdom or the other. Everyone worships in one kingdom or the other.

John had previously encountered this group of 144,000 in chapter 7, where a seal was placed upon the foreheads of God's servants. This seal was a protective one, to protect the saints from divine judgment. Again John juxtaposed what he saw and what he heard. John "*heard* the number of those sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel" (7:4), but he *saw* "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" (7:9) who have been martyred (7:14). Again John juxtaposes what he sees and what he hears to indicate an identity between two seemingly incongruous entities: the 144,000 of Israel are the countless international multitude. Those with God's protective seal have been delivered from the great tribulation by martyrdom.

This is a crucial point of interpretation: these are not two different groups, but one and the same. These are the servants of God, the saints, God's faithful people. In Old Testament terms God's people is Israel. But God has opened wide the doors to his kingdom to include Gentiles as well as Jews. To return to my comments of four weeks ago, is this replacement theology? Has the Church replaced Israel in God's plan? No, there is but one people of God. In the Old Testament that people was primarily ethnic Israel. But in the New Testament this same people of God is an international body of Jew and Gentile together. It is the Church, the *ekklēsia*, the Greek word that was used in the Old Testament to translate *qāhāl*, the congregation of Israel. Several books of the New Testament describe at length this transformation from an ethnically limited people to a truly international people: e.g. Acts, Galatians, Ephesians.

Using Old Testament imagery, God's faithful people are the Lord's army, drawn up in battle array: 12,000 from each tribe. They are ready for Holy War. Using New Testament imagery, they are a vast international choir, singing to God and to the Lamb.

How big is this people of God? From one point of view, it is 144,000. This is a richly symbolic number: 12 × 12 × 1000. Twelve is the number of the people of God. Ten is the number of completion, and ten cubed or a thousand indicates a large number. Putting it together, 144,000 indicates a very large and complete people of God: they're all there, none is missing. It's not a restrictive number, meaning that there are *only* 144,000 and not 144,001. It's an expansive number. This is confirmed by John's other description: the 144,000

is also a countless multitude. That's what God promised to Abraham: that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the sea shore and the stars in the sky.

The 144,000 seen by John in chapter 14 are the saints, the people redeemed unto God by the Lamb. They are the martyrs who have endured in their faithful witness. They are the army of the Lord, headed by their commander-in-chief, the Lamb: "The Lamb and his fair army doth on Mount Zion stand."<sup>4</sup> They will reappear in chapter 19 as the armies of heaven riding behind the Rider on the White Horse whose names are Faithful and True, the Word of God, King of kings and Lord of lords (19:11-16).

## B. What John Hears (14:2-5)

John next describes what he hears: a great company of heavenly musicians. For the third time he juxtaposes what he sees and what he hears to indicate an identity between two groups of very different description. Just as in chapter 7, the 144,000 of the Lamb's army are also the heavenly choir. They are ready to march into battle behind their commander, but they sing that victory has already been won. Their commander has been killed in battle, as have they, but he stands triumphant at their head. And so they sing! The volume of their singing is so great that it sounds like rushing waters or loud thunder. The song they sing is a new song. Frequently the psalmist calls upon God's people to sing a new song, celebrating his acts of salvation. *Shir Hadash* (New Song) is a favorite name for synagogues, such as the one in Los Gatos. What is the new song that they sing?

In chapter 5, the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders, each with a harp, fell down before the Lamb and sang a new song:

**"You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased men for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation.  
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our  
God,  
and they will reign on the earth."** (5:9-10)

The cherubim and elders sang a new song, celebrating the Lamb's victory. They celebrated that act of redemption as onlookers. They were not the beneficiaries of the Lamb's actions: as heavenly beings they had no need of redemption, but they sang in response to what they had seen. Now the saints, earthly beings who have been raised to heaven, join in this chorus. The only ones able to learn this song are the 144,000 who have been redeemed from the earth, that is all the saints. The saints now sing as the beneficiaries of that redemption, singing before the cherubim and elders who had started the song.

In chapter 15, John describes a similar vision into heaven:

**I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:**

**"Great and marvelous are your deeds,  
Lord God Almighty.  
Just and true are your ways,  
King of the ages.  
Who will not fear you, O Lord,**

**and bring glory to your name?  
For you alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship before you,  
for your righteous acts have been revealed."** (15:2-4)

Israel of old sang the song of Moses beside the sea, celebrating God's victory over Pharaoh and their exodus from Egypt (Exod 15). The song of Moses has become the song of the Lamb, sung beside the crystal sea by the people whom he has led forth in a new exodus. The saints have made their exodus from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God, and they have made their exodus from earth to heaven. On earth the beast has been "given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation" (13:7), but the countless multitude is also drawn "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (7:9). God is plundering Satan's kingdom, transferring his people from the kingdom of darkness into his kingdom of light. Their exodus from earth seems to be defeat, for it is accomplished by the beast conquering them through death, but their exodus brings them to heaven, for it is they who emerge victorious over the beast, conquering him through the blood of the Lamb and through their faithful witness.

John hears the great multitude singing again in chapter 19, "like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder":

**"Hallelujah!  
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and be glad  
and give him glory!  
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready.  
Fine linen, bright and clean,  
was given her to wear."** (19:6-8)

This, then, is the new song sung by the saints. It is a song of victory, a song of celebration to God and to the Lamb. On earth, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet seem victorious. It seems that might is right. But,

No song on Earth will ever sound  
Like one before your throne  
When myriads of the Angels sing  
In Praise you Alone.<sup>5</sup>

The cherubim, the elders and the angels have sung this song before the throne. Now the faithful martyrs as well sing the song before the throne. It all takes place before the throne. The throne and the One seated upon it stand central in the Book of Revelation. All that is True revolves around this throne in Heaven. All that is False revolves around the counterfeit throne on Earth, the dragon's throne on which he has installed the beast. Everyone worships before one throne or the other. Revelation is written to comfort those who are suffering because they have centered themselves on the heavenly throne, and to chastise those who have taken their eye off that throne and cast it onto the earthly throne.

John gives a fourfold description of this choir of 144,000 singing before the heavenly throne:

**These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as first-fruits to God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless. (14:4-5)**

They have not defiled themselves with women. This does not mean that only celibate males get into heaven. Sadly it did not take long for the early Church, influenced by neoplatonic philosophy which viewed matter as evil and spirit as good, to take a negative view to marriage. But the Bible never takes such a view. The meaning is clear if we look at the broader context. The 144,000 are the army of the Lord. In the Old Testament, Israel was to consecrate herself before holy war. The troops were to abstain from sexual relations prior to battle. Here in Revelation, the Lord's army has kept itself pure from defilement with the prostitute Babylon, from entanglement in the beast's kingdom. This is how they have "been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name" (15:2).

They are without deceit and without blame. In the conflict between the world of the True and the world of the False they have remained pure and faithful. Nothing that is false is permitted into the New Jerusalem.

They have been redeemed from among men and offered to God and the Lamb as firstfruits, the first portion of the harvest which belongs to God. Later in chapter 14, John sees Jesus harvest the earth when the harvest is ripe. That harvest is a harvest unto judgment. But the saints are the firstfruits; they belong to God. They have been sealed with his seal of ownership, with his seal of protection. Though they be killed for their faithful witness, they have nothing to fear for they are dedicated to God.

Finally, and most beautifully, the saints follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

### 3. Following the Lamb

These past three weeks I have ended each sermon with the words, "Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow him," the words which appear on the picture with which I have closed each sermon. This picture is the Moravian seal, the emblem of the Moravian Church. The image at the center of this seal is an ancient motif of Christian symbolism and religious art. It is known formally as the *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), or colloquially as the Lamb and Flag. At the center of the image is a standing Lamb, Jesus the Lamb of God. The Lamb holds a staff, topped by a cross. From this staff flies a banner depicting a red cross on a white background. This is the banner of victory, the banner of resurrection. The same red cross appears on the halo behind the Lamb's head. The whole montage is a portrayal of key truths in Revelation. The Lamb was slain on the cross but emerged victorious in the resurrection. Victory has been accomplished not by the exercise of brute force, not by deception, but through sacrificial death and resurrection.

As I was researching the Moravian seal, I came across this comment by a Moravian pastor, apologizing for the symbol: "The war metaphor of the image and words may not be what the Moravian Church would choose were we creating our seal today; nevertheless, as our historic emblem, the Seal remains an important Moravian symbol." Sadly this pastor has interpreted the seal as a militaristic emblem. But if she understood Revelation, she would recognize it as an anti-militaristic emblem. Yes, the Lamb has conquered, but his path to victory was neither of the paths employed by the dragon: neither the path of power used by the beast, nor the path of deception used by the false prophet. Jesus the Lamb is Faithful and True. He bore faithful witness. In his mouth was found no lie. He kept himself pure and undefiled. He refused to respond to evil with evil. For this faithful witness he was put to death. It seemed that he had been conquered. But he died as the blameless, spotless Lamb of God. And so God vindicated him and his faithful obedient witness, raising him from death to new life, raising him to heaven, there to enthrone him as King of kings and Lord of lords. The saints are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. To follow him in faithful witness, with no lie in their mouth, bearing faithful witness to him that is True in a world in which much is false. To follow him blameless into death. To follow him in resurrection into new life. To follow him into heaven, there to stand on Mount Zion. This is how the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet are overcome.

Sadly, too often the lines between the two kingdoms have been blurred. The state has marched into battle under the banner of the cross. Or the Church has employed the dragon's methods of power and deceit to build its kingdom. The Church has only one weapon: its faithful witness to the death and resurrection of the Lamb whom it follows.

Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow him.

*Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.*  
(2 Cor 2:14)

1. Reply to a reporter's question, South Lawn of the White House, 9.16.2005. Online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>.

2. Maltbie Babcock, hymn *This Is My Father's World* (1901).

3. John Newton, hymn *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken* (1779).

4. Anne R. Cousins, hymn *The Sands of Time are Sinking* (1857).

5. P. A. Baggaley, poem *No Song on Earth* (1996).

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 Bernard Bell  
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# GLORIFYING GOD IN LIFE AND DEATH

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Current events in the Middle East provide a striking backdrop for our annual visit to the Book of Revelation, especially since the section we'll cover over the next four weeks (14:6–16:21) ends with the Battle of Armageddon. The Rapture Index (“The prophetic speedometer of end-time activity”) moved up a couple of points this week.<sup>1</sup> Newt Gingrich has announced that we are already in World War 3. What will happen? How is this going to end? Are we in the run-up to Armageddon? For answers to such questions, many people turn to their Bibles, especially to the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation is indeed about the things which are going to happen. The very first sentence tells us that this is “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place” (1:1). At the end John is assured, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (22:6). What are these things which are going to happen?

Revelation is a book of visions. For the past several years we have been in the main sequence of visions (chapters 4–16), which began with John being summoned up to heaven, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (4:1). The sequence ends with the declaration “It is done!” (16:17)—what must happen has happened! Today we begin the final run-up to that declaration; we are close to finding out what it is that must happen!

A prominent feature of this central sequence of visions is the three sets of seven: seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. People commonly think that these are the things which must happen, but they are not. Instead John uses Old Testament imagery to paint pictures of divine judgment, which are warnings heralding the things which must happen. Interspersed among the sets of seven with their images of judgment are what I call interludes. These are of great importance for they help us understand the judgments pictured in the sets of sevens.

The most extensive interlude is chapters 12–14, between the seven trumpets and the seven bowls. Here we are given a symbolic panorama of the conflict between good and evil. The dragon, Satan, exercises his destructive influence on earth through the tyrannical rule of the first beast and the deception of the second beast, the false prophet. John's readers at the end of the first century would have recognized these two beasts as the Roman emperor and the system which promoted the worship of the emperor. Rome is long-gone, but Satan is still at work, diverting the world from the worship of the one true God and opposing those who worship this God.

In chapter 14, in a series of three visions, John shows us what God is doing about this evil that is rampant in the world. In the first of these visions (14:1–5), John saw the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion. This is the heavenly Zion, the counterpart of the earthly Zion where in the Old Testament God installed his king over his people Israel. No matter how powerful Satan the dragon might seem, he has been unable to prevent God installing his king. This is the true King, the

King of kings and Lord of lords. The beast, whom the dragon has installed on his throne, is but an imposter. This true King is seen as the Lamb, for God's way of victory over evil is the death and resurrection of his Son. The remaining two visions of chapter 14 announce the consequences of this victory, showing how God extends his reign from heaven to earth. We'll look at the first vision this week (14:6–13), and the second vision next week (14:14–20).

## A. The Eternal Gospel (14:6–11)

In the first vision, John sees three angels follow one another through the heavens, each proclaiming a message. They fly in mid-air, directly overhead we would say, because their three-fold message is for all to hear.

### 1. Worship God (14:6–7)

**Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” (Rev 14:6–7 NIV)**

The first angel calls all people to worship God the Creator. This proclamation is described as an eternal gospel. This is not the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, but news that is much older than that, news that goes right back to the beginning of the world. Ever since the first verse of the Bible—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1)—there has been a fundamental divide between the Creator and creation. All creation owes worship to its Creator. In chapter 4 John saw the heavenly beings gathered around the throne acclaiming God as worthy because he has created all things (4:11). We worship God “for it is seemly so to do” as our opening hymn put it.<sup>2</sup> Failure to do so is not a mark of enlightenment but an act of rebellion. Satan and his angelic assistants were thrown out of heaven for their rebellion, their refusal to worship their Creator. Satan has deluded humanity into extending that rebellion, worshiping that which is created rather than he who alone is Creator.

This call to worship God the Creator is addressed to “those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” “Earth-dwellers” is a term which John uses consistently to refer to those who live without reference to God. There are two sets of people in the book: the earth-dwellers who refuse to worship God, and those destined to be heaven-dwellers who do worship God. Through the false-prophet, Satan has deceived these earth-dwellers into worshiping the beast, the imposter whom he has set on his throne (13:8, 12). This Satanic kingdom of those who refuse to worship God encompasses every nation, tribe, language and people.

What does it mean to worship God? This first angelic herald uses three synonymous terms: fear God, give him glory, and worship him.

Neither Hebrew nor Greek saw any incompatibility in using “fear” to describe what our attitude to God should be. But to fear God in a positive way sounds strange to modern ears, so often this word gets explained as showing reverence. But there is more to it than reverence. To fear God means to recognize that he is the one who has total power over us, that we are in his hands, that he can dispose of us as he wills. This fear of God is to be balanced against the most frequent command in Scripture, “Fear not.” But this command to fear not is predicated upon the fear of the Lord. As another hymn says, “Fear him, ye saints, and you will then have nothing else to fear.”<sup>3</sup> But if you do not fear God you will have everything else to fear. Once we accept the fact that we are in the hands of our Creator, we can have confidence that he is more than equal to all circumstances.

To glorify God means to give him honor. The root idea of the Hebrew word for glory, which lies behind John’s thinking here, is “weight.” We give God weight by recognizing that he is our superior. The opposite of this is to trivialize him. The most extreme form of trivialization is complete disregard, but there are numerous ways in which we can acknowledge God yet still trivialize him. We do so when we co-opt him as a genie in the bottle to bless our selfish desires, church programs, or nation. We do so when we pay attention to him on Sundays, then put him in the back seat on Monday through Saturday.

To worship God means to pay him homage. In both Hebrew and Greek the word implies falling flat on your face before your lord, be he human or divine. We are gathered for a worship service, during which we have sung songs. Too often we think that this is our worship. But it is not: these songs are the glory and honor and praise that we render unto the triune God. Worship is what comes after that. Having brought him our praise, we fall on our faces in awe. This requires seeing God for who he is, having a large view of God. Nothing is more helpful here than the Book of Revelation, this revelation of the seen and the unseen worlds. Heaven is opened to our gaze, where we see God the Creator enthroned, receiving the praise and worship of the heavenly court. There beside him is the Lamb, our Redeemer, also receiving the praise and worship of the heavenly court. There too, joining in the worship, are the saints who have gone before us. We, on earth, created by God and redeemed by the Lamb, are moved by the Spirit to join our voices to theirs.

To fear God, to give him glory, and to worship him means that our thinking begins and ends with God, who is himself the Beginning and the End. Our thinking revolves around him because we recognize that our lives revolve around him. In this orientation of our lives around God and Christ lies our perfect freedom. As the Catechism says, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”<sup>4</sup>

Those who rebel against God think they are doing so in the name of freedom. It has been this way ever since the Garden when the serpent persuaded the woman to act on her own, to make her own decision. But this act of moral autonomy led to death not life. We were not created to be our own masters. We are created to live our lives in reference to God. Therein lies our perfect freedom and our true enjoyment.

## 2. Fallen is Babylon (14:8)

**A second angel followed and said, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.” (14:8)**

The second angel introduces us to a new player in this book, one whom we will read a great deal about in chapter 18. This is Babylon the great city. It is the world city, humanity gathered together living in autonomy from God, in self-sufficiency and self-security. It is a seductive city, intoxicating its inhabitants with its idolatrous wares. In defiance of God, humanity gathered together at Babel to build a city and a tower reaching to heaven (Gen 11:1-11). God reached down from heaven to do two things. He scattered the people so they could no longer build the city; he did so to limit the accumulation and concentration of evil. But he also did something positive: calling Abraham to leave Ur he began to build a people who would be the antithesis of Babylon, a people with whom he would dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city. Redemption history has been the story of these two cities: Babylon the great city versus Jerusalem the holy city; the people who live apart from God versus the people who live in God’s presence as his people.

Throughout history Babylon has repeatedly rebuilt itself as a seemingly invincible city, secure in its autonomy from God, and hostile to the people of God. But each time it has fallen under divine judgment. “Fallen, fallen is Babylon,” announced Isaiah (21:9) as if it had already happened. And it did happen: mighty Babylon, secure behind its enormous walls, fell to Cyrus of Persia. But Babylon rose again, like a phoenix from the ashes. To the original readers of Revelation, Babylon was Rome, the world city reborn. Rome, the eternal city; Rome, the center of a vast empire; Rome, which in the guise of the goddess Roma was worshiped throughout the world. Using the words of Isaiah, this second heavenly messenger pronounces judgment on this new Babylon: “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great.” Again it happened: Rome, the eternal city, fell.

Babylon has fallen, but Babylon is alive and well, not least here in Silicon Valley, where she still holds out her seductive cup of intoxicating, idolatrous wine. Yes, Babylon continues to rise from the ashes, but this cry of the angel is also an announcement of final judgment on all Babylons, on every attempt of humanity to live apart from God.

## 3. Judgment on False Worshipers (14:9-11)

**A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” (14:9-11)**

The third angel pronounces judgment on all who worship the beast. Everyone in Revelation worships, everyone that is except the two trinities: the divine Trinity: the one seated upon the throne, the Lamb, and the seven-fold Spirit; and the counterfeit trinity: the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. It’s not a question of whether or not you worship; it’s a matter of whom you worship. To whom do you give glory and honor? Whom do you recognize as your source of life, meaning and hope? In the first century the majority attributed life, meaning and hope to Rome and its emperor. The first emperor,

Octavian, was acclaimed as the son of a god; as Augustus, one worthy of worship; as the savior, who had brought peace to the world. Domitian, the emperor at the time Revelation was written, insisted that he was “lord and god.” Throughout the empire, and especially in the province of Asia, temples were built for the worship of Rome and of the emperor. This was not worship that was forced upon the people; this was worship that they willingly gave.

Post-Enlightenment society is too sophisticated, too rational, to believe in the worship of gods, goddesses and divine emperors. But it still attributes life, meaning, hope and salvation to the wrong sources. It still refuses to recognize that it is in God the Creator that “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28); that it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is the Savior, the Prince of Peace. Upon all such rebels the third angel pronounces divine judgment.

There is a poetic justice here. Babylon has made all the nations drink the wine of her passion—adultery, a metaphor for idolatry. In turn God will make her inhabitants drink the wine of his passion—his wrath.<sup>5</sup> They will fall under the same judgment as Sodom and Gomorrah: fire and sulfur, from which they will have no rest.

This then is the three-fold proclamation to the whole world: all people should worship God the Creator; the kingdoms of this world will fall; and those who refuse to worship God will be judged. This is an eternal proclamation: all three elements are already present in the early chapters of Genesis. This is gospel: it is good news because it means that God will have his way, that the insurrection on earth will be put down, that the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our God, that evil will be finally removed.

This is an offensive gospel. Rebels do not like to be told to submit to the one against whom they rebel. They do not like to be told that their world will come crashing down. They do not like to be told that there will be a day of reckoning, a day of final judgment. I got a vivid illustration of this earlier this month, when attending the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held this year in Edinburgh. After a paper on Revelation that I enjoyed very much, during the Q&A session, a Scotsman spoke up with heated passion, railing against the images of judgment in the book, specifically the images of judgment on Babylon. He was angry at God, angry at the book, angry at the concept of final judgment. Such is the response of earth-dwellers.

This eternal gospel is predicated on the vision of chapter 4, where we see God, seated on the throne, sovereign over all that he has made, and receiving the worship of the heavenly court. As Creator, he is worthy of all praise and honor. But there is another gospel, one predicated upon the vision of the slain Lamb in chapter 5. The dragon’s kingdom encompasses every nation, language, tribe and tongue; all these have been deceived by the false prophet into worshipping the beast, and seduced by Babylon’s intoxicating wine into idolatrous worship of that which is not fit to be worshiped. But the Lamb is plundering this kingdom, redeeming people from every nation, language, tribe and tongue to be a people for God. There is nothing the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, or Babylon can do about it. The means that the Lamb uses to do this is his own shed blood. The way he has conquered is by being the slain Lamb.

God’s people expected a conquering Lion to save them by judging all the other people. But what God gave them was a slain Lamb, because they themselves were liable to judgment. Had we only the conquering Lion then hell would be full and heaven empty of people. All humanity is complicit in rejection of God and rejection of

his Messiah. It was in Jerusalem, the “holy” city, that this Messiah was put to death—Jerusalem which had become indistinguishable from Babylon. Had we been there, we too would have called for his crucifixion. This Jesus drank to the dregs the cup of God’s wrath, the cup that he alone had no need to drink, other than his obedient submission to his Father’s will. Because of his perfect obedience to the Father, actively in life and passively in death, God vindicated him, raising him from the dead and installing him on the heavenly Zion as King of kings and Lord of lords. Through his blood he is redeeming people to God: people who now acclaim that it is Christ, not Caesar, who is Lord; that it is Christ, not the emperor, who is the Savior, the bringer of peace; that it is Christ, not Caesar, who is august, who is worthy of worship. The astonishing thing is that such people, with full Scriptural support, find there is no conflict between the worship of Christ the slain Lamb and the call to worship God alone. The slain Lamb is as worthy of the praise and worship of heaven and earth as is the one seated upon the throne.

But this sets up a conflict between those who acclaim Christ as Lord and those who acclaim Caesar, or anyone or anything else. The Book of Revelation is a pastoral letter, written by John to seven churches who are caught in this tension. He adds two words of pastoral counsel, about how to live well and how to die well.

## B. Pastoral Counsel (14:12-13)

### 1. Living Well (14:12)

**This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus. (14:12)**

How are the saints to live while awaiting judgment on those who oppose them? The easy answer would be that they are to flee to the desert, out of reach of the tyrannical arm of the beast and the seductions of Babylon, there to await God. But God doesn’t want his church out in the desert; he wants it in the middle of Babylon though not part of Babylon. He wants it under the nose of antichrist but not paying allegiance to antichrist. The seven churches to whom John wrote were in major cities in the province of Asia, cities that competed with one another in worshipping the emperor, cities that prospered greatly from Rome. It was in just these cities that God had put his churches as lampstands where they were to bear faithful testimony to the Creator God and to the Redeemer Lamb.

The great danger with having churches planted in the midst of Babylon is that they become infected with Babylon’s way of thinking. Jerusalem of the Old Testament became indistinguishable from Babylon in its idolatry and confidence in its own inviolability. So God removed his presence and handed the city over to Babylon. The Jerusalem of the first century became indistinguishable from the new Babylon, Rome, in its rejection of God’s Messiah and its confidence in its own inviolability. So God again removed his presence and handed the city over to the new Babylon. But though the earthly Zion rejected the Messiah, God has installed this Messiah on the heavenly Mount Zion. Through the redeeming blood of this Messiah, rejected by man but vindicated by God, he has established colonies of this heavenly Zion on earth, right under the nose of Satan. From an earthly point of view these colonies seem hopelessly weak. But all they have to do is to endure in their faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ, insisting that it is he who is Lord.

The messages to the seven churches show that these churches vary considerably in their faithful endurance. The churches who are most faithful in life are the ones facing the strongest opposition: Smyrna

and Philadelphia. They are called to be faithful even unto death. Pergamum and Thyatira have compromised with the world, probably out of fear of death. Ephesus and Sardis have grown complacent due to their apparent visible success. The final church, Laodicea, has been thoroughly infected by Babylon: it says, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing" (3:17). That is Babylon's way of thinking through-and-through.

## 2. Dying Well (14:13)

**Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."**

**"Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." (14:13)**

John's second word of pastoral counsel is an exhortation to die well. It is presented as a beatitude, the second of seven in the book. It is one of the most frequently cited verses of the book, regularly used at funerals to give comfort to friends and family of the departed. But note the context here: the conflict between the two kingdoms, between the two cities, between the two sets of worshipers. For the saints at the end of the first century, living well brought the real possibility of death. But if they die in the Lord, enduring to the end in their faithful witness to him, then they die well. We don't face death from persecution, but we are still called to die well. I think of Marie Chaney who died in May. She died well, radiant to the end in her testimony to Jesus.

"Yes," adds the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." In contrast to the rebels who will have no rest in their judgment, the saints will enjoy rest in paradise, the New Jerusalem. In the context of Revelation their deeds are simply their faithful witness to Jesus Christ in life and in death.

May the Lord God, through his Spirit, give us such a vision of himself, the one who sits upon the throne, and of the Lamb, that we endure faithfully in life and in death, that we live well and that we die well. Amen.

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)*

1. Online: <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html>.
2. William Kethe, *All People That on Earth Do Dwell* (1561), a metrical rendition of Psalm 100.
3. Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, *Through All the Changing Scenes of Life* (1696), a metrical rendition of Psalm 34. This particular line renders verse 9, "Fear the LORD, you his saints."
4. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 1.
5. The same Greek word, *thumos* "passion," is translated "maddening" (v 8) and "fury" (v 10).

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 Bernard Bell  
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## HARVEST TIME

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Last week after one of the services someone came up to me with a question that was troubling her. Is there a second chance for those who die after rejecting the gospel, after turning their back on the good news of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ? It's a question that many ask. Death brings a finality that is difficult for Americans to accept. This country devotes enormous resources to postponing death, but finally death catches up with all. As has frequently been observed, the mortality rate is 100%, with a couple of exceptions for Enoch and Elijah. Our text last week ended with the beatitude, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on" (Rev 14:13). This was an exhortation to die well, holding on to the Lord Jesus Christ. What of those who do not die well? What of those who die, but not in the Lord? Mormons get around this finality with their baptisms for the dead. Liberal theologians get around it with universalism: since God is love he will surely save everyone. But the Scriptures offer no such comfort. There is a time when God says, "Enough. Time is up." Death is the moment at which God has been saying this until now, but the day is coming when God will say this for both the living and the dead. The time is coming when God will wrap up the world as we currently know it. This is the point which we have now reached in the Book of Revelation, the third and final vision of chapter 14.

The second vision (14:6-13) announced the arrival of this time, as an angel proclaimed that "the hour of his judgment has come" (14:7). This angel was the first of three angels who sequentially proclaimed the three-fold eternal gospel: all humanity owes worship to God the Creator, the kingdoms of this world will fall, and those who refuse to worship God will be judged. The third vision now shows this judgment.

### A. The Two Harvests

This third vision of chapter 14 describes two harvests, one of grain the other of grapes. These harvests are presented as two parallel panels. In each panel there are two heavenly beings and the same three actions: John sees a heavenly being holding a sharp sickle; "another angel" emerges from the temple or the altar and calls in a loud voice for the first being to wield his sickle and gather in the harvest for it is ripe; whereupon the first being uses his sickle and the earth is harvested.

There are some differences between the two panels: the first harvester is "one like a son of man" while the second is an angel; the first harvest is of grain, the second of grapes; and we are told what happens with the harvested grapes but not with the grain. But the similarities between the two panels are more extensive than the differences; indeed, the similarities serve to highlight the differences.

This literary device of parallel panels can be used to compare or to contrast, to describe similar or contrasting things. The big question is which purpose is being served here. Are the two harvests the same or are they different? Is the grain harvest the same as the grape har-

vest? This is a matter on which there is considerable disagreement. Commentators I greatly respect are lined up on either side of the debate: some say the harvests are the same, others say they are different. Both sides marshal cogent arguments in support of their position.

This is an issue on which I formerly could not make up my mind—one of several in the book. But over many years of studying this book I have gradually become more decided on most of these issues. This is one of them. I now think that the two harvests are different, that they refer to different sets of people.

Let me advise you to be skeptical of anyone who claims that they have every detail of this book figured out. Revelation is a book that requires humility and caution. Nevertheless, I think that the basic message of Revelation is very clear. It has been said of the Scriptures that they are shallow enough for a lamb to paddle in but deep enough for an elephant to swim in. This is one of the things that makes the study of Scripture so rewarding. There is more than enough to keep the scholar busy his whole life, yet Scripture is also accessible to the new believer. This is certainly true of the book of Revelation. There is a depth sufficient for a lifetime, yet the basic message of the book is abundantly clear if we will but read it well.

#### 1. The Grain Harvest (14:14-16)

**I looked, and there before me was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one "like a son of man" with a crown of gold on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. Then another angel came out of the temple and called in a loud voice to him who was sitting on the cloud, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe." So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested. (Rev 14:14-16 NIV)**

The first of the two harvests is the grain harvest. That this is so is indicated by the word used for "ripe": the crop has "dried out," which is true of grain cereals. The harvester is described as one "like a son of man," seated on a white cloud with a golden crown on his head. This is Jesus Christ; we'll return to his description later.

Who is being harvested in the grain harvest? There are three major opinions: the unrighteous, the righteous, or both together with the righteous being separated from the unrighteous. Before I tell you which one I think it is, I need to give you a little explanation of harvest technology. Most people now have no idea how the food on their table is produced. We no longer live on or near farms where we can observe farming methods; farms are so heavily mechanized that these farming methods of old have almost completely disappeared; we purchase our food in packaging that masks its origins; the food itself is heavily-processed, bearing little resemblance to what is harvested.

The Bible is full of agricultural imagery; this imagery conveyed meaning to every generation of readers until our own, but I fear that its meaning is lost to many of us today. Growing up in the rice fields

of Thailand I had the good fortune to see farming in a pre-mechanized age. The rice fields were still prepared with plough and harrow, then planted and harvested by hand.

The manual harvesting of any grain cereal is a three-stage process: reaping, threshing and winnowing. This applies whether it is rice in Thailand or wheat and barley in Old Testament Israel. The first stage is reaping: the stalks of standing grain are cut with a sickle. These cut stalks are gathered into sheaves and left standing in the field to dry. The stubble left in the ground is burnt or ploughed under. The second stage is threshing: the stalks are laid out on the ground on a threshing floor, and hooped animals are driven over the stalks. In Thailand these animals were water buffalo; in Old Testament Israel they were cattle. Sometimes a threshing sledge is used; this is a board with sharp stones or pieces of iron embedded in the bottom that is dragged across the stalks by an animal while someone stands on the board. The sharp edges of the animals' hooves or of the sledge cut the stalks into short pieces, and separates the grain from the stalks and the husks from the kernel. The third stage is winnowing. The threshed grain is thrown up in the air using a pitchfork. Wind blows the light-weight grain husks away as chaff; the not-so-light straw blows just a short distance away to fall at the edge of the threshing floor; and the heavier kernels of grain fall straight down where they accumulate in a pile.

In the Old Testament, which is John's primary source book for his imagery, both threshing and winnowing are used metaphorically for judgment. But neither threshing nor winnowing is mentioned here in John's vision. In contrast to the grape harvest where he sees what happens to the harvested grapes, John does not see what happens to the reaped grain. He sees only the reaping. Reaping is a positive image in the Old Testament; bringing in the harvest was a time for rejoicing. This is one of the reasons I conclude that this grain harvest refers not to judgment on the wicked, nor to separation of the godly from the wicked, but to the ingathering of the saints.

In the first vision (14:1-5), John had seen 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion. This is the same group as in chapter 7, where John *heard* them as 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes, enumerated as in a military census, but he *saw* them as an innumerable multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language, gathered around the heavenly throne singing praise to God and to the Lamb. They are the saints, "purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb" (14:5). In Old Testament Israel the first portion of the harvest was offered to God as the choicest portion. The firstfruits implied that the rest of the harvest, the ingathering, would follow. The presence of the 144,000 in heaven as the firstfruits anticipates the ingathering of the full harvest.

Here, in the grain harvest, John sees to the end of this age, when the ingathering will be complete. When the harvest is fully gathered in, then and only then will the end come. How many will be in the harvest? Their number is 144,000 from all Israel: it is the complete number (10-cubed) of the people of God (12-squared). It is the fulfillment of all that God started to do with Abraham when he called him from Ur and began to build a new people in a new land with whom he would dwell as God and people. But their number is also a multitude beyond counting, from every nation, tribe, people and language. The people that the Lamb is redeeming unto God is universal. The number 144,000 is expansive not limiting. It does not limit the harvest to a literal 144,000, but implies that the number reaped, the number gathered in, will be extensive, full and complete.

## 2. The Grape Harvest (14:17-20)

Another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. Still another angel, who had charge of the fire, came from the altar and called in a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe." The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia. (14:17-20)

The second harvest that John sees is the grape harvest. This is another familiar image from the Old Testament. When ripe, grapes were harvested with a small knife, here also called a sickle. The grapes were placed in a winepress, usually a pit carved into the rock. As the grapes were trampled by foot, the juice overflowed, and ran along a small channel to another pit where it was collected in a container.

The grape harvest itself and the drinking of the end-product are positive images in the Old Testament, but the trampling of grapes in the winepress is a negative image of judgment. There is thus near-universal agreement that the second harvest seen here, the vintage, is the gathering of the rebels for final judgment. The winepress is "the great winepress of God's wrath." Just as the wheat harvest looked back to the firstfruits of the first vision, so this winepress looks back to the second vision of chapter 14. Babylon had intoxicated the nations with the wine of her passion, her idolatry (14:8). The worshipers of the beast, who had drunk Babylon's wine of passionate idolatry, would have to drink from God's cup his wine of passionate wrath (14:10). Cup, wine and winepress are all used as metaphors of judgment on the great day of the Lord.

Instead of grape juice overflowing the winepress, it is blood that flows out. So devastating is this judgment that the blood flows deep and far: as deep as the height of horses' bridles, and as far as 1600 stadia. How far is this? As a physical measurement, 1600 stadia is about 184 miles. Therefore, most modern English versions render this as 180 or 200 miles. Of the major translations, only NIV and ESV leave it as 1600 stadia (KJV, NKJV use 1600 furlongs). Some commentators point out that some ancient Jewish writers give the length of Palestine as 1600 stadia, suggesting that judgment extends throughout the land. But I would be very surprised if John is referring to a physical distance. All those translations which render this as 180 or 200 miles have, I think, robbed the text of its meaning. The meaning lies in the number not in the unit. We'll find that the same is true for the dimensions of the New Jerusalem (21:16-17), where again many modern versions rob the text of meaning by translating away the symbolic numbers. Since every other number in the book is symbolic, it seems unlikely that this would be the only number that is not so. What sense can we make of the number? For many years I have been puzzled by this number; I am still somewhat puzzled by it, but I am at least willing to hazard a guess. The number 1600 can be broken down into 40-squared or 4-squared times 10-squared. All three of these numbers have symbolic value in Scripture; but 40 is not used elsewhere in Revelation, whereas both 4 and 10 are used frequently. Four is the number of universality, and ten the number of completeness. I suggest that 1600, which is 4-squared times 10-squared, signifies that this judgment is universal and complete. At the end, no longer will God's judgments be partial.

The judgments unleashed by the seven seals affected a quarter of the earth. The judgments unleashed by the seven trumpets affected a third of the earth. The time is coming when God's judgments will affect all of the earth. No longer will these judgments serve as warnings, as calls to repentance. There will come a time when it will be too late. The final call to repentance had been announced by the first angel with the eternal gospel (14:6-7). The trampling of the grape harvest with the blood flowing to 1600 stadia is a vision of final judgment upon all who refused to heed the final call. It is, therefore, no surprise to find that in the very next verse John sees "seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed" (15:1). These plagues are contained in seven bowls which the angels pour out upon the earth: the seven bowls which affect not a quarter, nor a third, but all the earth. With the pouring out of the seventh bowl, the cry goes up, "It is done!" The end has arrived. The things which must happen have happened.

Note that the harvest field is the same in the two harvests: it is the earth's (grain) harvest and the grapes of the earth's vine that are ripe. The earth's vine stretches throughout the world. Every nation, language, tribe and tongue has been deceived into worshiping that which is false. All the earth-dwellers refuse to worship God. They persist in their rebellion, ignoring God's call to repent and return to him. God's judgment, when it comes, will therefore be just. But before the grape harvest comes the wheat harvest. This, too, encompasses the whole earth. Through his own blood, the Lamb has purchased people from among men to be the people of God, drawn from every nation, language, tribe and tongue. He is turning rebellious earth-dwellers who worship what is not fit to be worshiped into worshippers of God.

To turn around the parable of our Scripture reading (Matt 13:24-43), in Satan's field, which is full of weeds, wheat is springing up on all sides. The seed is God-given, but he uses his saints as the planters and waterers. When God, through Christ and his Spirit, has raised up a full harvest, when the Lamb has finished plundering Satan's kingdom, then the end will come. But not before. Final judgment does not take place until after Christ has finished gathering in a people for God. Because this is what Christ is doing, we can pray that the Lord of the harvest send out workers into his harvest field (Matt 9:37-38; Luke 10:2), for the harvest is plentiful. Missionaries can go out with the confidence that God is sowing his seed throughout the whole world.

## B. God and his Harvester

### 1. The Lord of the Harvest

The first and second angels come out of the temple in heaven, that is they come out of God's presence, to speak on his authority. It is thus God who gives the word for both harvests to take place. It is God alone who decides when the time is up. He is the Lord of both harvests.

The third angel, who called upon the second angel to harvest the grapes, came from the altar. This is the altar under which John saw the martyrs crying out, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10). It is the altar on which the prayers of the saints were offered up to God (8:3). It is the altar from which the censer was filled with fire and hurled upon the earth (8:5). The seven trumpets within time were God's response to the prayers of the saints. The grape harvest at the end of time is also God's response to the prayers of the saints.

At our Lord's instruction we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." His kingdom will come, his will will be done. But this requires the removal of those who want no part in his kingdom. Meanwhile, though, the gates of his kingdom are open to all.

### 2. The Harvester

We do not see who it is that treads the grapes in the winepress of God's wrath—the action is rendered in the passive, albeit a "divine passive," that is a circumlocution for divine activity. In chapter 19 we learn the identity of the one who "treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty" (19:15). There it is the rider on the white horse, the King of kings and Lord of lords. This is the divine warrior, Christ himself. Thus the one who treads the grapes is the same as the one who reaps the wheat harvest. The one who judges is also the one who saves, and vice versa. Jesus Christ, the Lion-Lamb, is the one through whom God accomplishes both salvation and judgment. Indeed, salvation and judgment are opposite sides of the same coin.

In the second and third visions of chapter 14, John sees a total of seven heavenly beings. Six of these are angels, each described as "another angel." They are seen as two sets of three, between whom is seen one like a son of man. The literary structure thus focuses our attention on this, the central character.

In addition to the sharp sickle in his hand, John sees him as one "like a son of man," seated on a white cloud with a golden crown on his head. This is a reference to Daniel 7, one of the most important chapters of the Old Testament for understanding the imagery of chapters 12–14. In that chapter Daniel saw a succession of four beasts resembling a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a final beast that was terrifying and frightening beyond description. Then Daniel saw God as the Ancient of Days seated upon his throne. Into his presence, "coming with the clouds of heaven," came "one like a son of man." "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Dan 7:14).

It was explained to Daniel that the four beasts represented four earthly kingdoms; they were beastly perversions of the kingdom idea. In the beginning, God had delegated rule of his earthly kingdom to the human who was in his image (Gen 1:26). But due to rebellion, the earth was ruled by a series of tyrants who were beastly rather than human, who were images of Satan rather than images of God. Daniel was shown that there was coming "one like a son of man," one who would be truly human. He would be a fit ruler of God's eternal kingdom. God's kingdom would be universal and eternal, ruled by one who was truly human. This kingdom would not be the sole possession of the one like a son of man. Daniel was shown that it would also be for the saints of the Most High as their eternal possession (Dan 7:18, 27). Daniel 7, then, is about the collapse of all earthly kingdoms, the inauguration of God's eternal kingdom under the rule of the true king, and the incorporation into that kingdom of the saints of the Most High.

In Revelation 13, the beast whom the dragon uses to exercise his rule on earth is modeled on the four beasts of Daniel 7; he is a combination of all four. He has ten horns and seven heads, for in him seems to be concentrated all power and authority. But the first vision of chapter 14 shows the Lamb standing on Mount Zion. Here, on the heavenly Zion, God has installed his king. There was nothing that the dragon, the beast, the false prophet or Babylon could do

about it. The installation of the king over God's eternal kingdom has two ramifications: the end of all earthly kingdoms, and the incorporation of the saints into the eternal kingdom. This is what the triumphant cry at the seventh trumpet is about: "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). That declaration is spelled out for us in symbolic terms in chapters 12–14.

The installation of the Lamb on Mount Zion as king means that both judgment and salvation are at hand. In the sequence of John's visions, the investiture of the Lamb is followed immediately by the proclamation and harvest at the end of this age. But we know that there has been a long gap. God has installed his king, but the full ramifications of that installation in judgment and salvation have not yet been brought to fulfilment. During this time God is expanding his kingdom deep into Satan's territory.

At the end of time God will make all who reject him and rebel against his kingdom drink the cup of his wrath. But in the middle of time, he handed that cup to his own Son. Jesus drank to the dregs the cup of God's wrath. His blood was poured out in the winepress of God's wrath. That blood flows deep and wide to the farthest reaches of the world. God calls upon all men everywhere to repent and enter his kingdom: that's the eternal gospel. Entrance into that kingdom is passage through the blood of the Lamb: that's the gospel of grace. Passage through this blood means death and resurrection, following in the footsteps of the Lamb. Christ is himself the firstfruits of those who rise from the dead (1 Cor 15:20, 23). In raising his Son from the dead, God had in mind not only him, but all who would follow him, the firstfruits, in the ingathering of the full harvest.

Seven, yea ten, times in Revelation, Jesus says to his churches, "I am coming."<sup>1</sup> When he comes, he will do so as both Savior and Judge, as both reaper of the wheat and stomper of the grapes. In the gospel, God calls upon all people to know his Son as Savior before he reveals him as Judge. To Moses on Mount Sinai the Lord revealed himself as a "compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exod 34:6-7). The means he has provided for the forgiveness of sins is the blood of his own Son. But "he does not leave the guilty unpunished." Though his patience is long, he will eventually call "Time!" Those who refuse to know Christ as Savior will know him as Judge.

In Paul's sermon to the Areopagus, the city council of Athens, which was our Scripture reading last week, he told these religious but deluded men, who worshiped man-made images in man-made temples, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). Yes, God has set a day of judgment; there is a day when he will call, "Time." He has appointed a judge, even the Lord Jesus Christ. But this same Judge he has appointed also as Savior, and he invites all people to come and know his Son as Savior before he reveals him as Judge.

In the words of the wonderful hymn by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty sung as our offertory, "'Jesus is Lord'—the cry that echoes through creation."<sup>2</sup> The installation of God's king on Mount Zion, seen in the first vision (14:1), has ramifications throughout the entire cosmos. Indeed the cry echoes throughout creation. This Lord whom God has installed as King of kings and Lord of lords, is both Savior and Judge. As the final verse reads,

'Jesus is Lord'—a shout of joy, a cry of anguish,  
As He returns, and every knee bows low.  
Then every eye and every heart will see His glory,  
The judge of all will take His children home.

What manner of love God has shown to us in and through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ: that he poured out his judgment upon his own Son, handing him the cup of his wrath; that his blood was trod in the winepress; that we might know him as Savior rather than as Judge; that we might be part of the wheat harvest rather than of the grape harvest. What wondrous love is this that God is reaching deep into Satan's territory, there to sow the seed of his gospel; that the Lamb is turning rebels who worship that which is not fit to be worshiped to worship the only true God; that Jesus is assembling a people from every nation, language, tribe and tongue to be the people of God, the people with whom God will dwell in his eternal kingdom. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. Amen.

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:5-6)*

1. *erchomai* 7 times, *hēxō* 3 times.

2. Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, *Jesus is Lord* (2003).



Catalog No. 1526

Revelation 15:1-8

26th Message

Bernard Bell

August 6th, 2006

# GOD INCOMPARABLE

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

The news from the Middle East this past week has not been good. Israel continues to strike far into Lebanon in its efforts to cripple Hezbollah, an enemy committed to its destruction. There has been massive collateral damage, the recently-thriving Lebanese economy has been shattered, and countless civilians are suffering. Meanwhile, Hezbollah continues to fire rockets deep into Israel and grows in popularity throughout the Moslem world. The West seems unable to come up with a solution, though finally yesterday agreement was reached on a draft UN resolution. The ferocity of Israel's response and the resilience of Hezbollah have taken the world by surprise.

Meanwhile in Iraq the situation goes from bad to worse. On Thursday two four-star generals testified to Congress that civil war is a real possibility. And then there is Iran, looming menacingly on the horizon! What is the West to do about this region that seems to be rapidly spinning out of control? No one seems to have any convincing solutions.

The rules of war have changed. In former wars, when military forces wore uniforms, declared war and engaged in pitched battles, it was relatively easy to target the combatants while sparing the non-combatants. It's a lot more difficult now. How do you take out the bad guys without destroying the good guys? Who are the bad guys and the good guys anyway? How do you turn bad guys into good guys so that the cycle of violence stops?

In short, how do you work judgment and salvation simultaneously? Judgment so that the bad guys are stopped. Salvation so that the good guys are delivered, and, if possible, the bad guys are turned into good guys. I am at a complete loss as to solutions for the multiple conflicts in the Middle East. But the seeming intractability of these conflicts has prompted me to ponder the much greater problems of salvation history. How does God act so as to restrain evil while simultaneously ensuring that there is a community to enjoy the world that has been rid of evil? Or, to put it bluntly, how does God reconcile judgment and salvation?

Most people think that the book of Revelation is about judgment. But, as I hope we've seen the past two weeks, and indeed throughout this whole series, this book is just as much about salvation. No, it's more about salvation than it is about judgment. The book ends with salvation not judgment, with a renewed cosmos not a destroyed one. Today we continue to explore the twin themes of judgment and salvation as we come to chapter 15.

Chapter 15 is arranged as three separate visions which John saw (vv 1, 2-4, 5-8).

## A. Vision 1: The seven plagues (15:1)

**I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed. (Rev 15:1 NIV)**

In the first vision John sees in heaven another sign. This is the third and final sign seen in heaven. The first sign was a woman about to give birth (12:1-2). The second sign was a dragon standing in front of the woman ready to devour her baby (12:3-4). This third sign is seven angels with the seven last plagues which bring God's wrath to completion.

A sign points to something else; it is symbolic of something. The three signs seen in heaven present a symbolic portrayal of salvation history. It's a history that started all the way back in Genesis 3. There the serpent, symbolic of Satan, deceived the woman into following the desires of her eyes rather than heeding the word of the Lord. She saw that the fruit was good and she took. Every sin since has been but a variation on that theme: we see what is good in our own eyes and we take. In so doing we reject both what God declares to be good and the good which he provides us.

Last week I was asked whether God loves Satan. God makes no effort to save Satan. Instead he curses him (Gen 3:14). Curse is the opposite of bless, which means to endow with success and fruitfulness. Curse therefore means to consign to futility. Henceforth, God will frustrate Satan, rendering all his efforts futile.

In contrast, God pursues the man and the woman, calling to them in the garden and giving them an opportunity to confess their sin. Even when they do not repent but instead pass the buck, he initiates a plan that will lead to redemption. God's purposes for humanity are redemptive, salvific. His purposes for Satan are not so. Central to this plan of redemption is the birth of a son. God says to Satan,

**"I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel." (Gen 3:15)**

In this, the protoevangelium (first gospel), God announces a future battle between the woman's seed and the serpent's seed. The rest of the Old Testament can be read as the conflict between these two seeds, as the birthing of the woman's seed and Satan's efforts to eliminate that seed. Along the way God reveals the identity of this seed with increasing specificity: it will be descended from Shem, from Abraham, from Jacob, from Judah, from David. Along the way God overcomes barrenness to make it very clear that this seed will be by divine gift not by human effort. Along the way Satan makes several attempts to destroy the seed, through Pharaoh, Athaliah, Herod.

This is the great drama portrayed in the first two signs. The seed foreseen in Gen 3:15 is about to be born, and Satan, the dragon, is poised ready to devour him. The son is born, the dragon pounces, but the son is gone! Snatched up to God in heaven (Rev 12:5). The dragon is foiled. He's cursed, his actions are futile, destined to be frustrated by God. Enraged, he goes off to make war on the saints, something which God mysteriously allows him to do. In this endeavor he enlists two henchmen: the beast of tyrannical power and

the false prophet of deception. But God has installed his king on Mount Zion: the son of the woman, the Lamb, the King. Satan has been unable to prevent the birth of the seed and he's been unable to prevent God's installation of the king over his kingdom. But the way God has done this is breathtaking: the Lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb. The Son, the woman's seed, has conquered Satan by being killed, which is what Satan had been trying to do all along. The Son has conquered death by being put to death himself. Rising as the firstborn from the dead, he is liberating with his own blood a people for God. In his Son, God simultaneously worked judgment and salvation, judging the enemy in such a way that produced the salvation of many. It's astonishing! In the words of the hymn by D.A. Carson that we sang two weeks ago, none of the Old Testament sages "glimpsed the cross" or "thought that God would buy back rebels at such cost."<sup>1</sup>

With the third sign we come to the denouement of this conflict. It is the completion of the drama portrayed in the first two signs, serving as the conclusion to the symbolic history that began in chapter 12. But it is also the resumption of an earlier series of visions, those that began in chapter 5. This third sign comprises seven angels with seven plagues, which we will see are to be poured out of seven bowls. This is the third and final series of seven judgments. The seven seals affected a quarter of the earth, the seven trumpets affected a third of the earth, and the seven bowls will affect all of the earth. I view these as three sets of variations on the same theme of divine judgment. Indeed, the seven trumpets are the seventh seal, and the seven bowls are the seventh trumpet (and also the third woe). The bowls are the final variation because they bring God's wrath to fulfillment.

Before the seven plagues are poured out upon a rebellious humanity in chapter 16, there is another interlude, a delay in the action. This interlude between the initial sight of the seven and the unfolding of the seven was present also in the seven seals and the seven trumpets. In each interlude John is shown something in heaven which helps understand the sevens on earth. In each interlude he is shown something that places divine judgment into context.

In the interlude between the initial sight of the seven-sealed scroll (5:1) and the unlocking of the seals (6:1), John is shown that the only one who can unlock those seals is the conquering Lion who is the slain Lamb. The key to history, for that is what the scroll represents, is the triumph of the slain Lamb. God exercises judgment upon a rebellious humanity only after he has provided salvation. The one whom he has appointed as Judge is also the one whom he has appointed as Savior. The way he has conquered is breathtaking: through the death and resurrection of his own Son.

In the interlude between the initial sight of the seven trumpets (8:2) and the blowing of the trumpets (8:6), John is shown the prayers of the saints rising from the heavenly altar, whereupon an angel hurls to earth a censer filled with fire from the altar (8:3-5). The seven trumpets are to be understood as God's response of judgment to the prayers of the saints. They have prayed, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:10).

Now between the initial sight of the seven plagues (15:1) and the pouring out of the plagues (16:1), John sees another interlude. Like the earlier interludes it provides context in which to understand the divine judgments. The interlude contains two separate visions (15:2-4, 5-8).

## B. Vision 2: The Song of the Lamb (15:2-4)

**And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:**

**"Great and marvelous are your deeds,  
Lord God Almighty.  
Just and true are your ways,  
King of the ages.  
Who will not fear you, O Lord,  
and bring glory to your name?  
For you alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship before you,  
for your righteous acts have been revealed." (15:2-4)**

John sees a sea clear as glass, the same crystal sea he had seen in 4:6. On or beside the sea are those who have conquered the beast. They hold harps given them by God and they sing. These are the saints whom we've seen several time before. They are the countless multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language who sing, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (7:9-10). They are the 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion where they sing a new song before the throne (14:3). They are the army of the Lord, but they never actually do any fighting. All they do is sing, celebrating the victory that God has won, for salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb.

The song they sing is the song of Moses (Exod 15:1-18), which we read antiphonally to one another earlier in the service. It's the song which Moses led the Israelites in singing to the Lord as they stood beside another sea through which they had just come. There beside the sea they sang a song of celebration, praising God for the salvation he had accomplished for them and the judgment he had wrought on their enemies. God's actions with the sea brought both judgment and salvation: salvation for his people whom he brought through the sea, but judgment for Pharaoh and his armies whom he overwhelmed in the sea. No wonder they sang the words that are on the cover of our bulletin today,

**"Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?  
Who is like you—  
majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glory,  
working wonders?" (Exod 15:11)**

This declaration of the incomparability of God is the turning point of the song, from celebration of God's judgment upon the enemy to celebration of salvation for his people. Who is able to reconcile judgment and salvation but our incomparable God who works wonders?

Now the saints stand upon or beside another sea. But now the crystal sea is ablaze with fire, the fire of judgment. In the second interlude the fire of judgment burnt on the heavenly altar; now it infuses the sea. The saints have come through this fiery sea, victorious over the beast, his image and the number of his name. They have remained faithful to God even at the cost of their lives. It seemed as though the beast has conquered them by putting them to death (13:7), but it is they who have emerged the conquerors through the blood of the Lamb and their faithful witness (12:11). And so they

sing. It's a song of praise celebrating not their own victory over the beast, but God's victory.

Their song is a pastiche of quotes from the Old Testament. They acclaim that God's ways are great and marvelous, just and true. God's judgments upon his enemies are right and deserved, but he acts in such a way that he saves his people. It is because he is the universal sovereign that he has the authority both to judge and to save.

The second half of the song is breathtaking: the goal of God's judgments is universal worship! It incorporates a portion of Psalm 86 that served as our call to worship this morning:

**Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord;  
no deeds can compare with yours.  
All the nations you have made  
will come and worship before you, O Lord;  
they will bring glory to your name.  
For you are great and do marvelous deeds;  
you alone are God. (Ps 86:8-10)**

There it is again: celebration of the incomparability of God who works wonders. What are these wonders? The simultaneous accomplishment of salvation and judgment. God has revealed his righteous acts, with the result that all nations will come and worship him. The first angel with the eternal gospel had called upon all men to fear God, give him glory, and worship him (14:6-7). The third angel had pronounced judgment upon those who worship the beast, those who worship what is not fit to be worshiped (14:9-10). Then we had the vision of the grape harvest, showing the outpouring of God's wrath upon a rebellious humanity (14:17-20). Now the saints celebrate God's righteous acts. We expect this to mean judgment upon the idolaters, but what we find is that the effect of these righteous acts is to turn rebels into worshipers. Again the same three synonymous terms are used: fear God, give him glory, and worship him. Those who worship what is not fit to be worshiped have become those who worship God. The nations, who had been led astray into worshipping the beast, have been turned into those who worship God. Where we expected to find only judgment we find salvation!

How is this possible? The Old Testament had foreseen this. The song sung in verses 3-4 is drawn entirely from the Old Testament. But it takes the New Testament to understand how this happens. The song of Moses has become the song of the Lamb. The song *by* Moses has become the song *about* the Lamb. Beside the sea of old God revealed his righteous acts by simultaneously judging Pharaoh and saving his people. God has revealed his righteous acts in the Lamb, simultaneously working judgment and salvation. It is because of the triumph of the Lamb that all nations will come to worship God. All the earth-dwellers, every nation, language, tribe and tongue, has been deceived into worshipping the beast. But the Lamb is delivering people from that bondage; he is redeeming people from every nation, language, tribe and tongue to be the people of God.

In the sea God's judgment brought salvation for his people Israel. In the Lamb God's judgment brought salvation for all nations. At the end God's judgment will bring salvation for the entire cosmos. Beyond final judgment lie a new heavens and a new earth, a new Jerusalem into which the nations stream. The dragon, the beast, the false prophet, even death and Hades, will all be thrown into the lake of fire, the place of eternal judgment. God makes no effort to save them. But his goal for humanity is salvation. Sadly, people will also be thrown into the lake of fire; people who have persisted in their refusal to acknowledge their Creator. They have been called to

worship their Creator, but have refused. But the end of the story is not judgment but salvation: not a destroyed cosmos but a renewed cosmos, not the lake of fire but the New Jerusalem into which the nations stream bringing their glory to lay at the feet of God and the Lamb (22:24-26), a new Jerusalem full of former rebels who have become worshipers.

How will this happen? How will God work final judgment so that it accomplishes final salvation? I have no idea. Had I been standing with the Israelites, backed up against the sea, watching the Egyptians advance, I would have had no idea how God could work judgment on his enemies while simultaneously working salvation for his people. But he told the Israelites to stand firm and watch the judgment and salvation that he would simultaneously work (Exod 14:13). God accomplished salvation for his people without any help from them; indeed they wanted to go back to Egypt.

Had I been present in Jerusalem as Jesus was arrested, tried and condemned to death, I would have had no idea how God could work judgment on his enemies while accomplishing salvation for his people. But again he did so, in a way that far exceeded imagination. In the cross he judged sin, death and Satan, and he worked salvation for his people. Again it was without any help from his people. His people Israel had rejected Jesus, God's final prophet. And as for the rest of us, it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us (Rom 5:8).

In judgment God's righteous acts are revealed. But they are revealed in such a way as to accomplish salvation. This is what the song of Moses celebrated. This is what the song of the Lamb celebrates. This is what the saints are singing about as they are gathered beside the crystal sea. This is what God wants John to see before showing him the seven bowls of final judgment. This is what he wants us to understand about judgment: the God who judges is the God who saves. This evokes wonder and amazement. We should join Moses and David in saying, "There is none like God, who works wonders." We have an incomparable God. It is only an incomparable God who can do this. Who is like unto our God?

### C. Vision 3: The Tabernacle of Testimony (15:5-8)

**After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. (15:5-8)**

In John's third vision he sees in heaven the temple, the tabernacle of the testimony. This is the heavenly dwelling place of God, of which the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem were earthly copies. The tabernacle was called the tent of Testimony because it contained the two tablets of the Testimony, that is the Ten Commandments. This Decalogue, the Ten Words, was God's testimony or witness to Israel, showing her how to be holy in the presence of a holy God. The tablets of the Testimony were placed in the ark of the Testimony which was placed in the tent of Testimony. It was here, over the tablets of the Testimony, that God met with Moses.

What testimony is in the heavenly temple? No longer is it the Ten Commandments. The Law has been replaced by a much greater testimony, namely the Lamb. Jesus bore faithful witness to his Father. But he also constitutes the Father's witness or testimony to humanity. This book of Revelation is by John "who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:2). Jesus both bore witness to the word of God and is the Word of God. He is a much greater word than the Decalogue, the Ten Words. Though they were intended to convey life, the commandments conveyed only death, for they remained written on tablets of stone and not on human hearts. But God's testimony in his Son conveys life. Yes the Son will judge; he has already judged the supernatural powers of evil and he will judge those who persist in following those powers. But the Son also saves; he gives life to those who follow him through death into resurrection. He has become the meeting place between God and his people. No longer do we meet God over the tablets of the Law; now we meet him over his much greater testimony, the Lamb.

Out of this heavenly temple, this shrine to the saving grace of God exercised in Christ, come the seven angels with the seven plagues. Their procession from the temple indicates that they are authorized by God, but also that their mission is enabled by the Testimony, by the triumph of the Lamb. They are given seven bowls, the sort of bowls used in temple service. Previously these golden bowls had held the prayers of the saints (5:8). Now those prayers have been replaced by God's wrath, for God's judgments are at least partly in response to the prayers of his people. "Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we pray.

The last thing that John sees is the heavenly temple filled with God's glory. The smoke is of his glory cloud, his overwhelming presence, what the Jews would later call the *shekinah*, the indwelling presence of God in the Holy of Holies. The climax to the construction of the tabernacle and of the temple was the arrival of God's glory in the form of a cloud (Exod 40:34-35; 1 Kgs 8:10-11; 2 Chr 5:13-14). So overwhelming was this presence that Moses was unable to enter the tabernacle and the temple priests were unable to perform their service. In this vision of the heavenly temple, so overwhelming is God's presence that the angels cannot get back in until their mission is complete, until God's judgments are brought to fulfillment. But once God's wrath is complete, once his salvation is brought to fulfillment, his presence will no longer be overwhelming, for his people will see his face (22:4).

With this vision of God's overwhelming presence, the interlude is over. God sends the angels forth to pour out his wrath, to exercise his judgment (16:1). As the seventh bowl is poured out, the cry goes up, "It is done!" (16:17).

#### D. Our incomparable God

Revelation depicts the judgments of God against those who oppose him. These judgments are portrayed as three sets of seven: seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. But it is crucial to notice how these judgments are set in context by the interludes. If you see just the judgments you will get a very one-sided view of God, a God who seems to adopt a scorched-earth policy. In the interludes we see the other side of God. In the interlude between the first vision of the seven seals and the opening of the seals we see the Lamb. In the in-

terlude between the first sight of the seven trumpets and the blowing of the trumpets we see the prayers of the saints ascending to God. Here in the interlude between the first sight of the seven plagues and the pouring out of the plagues we see the saints celebrating God's righteous acts revealed in the Lamb, whereby the nations come to worship God.

For too many people, their perception of this book is shaped by the judgments, by the series of seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls. They respond with fear or fascination: fear over the awful events depicted or fascination with the timetables of such events. But these responses are misplaced. We need to pay attention to the interludes which set the judgments in context. In these interludes we see the centrality of the triumph of the slain Lamb, we see that God heeds the prayers of the saints that his kingdom come, and we see the celebration of the saints at the revelation of the righteous acts of God which brings all nations to worship him. If we read these interludes aright, I trust we will respond not in fear or fascination, but in adoration and worship, joining Moses, the Israelites, David, and the saints beside the crystal sea in praising our incomparable God whose righteous acts accomplish so much more than we could ever imagine. He has revealed his righteous acts supremely through the Lamb, Jesus whom he has set in his heavenly temple as his testimony to a rebellious world.

I don't have a solution for Israel and Lebanon, nor for Iraq, nor for Iran. I don't know how the US or the West can act in such a way that evil is overcome, the good are vindicated, and rebels are turned into friends. It seems that so many of our actions have unintended consequences. But this just serves to show the incomparability of God who has done all this on a much grander scale. He has overcome evil, he has vindicated the good, and he has turned rebels into friends. To quote again from D. A. Carson's hymn: "Who has comprehended the wisdom of the Lord? For the grandeur of his plans our God must be adored." Amen!

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!  
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?"  
"Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay him?"  
For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)*

1. D. A. Carson, "In This Rebel World," in *Shout With Delight: New Songs for the People of God, Volume 1* (Trenton, Mich.: Christway Media, 2000).

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 Revelation 16:1-21  
 27th Message  
 Bernard Bell  
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# SHOWDOWN AT ARMAGEDDON

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Armageddon. A word that evokes fear or fascination. A word that has entered the English language as a metaphor for catastrophic conflict. A word that shows up in headlines, in the titles of books and movies, in the names of hot sauces and pest control products. A Google search of “Armageddon” yesterday yielded 21 million hits!

Are we in the countdown to Armageddon? The events of the past few weeks have been troubling. Some of the rockets that Hezbollah has been firing into Israel have fallen very close to the supposed site of Armageddon. The exposure this past week in Britain of another plot to blow up airplanes has again confronted us with the terrorist threat. Will these mujahideen, these Islamic jihadists, drag the West into Armageddon?

The two most famous features of the book of Revelation are the number 666 and the name Armageddon. Both have captured the public imagination, while also unsettling it. Given the great amount of material written about 666 and Armageddon, it may surprise you to know that each is mentioned only once in Revelation, indeed in all of Scripture, and that no explanation is given of either term. This lack of data hasn't prevented great speculation. Despite the lack of data, and the wide variety of interpretations, it is clear that John expected his readers to understand the number and the name. Both are given in the context of pastoral counsel to the saints. The number 666 is given in the context of a call for wisdom (13:18). The name Armageddon is given in the context of a promise from Jesus.

Today we will try to make sense of Armageddon as we come to chapter 16, the pouring out of the seven bowls.

## A. The Bowls of God's Wrath

**Then I heard a loud voice from the temple saying to the seven angels, “Go, pour out the seven bowls of God's wrath on the earth.” (Rev 16:1 NIV)**

The seven bowls follow the seven seals and the seven trumpets as the third and final set of divine judgments. The three sets of sevens exhibit both similarities and differences. The most notable difference is the escalation in intensity: the seals affected a quarter of the earth, the trumpets affected a third of the earth, the bowls affect all of the earth. But this difference serves to heighten the correspondence between the three sets. It is this correspondence that persuades me to view these three series as three variations upon the one common theme of divine judgment. Given that the narrative sequence of Revelation is a series of visions, rather than the things seen in the visions, there is no need for the seven seals to be followed chronologically by the seven trumpets then the seven bowls. All three sets of seven portray God's judgments upon rebellious humanity, judgments which have been displayed, are being displayed, and will be displayed.

## B. The Plagues

**The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped his image.**

**The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea, and it turned into blood like that of a dead man, and every living thing in the sea died.**

**The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water, and they became blood.**

**Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:**

**“You are just in these judgments,  
 you who are and who were, the Holy One,  
 because you have so judged;  
 for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets,  
 and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.”**

**And I heard the altar respond:**

**“Yes, Lord God Almighty,  
 true and just are your judgments.”**

**The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.**

**The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refused to repent of what they had done. (16:2-11)**

The first four bowls, like the first four trumpets, affect the four realms of the cosmos: the earth, the sea, the fresh waters and the heavenly bodies. Four is the number of universality. When God acts, there is no place where his enemies can hide. There is no place to which God will not extend his judgment. There is no place that God will not rid of evil in order to renew his cosmos, in which all is holy.

Also like the trumpets, the bowls are modeled on the plagues with which God struck Pharaoh in Egypt. Indeed the divine judgments that the seven angels pour out of their bowls are specifically called plagues (15:1, 5). In Egypt Pharaoh was regarded as divine, claiming status that belonged to God alone. Furthermore, he held God's people captive, oppressing them in cruel bondage. Despite repeated calls from God through his prophet Moses to let his people go so that they might worship him, Pharaoh refused to do so. Therefore God struck him and his people with plagues to show all parties that he alone was God. They were acts of judgment upon one who set himself up against God and upon those who formed his kingdom.

They were also the prelude to the great act that would simultaneously defeat Pharaoh and his armies while delivering God's people.

The Egyptians had been deceived into worshiping Pharaoh as divine. In John's visions the earth-dwellers have been deceived into worshiping the beast. Both Pharaoh and the beast were granted their throne by Satan, but since Satan is not the sovereign of the universe, he and they are imposters, counterfeit, not fit to be worshiped. In the first five bowls God strikes at the beast's kingdom and people just as he had struck at Pharaoh's kingdom and people. It is the worshipers of the beast who are afflicted by the boils of the first bowl and by the scorching heat of the fourth bowl; it is they who writhe in pain when the beast's kingdom is plunged into darkness by the fifth bowl.

Just as the plagues in Egypt were both judgments upon and warnings to Pharaoh, calling him to repent and acknowledge the one true God, so are these plagues poured out of the bowls. But the worshipers of the beast refuse to heed God's warnings. After the fourth, fifth and seventh bowls we see that mankind refuses to repent, but continues to blaspheme God. The sixth trumpet evoked the same response. Though God's judgments work salvation, they do not themselves bring about repentance. Instead, what draws people to repentance is the faithful witness of the saints to Christ, who is himself the faithful witness to God.

Two heavenly voices break into the vision of the third bowl. An angel praises God for the justice of his judgments, acclaiming him as "you who are and who were, the Holy One." A common title for God in this book is "the one who is, and who was, and who is to come" (1:4, 8; 4:8). The angel omits the third part, for at this moment God has come in judgment. Instead he is hailed as "the Holy One." It is his holiness, the fact that he is altogether other, that gives God the authority to judge. He is the Creator; all else is created. He therefore has the right to execute judgment on creatures that rebel against him. The offense for which God judges the people here is hostility to his own people. Again there is poetic justice. They have poured out the saints' blood as if from a cup. In turn God gives them his cup of blood to drink; his cup contains his wrath which spills out their blood. The oppressors of God's people have brought this upon their own heads: judgment is what they deserve. Literally, they are "worthy."

"Worthy" is one of those words that is used exactly seven times in the book. Who is worthy of what? As Creator, God is worthy of all praise and worship (4:11). The Lamb is worthy to open the sealed scroll because he has been slain (5:9); this is the turning point of history. The slain Lamb is therefore also worthy of praise and worship (5:12). He is worthy of the same worship as God without contradicting the call to worship God alone.

We do not live in an honor-shame culture. Instead we live in a culture obsessed with self-worth. It can therefore be hard for us to grasp the significance of worthiness. The first readers of Revelation would have been considered unworthy by surrounding society. They refused to participate in the idolatrous practices of society. One of the purposes of this book is to reinforce the saints' understanding of who is worthy and why. God and the Lamb are worthy of worship: God as Creator, the Lamb as Redeemer. The dragon and the beast are not worthy of worship; those who worship them are deceived. Though the saints be judged unworthy by the world, if they just hold onto Jesus, he will judge them worthy. Jesus tells the faithful saints in Sardis that they are worthy of wearing white garments (3:4). Their worth lies not in themselves, but in the Lamb to whom they bear

faithful witness. Conversely, those who judge them unworthy in this world will themselves be found worthy of judgment.

"Yes," affirms the altar—the altar on which the prayers of the saints had been offered up to God (8:3), the altar from which the censer had been filled with fire and hurled to the earth (8:5). In his judgments God vindicates both himself and his people. Since he is holy, he vindicates himself by removing that which is not holy from his world. In doing so, he shows his righteousness. But God shows his righteousness in such a way as to bring about salvation. He vindicates his people when he judges those who oppress them. He thereby shows that it is his people not their oppressors who are in the right, who are worthy.

### C. Armageddon

**The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.**

**"Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed."**

**Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. (16:12-16)**

The similarity between the trumpets and the bowls is seen again in the sixth of each series. The blowing of the sixth trumpet released two myriad myriad troops who had been held back at the River Euphrates (9:14-16). The sixth bowl causes the Euphrates to dry up, opening the way for the kings of the east.

The Euphrates is over 1700 miles long, forming one of the great natural borders of the ancient world. From Old Testament Israel's perspective, beyond the Euphrates lay her enemies Assyria and Babylon. From Rome's perspective, beyond the Euphrates lay her great nemesis, Parthia. The drying up of the river prepares the way for invasion by God's instruments of judgment. But there is more. The Euphrates flowed through the center of Babylon. Through his prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah the Lord announced that he would dry up Babylon's waters as a prelude to her fall. The drying up of the Euphrates therefore signals that the fall of Babylon is at hand.

John sees three demonic spirits looking like frogs, another echo of the plagues in Egypt. These spirits originate in the counterfeit trinity: the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Empowered by this Satanic troika, the spirits gather the kings of the earth to a great battle. We are told both the time and the place of this battle: it will occur on the great day of God Almighty and at a place called Armageddon.

The great day of God Almighty is the day when God accomplishes both judgment and salvation. Israel of old thought that this day of the Lord announced by the prophets would be a single event when God would set everything right. God did set things right: he raised up his messiah Cyrus to fell Babylon and release his people from captivity. But it became evident that more was needed. The battle on the day of the Lord took place again on the cross: through his Messiah Jesus, God brought judgment upon sin, death and Satan, liberat-

ing his people from a greater captivity. But it is evident that neither judgment nor salvation is yet complete. We await the day when God will bring final judgment on his enemies, and will thus complete the salvation of his people and of the world he has made.

The site of this final battle is Armageddon. This Hebrew name written in Greek characters has become one of the most famous names of all time. But what does it mean and where is it? The standard interpretation of this name is *Har-Megiddo*, the mount or hill of Megiddo.

Megiddo was a strategic city in ancient Israel; it is now a well-excavated ruin. The city lay on the coastal highway that was the main route between Egypt in the south and Anatolia and Mesopotamia in the north. At Megiddo this highway emerged from a narrow ravine onto the Jezreel Plain. Over the past 3500 years many strategic battles have been fought here. Since Megiddo itself does not sit on a mountain, perhaps the Hill of Megiddo refers to the tell, the mound of rubble on which the ancient city sat, or to Mount Carmel which lies behind the site. The “standard” interpretation is that an army of 200 million will sweep across the Euphrates from the east and gather at Megiddo for a final climactic battle with God’s people.

But there is another way of understanding the name Armageddon, one which I think makes better sense of the context. Armageddon can be read as *Har-Mo’ed*, the Mount of Assembly. John provides a clue in his choice of verb: Armageddon is the place where the demonic spirits gather or assemble the kings of the earth for battle. Interpreting the name as Mount of Assembly fits the context of this gathering for war. It also allows a connection to be drawn with an Old Testament passage celebrating the fall of the king of Babylon:

**How you have fallen from heaven,  
O morning star, son of the dawn!  
You have been cast down to the earth,  
you who once laid low the nations!  
You said in your heart,  
“I will ascend to heaven;  
I will raise my throne  
above the stars of God;  
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,  
on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.  
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.”  
But you are brought down to the grave,  
to the depths of the pit. (Isa 14:12-15)**

The sin of the king of Babylon was to aspire to be like God. He desired to “sit enthroned on the mount of assembly.” We don’t know which king this taunt song was directed at, but this attitude was true of all the kings of Babylon and Assyria, as it had been true earlier of Pharaoh, as it would be true later of the Roman emperors. This attitude was true also of the empires represented by those rulers: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome. They aspired to the utmost heights but were thrown down to the utmost depths. Behind all these rulers and empires lurks Satan whose behavior they mimic. Satan aspired to be like God but has been thrown out of heaven. His home now is the Abyss, the antipode of heaven. But his fall is not yet complete: the great day of the Lord is coming when Satan will be thrown down to the utmost depths, down to the lake of fire, whence he can never again rise.

The Mount of Assembly is the place where God sits enthroned with his court. This court consists of heavenly beings: the cherubim,

elders and angels that we see assembled around the throne worshipping God. To this court God is also adding earthly beings, humans redeemed by the Lamb. Here on Mount Zion he has installed the Lamb as his King. Here are assembled the 144,000 who follow the Lamb (14:1). Satan’s assault on the Mount of Assembly is therefore an assault against the Lamb and his followers.

Interpreting Armageddon this way provides a better fit with the other depictions of this battle. In chapter 17 it’s the ten kings, sharing the beast’s power, who make war against the Lamb and his followers (17:14). In chapter 19 it’s the beast, the kings of the earth and their armies who gather to battle against the rider on the horse and his army (19:19). In chapter 20 it’s the dragon Satan who gathers the nations to battle against God’s people (20:7-9). To quote D. A. Carson’s hymn that was sung as our offertory, “The enemy is fearsome; His fury terrifies.”<sup>1</sup> He looks all-powerful. That’s why both dragon and beast are portrayed with seven heads and ten horns (12:3; 13:1). But, but, but! “[B]ut the Lamb will overcome them because he is King of kings and Lord of lords” (17:14). “But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet...The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur” (19:20). “But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil...was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur” (20:9-10). As soon as battle is joined, it’s over!

Are these four separate last battles or are they all the same battle? I think they are all the same battle, a battle that has taken place, is taking place, and will take place. Satan constantly wages war against the Lamb and his people; that’s his *modus operandi*. The Lamb has defeated Satan in his death, resurrection and exaltation; the Lamb is continuing to defeat Satan in his assaults on the church; and the time is coming when the defeat shall be complete. What will this final battle look like? I have no idea, but the last thing I expect is a pitched battle at Megiddo.

“Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” had asked the worshipers of the dragon and the beast (13:4). If you look just in the seen world, then the presumed answer is “no one.” But John sees into heaven, into the unseen world; there he sees the rider on the white horse, the divine warrior, Jesus. “With justice he judges and makes war” (19:11).

Who can oppose the beast? Jesus, whom God has appointed King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus has defeated Satan and his beastly helpers by doing the exact opposite of Satan. Satan aspired to be like God, to be seated in the utmost heights, but was cast down to the utmost depths. Jesus laid aside his equality with God, humbling himself as a servant, obedient even to death on a cross. Wherefore God has exalted him to the highest place (Phil 2:6-11).

There you have it in a nutshell: the grasping pride of Satan versus the self-giving humility of Christ. That is the fundamental conflict in the world. But the battle has already been won. God has judged the pride of Satan and vindicated the humility of his Son. Indeed it is precisely the humiliation of his Son that he has used to judge the pride of Satan. The world is no longer ruled by tyranny, by deception, by “might is right.” The kingdom of this world has fallen, is falling and must fall, to be replaced by the kingdom of God, who gives his own Son to buy back rebels at such cost.

Revelation is a pastoral book, a letter written by John to help churches in their daily lives. Just as John gave the number 666 within a piece of pastoral advice, so he does with the name Armageddon. Verse 16 could follow verse 14 as a continuation of the same sentence,

but into the middle of this sentence John has embedded verse 15. It is a word of pastoral counsel from Jesus himself.

“Behold, I come like a thief!” says Jesus, repeating the counsel that he gave to the church in Sardis (3:3). Repeatedly in this book Jesus tells his people, “I am coming”—seven times using this word, three times using a synonym, for a total of ten. He follows this with a beatitude, the third of seven in the book: “Blessed is he who stays awake” or the one who is watchful. Watchful for what? Watchful not for Armageddon but for the return of Jesus. In the countdown to Armageddon the forces of evil look strong, but our gaze is to be not on them but on the Lamb, for it is he who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

If by the time you get to the end of Revelation, you are still trying to figure out 666 and Armageddon, you have totally missed the point of the book: your gaze is on the beast not on the Lamb. The book ends with Jesus again saying, “I am coming soon” to which John responds, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

#### D. It is done!

**The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, “It is done!” Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found. From the sky huge hailstones of about a hundred pounds each fell upon men. And they cursed God on account of the plague of hail, because the plague was so terrible. (16:17-21)**

Before any battle of Armageddon is even fought, the seventh angel pours out his bowl. A cry of triumph comes from the throne, from God himself: “It is done!” It has happened! Lightning, thunder, and an earthquake announce the arrival of God, his appearance in awesome majesty. These phenomena accompanied God’s appearance to his people at Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16-19). With ever-increasing intensity they have accompanied the manifestation of his presence in heaven (4:5) and the manifestation of his judgment in the seventh seal (8:5), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and now the seventh bowl (16:18). The great earthquake brings the collapse of Babylon, the great city, and of all the cities of the nations. Babylon must fall to make way for the New Jerusalem.

So we come to the end of the central section of the book, chapters 4–16. The section began with John being summoned up to heaven, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this” (4:1). It ends with the triumphant cry from God, “It is done!” The things which must take place have taken place. What has happened? The fall of the kingdom of this world. This is what the seventh trumpet had announced: “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15). This must happen because God is on his throne, as seen in the first vision of the section (chapter 4). The way it happens is through the triumph of the Lamb, as seen in the second vision of the section (chapter 5). I hope you have noticed how often we keep coming back to these two chapters. They are the most important chapters in the book. God is on his throne, and there enthroned beside him is the slain but victorious Lamb. Everything hinges on these two chapters.

The remaining six chapters (17–22) are a tale of two cities, portraying the fall of Babylon and the descent from heaven of the New Jerusalem. The great city falls to make way for the holy city. The world city falls to make way for the heavenly city. The harlot falls to make way for the bride. The kingdom of this world falls to make way for the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.

The cry, “It is done!” heralds the fall of Babylon. The same cry, “It is done!” heralds the descent of the New Jerusalem (21:6). The fall of Babylon is only half of the story, the judgment side. God has yet to complete salvation with the arrival of the New Jerusalem. When God cries, “It is done!” for the second time, he also declares, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (21:3).

To which all God’s people say, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

*Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.*  
(2 Cor 2:14)

1. D. A. Carson, “The Kingdom of our God,” in *Shout With Delight: New Songs for the People of God, Volume 1* (Trenton, Mich.: Christway Media, 2000).

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# A TALE OF TWO CITIES

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

During the recent election campaign I have enjoyed looking at the political cartoons, cartoons in which donkeys and elephants feature prominently. To an uninitiated foreigner these cartoons must seem very strange; they are incomprehensible. But most of us are able to read these cartoons. We know the symbolism: we know that the elephants are Republicans and the donkeys are Democrats.

For the past few years there has been much talk of red states and blue states. This, too, makes sense only if you know the code. You have to know this code to understand the cover of this week's issue of *Time*. But I still have to think about this, because the UK follows a different code: red represents the party on the left, blue the party on the right. Here it is the other way around. Donkeys and elephants, red and blue: symbolic animals and symbolic colors. You have to know the code if you are to understand them.

The same is true of the Book of Revelation. It is full of symbolic animals and symbolic colors. Those who don't know the code to these symbols will completely miss the meaning, making a mockery of the text. G. K. Chesterton remarked that "though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators."<sup>1</sup>

Today we enter a major new section of the book of Revelation. Here we encounter two symbolic creatures each with a symbolic color: a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns, and a prostitute dressed in purple and scarlet. We've seen the beast before in chapter 13, but the woman is new. We'll spend the next three weeks looking at the beast and the woman, then turn in the fourth week to their opposites, the Lamb and the bride.

Hear the word of the Lord:

**One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."**

**Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead:**

MYSTERY

BABYLON THE GREAT

THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES

AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

**I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.**

**When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns..."**

**The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." (Rev 17:1-7, 18 TNIV)**

This angel's invitation to John to witness the punishment of the great prostitute marks a major new section in the book. The previous section had begun with the invitation, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (4:1). It ended with the collapse of the great city, Babylon the Great, accomplished by the pouring out of the seventh bowl (16:19). This is what had to take place: the fall of the great city. John will now be shown her punishment. Carried away in the Spirit to a wilderness location John sees a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast.

Since John is astonished at what he sees, the angel undertakes to explain his vision, both the woman and the beast. He explains the two in reverse order, first the beast in considerable detail (17:8-17), then the woman in a single sentence (17:18). We'll look at the explanation of the beast next week; this week we'll look at the explanation of the woman. As for the woman, the angel's brief explanation is that she is the great city. That doesn't seem like much help: we need an explanation of the explanation! The prostitute has been identified as many different things: Rome, Jerusalem, the apostate church in general, the Catholic church in particular. The key given by the angel to understanding the prostitute is that she is the great city. What then is the key to understanding the great city? The code is given us in the rest of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament and the rest of Revelation.

The Bible is a tale of two cities. It was not Charles Dickens who first wrote a tale of two cities, in his case about London and Paris. Nor was it Augustine, who contrasted the City of God with the earthly city. The tale of two cities is embedded within the Bible from beginning to end: the great city and the holy city, the earthly city and the heavenly city, the city of man and the city of God, the prostitute and the bride, Babylon and Jerusalem.

## A. The Great City: The City of Man

The great city has its origin near the very beginning, in the story of Cain. After Cain had killed his brother and rejected God's word, he "went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Gen 4:16). Here he had a son, Enoch, whose occupation was that of city-builder. He named his city after his son, for this was the city of his own making, the city of man. Cain's line developed a sophisticated culture with metal-working and music (Gen 4:20-22), but in the Bible's analysis all this was accomplished by humanity living away from the Lord's presence. God's name is completely absent from the account of Cain's descendents (Gen 4:17-24).

The next city-builder was Nimrod: “The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city” (Gen 10:10-12). These were the mighty cities of Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. Mesopotamian society took pride in these cities and their founders. Their accounts exalted the mighty rulers of these cities: men such as Gilgamesh in Uruk, and Hammurabi in Babylon. But in the Bible’s eyes these cities are all built by Nimrod, whose name means “we shall rebel.” Here we have the first mention of the great city, the city built by the rebel.

This rebellion is more fully depicted in the next chapter where humanity gathers together, saying, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4). This plan that was good in the eyes of man was evil in the eyes of the Lord. He intervened to halt this spread of evil. The Babylonians knew their city as *Bab-ili*, “the gate of god”; the Bible knows it as Babel, the city of confusion.

Here in the first eleven chapters of the Bible we have three accounts of the city of man. The cities that Mesopotamian society took pride in are viewed as the product of human society wandering east of Eden outside the presence of the Lord. The Genesis account has deconstructed the stories of the surrounding cultures.

And so the story continues throughout the Old Testament. Three cities in particular share the characteristics of the great city: Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre. Nineveh, located beside the Tigris River, and capital of the Assyrian Empire that was renowned in the ancient world for its brutality. Babylon, straddling the Euphrates River, and capital of the Babylonian Empire. Tyre, located on a small island just off the Phoenician coast, and center of a vast trading empire that sent its ships the length of the Mediterranean. The great city, as typified by these three cities, has several characteristic features. It lives in autonomy from God; it is proud and arrogant; and it thinks itself invincible, secure behind walls of its own making. It is the city of man, the city of human accomplishment. This city is opposed to God and to his people; it therefore oppresses his people and takes them captive, swallowing them up in its empire. It was Nineveh that took captive the northern kingdom of Israel. It was Babylon that took captive the southern kingdom of Judah. The great city is often portrayed in the Old Testament as a harlot, a prostitute whose crimes are two-fold. She is herself idolatrous, worshiping myriad false gods rather than the one true God, and she has seduced the whole world with her abominations, intoxicating the world with her wares.

It is this Old Testament imagery of Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre that lies behind John’s vision of the great prostitute. She is dressed in purple and scarlet, colors representative of fabulous wealth and luxury, and also of royalty. The color purple was highly prized and very expensive in the ancient world. The production of this color was the mainstay of Tyre’s economy. Indeed, the name Phoenicia comes from the Greek word for the color purple. The prostitute glittered with gold, precious stones and pearls. She is luxurious, dazzling, enticing, alluring. From the cup in her hand she has drunk deeply of her abominations and adulteries. This idolatrous woman is opposed to God and everything he stands for. She is seductive, sharing her cup all around. The kings of the earth and the inhabitants of the earth have drunk her cup; they too have become drunk on her wine, the adulterous wine of idolatry, of living apart from God. “The inhabitants of the earth” is a phrase used repeatedly in Revelation for those who live in autonomy from God. These are the earth-dwellers

whose horizon is only the earth, who have no eye for God, no eye for heaven. They live entirely by sight, and are therefore easily seduced by the next alluring thing that passes before their eyes.

Shockingly, John sees that the prostitute has been drinking not only the wine of her adulteries, but also the blood of the saints. She has consumed so much of this blood that she is drunk. The saints are those who bear testimony to Jesus. With the eyes of faith they see beyond the earthly horizon to heaven. They are resistant to her seductions, and pay the price of her fury.

To the readers of Revelation at the end of the first century, the great prostitute was in the first instance Rome. She was Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre all rolled up into one. She was the great city par excellence, the greatest city yet seen on earth. She called herself *urbs aeterna*, the eternal city; by this time she was almost 900 years old. She sat at the center of the largest empire the world had ever seen, an empire that existed to serve her insatiable appetites. This empire, built on the backs of slaves, made many fabulously wealthy. And just like Nineveh and Babylon, she had shed the blood of God’s people.

But the prostitute was much more than just Rome. Rome was only her current manifestation. Rome would fall but the great city would arise like a phoenix from the ashes. Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre and Rome are all long-gone. But Babylon the great city is alive and well. Wherever humanity lives outside the presence of God, proud of its own accomplishments, secure behind walls of its own making, intoxicated on its own idolatries and intoxicating others, there is the great city. Babylon is alive and well today, not least here in Silicon Valley.

Such then is Babylon, the great city, the city of man, the earthly city, the prostitute.

## B. The Holy City: The City of God

There is another city, a city that is in every respect the exact opposite of the great city.

In Genesis 4–11 we saw that humanity, left to its own devices, removed itself from God’s presence and became a race of city-builders. But God is not content to let his world go this way. He did not create mankind to live away from his presence. He did not create mankind to build its own cities.

So, after the human attempt to reach the heavens with a man-built city, God intervened in the life of one man, an idolatrous moon-worshiper living among the cities of Mesopotamia. He called Abram to leave these idolatrous cities and journey to another land, a land that he would show him (Gen 12:1). By faith Abram went.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and

welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:8-16)

There is another city whose architect and builder is God. And there is a people whom God is calling to live in this city. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called the God of this people!

But where is this city? Abraham and his descendents remained nomads in the land. They then spent four centuries in Egypt, sinking into slavery and hard labor. But God delivered them from that and brought them to the land that he had promised Abraham. Along the way he told them repeatedly that he would choose a place to put his Name (e.g. Deut 12). When David captured Jerusalem it became the City of David, the capital of the kingdom of Israel. It was here that God chose to put his Name, here that he instructed that a temple be built for his holy presence. This holy presence made the city also the City of God, the Holy City. Here God dwelt with his people, the people he had redeemed from bondage. This was Zion, the mount where God had enthroned his king and gathered his people. Pilgrimage to Zion, to the city where God is, is a major motif of the Old Testament, especially of the Psalms.

All should have been well, but the king and people proved fickle, easily led astray, easily seduced by the cities of man. It started with Solomon, the temple-builder himself, who built other cities upon the backs of slave labor. It was downhill from there. The kings led the people astray into idolatry. Finally Jerusalem became indistinguishable from the great city, from Babylon. In her was found the blood of the saints, for she put to death the prophets whom God sent to call her to her senses. Like Babylon, this rebellious, idolatrous city of Jerusalem considered herself invulnerable, for she had the Lord's temple in her midst. Finally the Lord removed his presence from the temple and the city (Ezek 10), whereupon she ceased to be the holy city. Since she desired to be like Babylon, God handed her over to Babylon.

By the time of Jesus, Jerusalem had been rebuilt. But again she was a vipers' nest of rebels. Again the blood of the saints was found in her. She killed God's final prophet, Jesus the Messiah, killing him in place of Barabbas the rebel. When Jew and Roman entered into unholy alliance to kill the king, Jerusalem had become indistinguishable from the new Babylon, Rome. Once again God removed his presence—not now the glory cloud that filled the Holy of Holies, but Jesus in whom God had been present among his people. Bereft of God's holy presence, Jerusalem again ceased to be the holy city, becoming instead the city of man. Since she desired to be like Rome, God handed her over to Rome, the new Babylon, the great city.

### C. The Holy City Today

Twice the holy city has become indistinguishable from the great city. Twice God has removed his holy presence and handed the city over to the great city. Where then is the Holy City today?

In Hebrews we read,

**But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the**

**Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:22-24)**

The holy city is the heavenly city, of which Jerusalem was an earthly outpost. Now it is the Church that is the earthly outpost, the Church made up of Jew and Gentile alike, all redeemed by God's grace to be a people for his presence. This Church had its genesis on the day of Pentecost, when God reversed the confusion of Babel. Then a most remarkable thing happened: God scattered his people throughout the Roman empire. In the Old Testament the scattering of God's people was a mark of his judgment. But the Book of Acts shows this scattering as a positive thing. By scattering his people from Jerusalem, God began to infiltrate his holy city deep into the heart of the great city. By the end of the book of Acts God's people had reached Rome itself, bringing news of another city, bringing the gospel of grace, of God's great acts in Christ. This holy city reached even into Caesar's household.

Now a generation later, John is writing to seven churches embedded within the cities of the province of Asia. God wants his cities there, for they are lampstands, serving as witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ. To the church in Pergamum Jesus says, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (2:12). He doesn't tell the church to move; no, he wants it right there, right in the heart of Satan's territory, right in the heart of the great city. Surely it would be much easier if the church picked up and moved to the desert, far from the great city. Or if it erected a huge wall to keep the great city out of sight. But God doesn't want his church removed from society. He wants his church in the midst of society, functioning as a lampstand.

God's design is that the church influence society. But the danger is that society influence the church, that the great city permeate the earthly colonies of the holy city. The seven churches of Revelation show considerable variation in resisting or embracing the mindset of the great city. Only two of the churches have remained pure: Smyrna and Philadelphia. It is not coincidental that these are the two that are facing active opposition. Two of the churches have compromised out of fear: Pergamum and Thyatira. The great city in Pergamum has already drunk of the blood of the saints: it has killed Antipas, the faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ (2:13). The churches in these two cities are fearful lest more blood be shed. But it is one of the characteristics of the great city that in her is found the blood of the saints.

To the church in Laodicea Jesus issued a stern rebuke: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing'" (3:17). This is Babylon's mentality. The Laodicean church had been so permeated by the world that she was indistinguishable from the great city. It is to this church that Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me" (3:20). This is not Jesus meekly knocking on the door of an unbeliever's heart. This is Jesus pounding on the door of a church that has become part of the great city, a church that has shut Jesus out, a church that has forgotten that she is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### D. Resisting Seduction

How do we remain true to the holy city while yet being embedded within the great city? The great city is seductive, alluring, enticing. It would be so much easier if it were not so. But it has been this way since the beginning: the fruit upon which the serpent focused the

woman's gaze was good for food and pleasing to the eye (Gen 3:6). The serpent wanted the woman to live by sight not by faith, to be driven merely by the alluring things that passed before her eyes, to be driven by her earthly appetites.

To resist seduction we have to be mindful of the chief characteristics of the holy city and the great city. The great city is the city built by humanity away from the Lord's presence; its horizon is earth-bound. The holy city is the city built by God. It is the city where God is. It is this and this alone that makes it the holy city.

After Ezekiel had seen God's holy presence depart from Jerusalem, he was shown a vision of the temple and city rebuilt. The climax of this vision is the naming of the city: *Yahweh Shammah*, "The Lord is there" (Ezek 48:35).

The big question is, "Does that delight us?" Is it enough that the defining characteristic of the holy city is that God is there? Is it God himself that we long for? Or are we after his benefits: a successful life, a home in the right neighborhood and the right school district, a good job, kids who "are above average," life free from pain, angst and regret?

In his sermon "The Weight of Glory" C. S. Lewis states,

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>2</sup>

We allow ourselves to be satisfied with the wares of the great city when God offers us something so much greater, he offers us himself. Earlier we sang, "I have no longings for another, I'm satisfied in him alone."<sup>3</sup> Could you sing that with meaning? As John Piper is fond of saying, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." Do you believe that? Are you satisfied in God? Do you even want to be satisfied in God?

In the first paragraph of his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote,

Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you... The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.<sup>4</sup>

Does the thought of God stir you deeply?

A recent *Time* cover story asked "Does God want you to be rich?"<sup>5</sup> What are you looking to God to do in your life? How do you want God to touch you? To give you money? To take away your pain? To fulfil your desires? Or do you want God to touch you with himself? To break your appetite for earth-bound things, replacing it with an appetite for himself? To so satisfy you with himself that you want nothing else?

In *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Jeremiah Burroughs writes of a paradox in the life of the Christian:

he is the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world...A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world, and ten thousand times more, will not content a Christian for his portion...A soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God.<sup>6</sup>

Are you looking to be satisfied with something other than God himself? Seeking satisfaction in something other than God is characteristic of the great city, not the holy city.

Revelation ends with a vision of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem:

**I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (21:2-3)**

Here we have it again: the chief characteristic of the Holy City is that God is there. Here we have the fulfilment of the heart of God's promise, oft-repeated throughout Scripture: "I will be your God, you will be my people and I will dwell with you." That fundamentally is what God is up to. But is that what you want? Do you want God himself?

The last six chapters of Revelation present us these two cities: the great city, Babylon, the prostitute; and the holy city, New Jerusalem, the bride. God wants us to experience the rapture of a bride for her husband, not the intoxication of a client for a prostitute.

It is by having our eyes fixed upon the holy city, and realizing that the chief characteristic of the holy city is that God is there, that we can resist the seductions of the earthly city, the great city. But if it is not God that you desire, you'll be open to all the seductions of the earthly city. The great city has much to offer that will satisfy for a moment. But the great city cannot satisfy the deepest places of the human heart, because humanity was not created to be a race of city-builders, humanity was not created to live apart from God. God created people to live with himself in the city which he builds. We also sang, "When he calls me it will be paradise: his face forever to behold."<sup>7</sup> Is that how you define paradise: to behold the face of God?

May God break us of our earthly appetites, intensify our appetite for himself, and then deeply satisfy us with himself. Amen.

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908).

2. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 [1949]), 26.

3. Steve & Vicki Cook, "I Will Glory in My Redeemer" (2001).

4. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 21.

5. David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God want you to be Rich?" *Time* 168:12 (Sept 18, 2006), 48-56.

6. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1648]), 42-43.

7. Cook, "I Will Glory."



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## BUT WE SEE JESUS

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” said Lord Acton. Despite the West’s efforts to foster democracy, the world still has plenty of absolute rulers, rulers corrupted by power. Even democratic nations find that their leaders are not immune to the corruption of power. Can great power, even absolute power, ever be used for good?

We continue our study of Revelation 17, in which John is shown God’s judgment upon the great harlot. An angel has invited John to witness this judgment: “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute” (17:1). Carried away in the Spirit into a desert, John saw “a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns” (17:3). In response to John’s astonishment at this vision, the angel replied, “Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns” (17:7). His explanation of the woman is very brief: she is the great city (17:18). Today we turn to his much longer explanation of the beast (17:8-17).

Few passages of Revelation have aroused as much scrutiny and created as much confusion as this one, so it is with trepidation that I launch into these ten verses. Three features of the vision need interpretation: the beast, his seven heads, and his ten horns. Each has been interpreted in numerous ways.

### A. The Beast (17:8-9a)

**“The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.**

**“This calls for a mind with wisdom.” (Rev 17:8-9a NIV)**

John has seen the beast before, in chapter 13, where he saw arising from the sea a beast with “ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name” (13:1). What or who is this beast? As usual, John’s imagery is drawn from the Old Testament, in this case from Daniel 7.

In that chapter Daniel saw four beasts arise from the sea: the first like a winged lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard with four wings and four heads, and the fourth a ten-horned monster that was unlike the other beasts, indeed unlike anything Daniel had ever seen so “terrifying and frightening and very powerful” was it (Dan 7:1-7). An angel explained to Daniel that these “four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth” (Dan 7:17).

The beast seen by John is a composite of these four beasts, all four beasts rolled into one. The four beasts between them had seven heads and ten horns. The heads represent authority, the horns represent power. Seven and ten are symbolic of completeness. This beast has absolute power and authority which he has received from the drag-

on, Satan (13:4). The beast is the tyrant king, ruler of the world, set up by Satan in opposition to God and his kingdom. John’s readers at the end of the first century would have had no difficulty recognizing this beast. He was the Roman emperor. Rome was the superpower of the day, the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. Her emperor was the world ruler, the most powerful man the world had ever seen. But the beast was more than just Rome. Rome was only the current manifestation of the beast, but the beast is far more enduring than Rome.

The beast is covered with blasphemous names. In Daniel’s vision, an additional horn arose among the ten horns on the fourth beast. This horn had “a mouth that spoke boastfully,” literally “a mouth that spoke great things” (Dan 7:8).

Earlier in Daniel we are given several narrative illustrations of the sorts of great things that tyrants say about themselves. It was blasphemy for Nebuchadnezzar to set up an image, calling on all to fall down and worship it (Dan 3). He uttered great things, boastful things, when he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan 4:30). It was blasphemy when Belshazzar, drinking from goblets taken from the temple in Jerusalem, “praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone” (Dan 5:4).

The book of Daniel is a warning to earthly kings and a comfort to God’s people. Nebuchadnezzar had to learn that though he might be called “king of kings” on earth (Dan 2:37), there was yet a higher king. When Daniel first related and then interpreted Nebuchadnezzar’s first dream, the king acknowledged, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings” (Dan 2:47). When God delivered Daniel’s three friends from the fiery furnace for their refusal to worship the image, Nebuchadnezzar acclaimed, “Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God...no other god can save in this way” (Dan 3:28-29). After boasting of his self-built city, Nebuchadnezzar was brought low until he acknowledged “that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes” (Dan 4:32). When he came to his senses he wrote a letter to the entire world, telling them what happened: “I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation... Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble” (Dan 4:34, 37).

Nebuchadnezzar learnt his lesson, but his successor Belshazzar did not. When he was uttering those blasphemous words during his feast, handwriting appeared on the wall announcing his doom. Daniel chastised him for failing to heed the example of Nebuchadnezzar:

“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven...you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways” (Dan 5:22-23)

This is the background to the beasts of Daniel 7, and to the beast of Revelation. Both Daniel and Revelation are about kings, kingdoms and worship. Who is the true sovereign: a mere mortal or God? Whose kingdom is everlasting: the kingdom of man or the kingdom of God? Who is fit to be worshiped: the earthly king, gods made by human hands, or the God of heaven?

Now a few centuries later, the Roman emperors were claiming great titles for themselves: *augustus* (worshipful), *dominus* (lord), *divus* (divine), *deus* (God), *pontifex maximus* (high priest, chief bridge-builder between earth and heaven), *princeps* (first citizen). But such blasphemous titles were not the sole prerogative of the Roman emperors. Every beastly ruler speaks boastfully, speaks great things of himself, claims blasphemous titles, sets himself up against God.

But there is more to the beast. He is not just anti-God, he is also a counterfeit Christ. In chapter 13, the beast is described three times as having recovered from a fatal wound (13:3, 12, 14). John saw that one of his heads was “as slain unto death” (13:3) and yet the beast lives (13:14). In this he mimics the Lamb whom John sees standing in heaven “as slain” (5:6), yet this Lamb lives (2:8). The beast, in his seeming death and resurrection, is a counterfeit of the Lamb.

In chapter 17, John uses a different expression three times to describe the beast. He “once was, now is not, and will come up” (17:8), “he once was, now is not, and yet will come” (17:8), and he “once was, and now is not” (17:11). In this he is a parody of God “who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:4, 8; 4:8; cf. 11:17; 16:5). God alone is the eternal one. He is the one “who lives for ever and ever” (4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7). The beast, though he seems to have consolidated all power and authority into his hands, is not eternal. His current status is described as “now is not.” How can this be? In the visible realm, the earthly realm, the beast seems to have total power and authority. But in the unseen realm, the heavenly realm, the spiritual realm, we see that his power is broken.

The beast will come again. However, John is careful not to use the same verb that he uses for God’s “coming.” When God comes it will be from heaven in judgment: judgment upon the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, the woman and all who are under their sway; judgment that completes the salvation of his people. It is also not the same word that he uses for the coming of Jesus. Ten times in the book Jesus says, “I am coming”: seven times with one verb, three times with another. When Jesus comes, he too will come from heaven. He too will come in judgment and salvation: judgment on his enemies and salvation for his people. But the beast does not have this power. When he comes, he will merely be present (17:8b) en route to his own judgment.

“The inhabitants of the earth” see the phoenix-like nature of the beast, and are astonished, just as in chapter 13 they saw the beast recovered from his mortal wound and were astonished and worshiped the dragon and the beast. These are the earth-dwellers, who live away from God’s presence, whose horizon is earth-bound. Since their vision is restricted to earth, they worship what on earth appears to be supreme: the seven-headed, ten-horned beast.

But John tells the saints, “This calls for a mind with wisdom” (17:9). Though most English translations place a paragraph break before verse 9, this call belongs with verse 8, as its parallels make

clear. John isn’t telling the saints that they need wisdom to figure out that the seven heads are seven hills. He’s telling them that they need wisdom concerning the beast and the worshiping response of the earth-dwellers. What are the saints to see that the inhabitants of the earth don’t see?

Four times John uses a similar construction: twice he writes, “This calls for a mind with wisdom” (13:18; 17:9); twice he writes, “This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints” (13:10; 14:12). Each time John issues this admonition in response to the worship of the beast. The earth-dwellers worship the beast: they are astonished at the beast’s seeming immortality, his ability to recover from his fatal wound, and they are deceived by the false prophet. But the saints are to look on this with a mind of wisdom. The earth-dwellers are worshiping the wrong one; they have been deceived into worshiping an imposter. The saints worship God and the Lamb. They will suffer for this, and so they are called to endure.

The saints have a wider horizon; they see what the earth-dwellers don’t see. They see whence the beast comes and whither he goes. They see that the beast is constantly arising from the Abyss and going to his destruction (17:8, 11). They therefore refuse to be astonished at the beast and refuse to give him their worship. Given his origin and his destination he is unfit to be worshiped. They also endure, because they know his doom is sure. The Abyss is the home of all that is demonic, Satan’s lair, the antipode of heaven. Its ruler is Abaddon (Hebrew) or Apollyon (Greek), both meaning Destroyer (9:11). Since it is Satan the Destroyer who has put the beast on his throne, the beast is hell-bent on the destruction of God’s kingdom. But in truth he is on the fast-track to destruction himself. To the earth-bound eye it doesn’t seem like he is headed for destruction, but the eye of faith sees what the physical eye cannot see.

So much, then, for the beast. What of his seven heads and ten horns? This is why people are really interested in this chapter!

## B. The Seven Heads (17:9b-11)

**“The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.” (17:9b-11)**

The beast’s seven heads are “seven hills on which the woman sits.” Everyone knows that Rome is the city built on seven hills; it has been known as such since the sixth century BC.

So far so good.

The angel identifies the seven heads as being also seven kings. Of these seven, five have fallen, the sixth is, the seventh is not yet come. Furthermore, when the beast returns he will be an eighth, but will also be one of the seven. Who are these seven kings? Who are the fifth, the sixth, the seventh and the eighth? There has been much speculation on this.

Most people focus their attention on the first twelve Caesars, from Julius Caesar through Domitian. Seutonius, who wrote his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* in the early second century, already recognized these twelve as a set. But how should one count them to arrive at the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth? Should one start with Julius, the first Caesar and progenitor of the first dynasty, but not himself an emperor, or with Augustus, the first emperor? Should one include Galba, Otho and Vitellius, the three short-lived emperors of the Year of the

Four Emperors? Should one count only the emperors who were deified by the Senate or who claimed divinity? Should one count Nero twice, in accord with the legend that instead of committing suicide he had gone into hiding in the east, whence he would return?

If this makes your head spin, you're in good company. As so often, George Caird speaks sense into this muddle:

Since our problems are not due to any lack of historical information, there is no reason to think that John's first-century readers would have been in any better case than we...John did not arrive at the number seven by counting emperors; the monster Leviathan had seven heads centuries before the founding of Rome...the seven kings are a symbolic number, representative of the whole series of emperors, and they would remain seven no matter how long the actual list happened to be.<sup>1</sup>

The seven kings represent the whole series of Roman emperors. They also represent the whole series of tyrant-led empires that have set themselves up against God.

If these seven kings are not restricted to Rome, what of the seven hills? Might they be more than just Rome? Hills or mountains are also symbolic of power or rule. Seven kings on seven hills well portray the totality of the beast's rule.

But there is good news. This series of tyrants who oppose God and his people is almost at an end: five of seven have already fallen. The present ruler doesn't actually have much power because currently the beast "is not." There is one ruler yet to come, but his rule will be only momentary. The beast will make one last grab for power, but he's going to destruction. Of course, this calls for a mind with wisdom. This calls for the eye of faith. To the earth-dwellers, the current king, the sixth, is all-powerful, and so is the beast. "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" they asked (13:4). But the mind with wisdom sees through the beast.

### C. The Ten Horns (17:12-14)

**"The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."** (17:12-14)

The seven heads are kings, most of whom have come and gone. The ten horns are also kings, but ones who are yet to receive rule. Those interpreters who look to ancient Rome for seven actual rulers, here look to modern Europe for ten actual rulers waiting in the wings. The prime candidate for the past few decades has been what is now the European Union. When the EEC expanded to nine members in 1973 there was great speculation that once it grew by one more member it would become this confederation of ten kings. But for five years (1981-86) the world survived a ten-nation European Community without the end arriving! Though EU membership now stands at 25 and is about to expand to 27, there are still prophecy experts who look for a ten-member Europe.

But I suggest that just as we would be wrong to look back for seven specific historical figures who were the seven heads, so we would be wrong to look ahead for ten specific historical figures to be the ten horns. Horns are symbolic of power. There are ten of them because they seem to have all power, power which the dragon will give them just as he has given power to the beast.

Because they are Satanic they have only one purpose: to support the beast in making war against the Lamb. Several times in the book we see this assault of evil upon God and his kingdom (16:14, 16; 17:14; 19:19; 20:7-9). From an earthly point of view the dragon and the beast with their seven heads and ten horns seem all-powerful. But, but, but! "[B]ut the Lamb will overcome them because he is King of kings and Lord of lords" (17:14; cf. 19:20; 20:9-10). It's no contest. The rule of the ten kings is only momentary. The beast is defeated.

The Lamb wins because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. This is a title used properly of God in the Old Testament. He allows only one other to bear the title: his own Son, who has done the exact opposite of the beast. The beast grasped for power and authority that was not his. The Son laid aside the power and authority that was his (Phil 2:8-11). This Jesus, the slain Lamb, God has raised to life, and has enthroned on his mountain, Mount Zion, as King of kings and Lord of lords.

There with the Lamb is his army, "his called, chosen and faithful followers" (17:14). The saints are involved in this victory, too. Their only weapon is their faithful witness to Jesus the slain but risen Lamb. But that was also the Lamb's weapon, for he was the archetypal faithful witness (1:5).

How many of these battles are there, and when are they taking place? Revelation seems to depict at least four last battles. This is a battle that has taken place, is taking place and will take place. The beast continues to assault God's holy mountain Zion where he has installed his king and to which he has gathered his people. But every assault is destined to failure for the beast is headed to destruction and his earthly rule is only momentary.

### D. God's Will Be Done (17:15-17)

**Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled."** (17:15-17)

Finally in his explanation of the beast, the angel turns to that on which the prostitute sits. She sits upon two different things: many waters and the scarlet beast. In the Old Testament Jeremiah described Babylon upon the many waters of her irrigation canals (Jer 51:13). That image is re-visited as the harlot seated upon "the peoples, multitudes, nations and languages." These are "the kings of the earth...and the inhabitants of the earth" whom she has intoxicated with her seductive idolatries (17:2).

Her other mount is the scarlet beast, for harlot and beast are in league together. Both are clothed in scarlet for they are the tools of Satan, the red dragon, and both make pretentious claims to royalty. But the day is coming when God will turn the beast against the woman. God turns evil upon itself in self-destruction. The assault of the beast's ten kings upon the Lamb had come to naught, so now they turn their hatred upon the prostitute, ruining her.

The ten kings were of one purpose in giving their power to the beast to assault the Lamb (17:13, 17). But it was God himself who propelled them to this one purpose so that his purpose might be done. The beast with his seven heads and ten horns thinks that he has all the power. But he doesn't see the hand of God, he doesn't see

that God's purpose trumps his own. This is what Nebuchadnezzar had to learn. This is what Belshazzar did not learn. This is what the seven-headed, ten-horned beast of Revelation never sees. Behind all the evil in the world is a sovereign God moving things along to accomplish his purpose until his words be fulfilled.

This whole book is about the things which must happen (1:1; 22:6). What must happen? Twice the cry goes up, "It is done!" Once for the fall of Babylon (16:17), once for the descent of the New Jerusalem (21:6). Two other climactic proclamations elaborate God's purpose: "The kingdom of the world [will] become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11:15). "[T]he dwelling of God [will be] with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3).

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely," said Lord Acton. But God uses his absolute power for good, to destroy the corrupting power of earthly tyrants and to install as King a very different type of ruler. He has taken all the evil that the world could throw at him. He sent his own Son as his final witness, his final Word, to a people in hostile rebellion. United in one purpose, they killed this Son, thumbing their nose at God in the worst imaginable way. God took all that. He raised his slain Son to new life, for death could not hold him. He raised his obedient Son to glory, installing him on his mountain as King of kings and Lord of lords. Now he bids all come to this King and there find not brute force but self-giving love and forgiveness.

What of the harlot and the beast who persist in their opposition to God? To quote Caird again, "every power which sets itself up against God shall in the end break itself on the Cross of his Son and the martyr witness of the saints."<sup>2</sup>

The earth-dwellers see the harlot and are seduced, intoxicated by her adulterous idolatries. The earth-dwellers see the beast and, astonished by his apparent total power and invincibility, give him their worship. "But we see Jesus...now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb 2:9). Whom do you see today? The seductive harlot, the power-hungry beast, or the self-giving and now-exalted Lamb?

Behold him there, the risen Lamb!

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen! (Rev 1:5)*

1. G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 218-219.

2. Caird, *Revelation*, 221.



Catalog No. 1530  
 Revelation 18:1-24  
 30th Message  
 Bernard Bell  
 December 3rd, 2006

# FALLEN...IN JUST ONE HOUR!

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Today marks the beginning of a season in which there is a massive disconnect between what society engages in and what the Church calls itself to. Society, as you are very well aware, has launched on its annual frenzy of rampant consumerism, but on this, the first day of Advent, the Church devotes itself to a completely different purpose: a season of quiet and sober reflection in preparation for Christmas. It is a season for remembering the promises which God gave in the Old Testament that he would come to save his people. It is a season for remembering the first advent or coming of our Lord, and for anticipating his second advent.

During this season attention is focused on certain Biblical passages that develop these themes. One of these texts is the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise in response to what Elizabeth said to her concerning the child in her womb. Our service today is shaped around this song. "My soul doth magnify the Lord" (κτν) sang Mary; *Magnificat, anima meum Dominum* in Latin, whence the title, Magnificat.

**"My soul glorifies the Lord  
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
 for he has been mindful  
 of the humble state of his servant...  
 He has helped his servant Israel,  
 remembering to be merciful  
 to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
 even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:46b-48, 54-55)**

She praises God for seeing the humble state of her, his servant, and doing great things for her. But by the end of her song it is clear that she understands that these great things are not just for her, his servant, but for his servant Israel. At the heart of her song are these lines:

**"He has performed mighty deeds with his arm,  
 he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
 He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
 but has lifted up the humble." (Luke 1:51-52)**

The song turns on the line "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm," continuing with an exposition of these mighty deeds. Mary has faith to see that in the conception of a child in her womb God has turned the world upside down. He has cast down the proud from their thrones, but the humble he has exalted.

Continuing in our studies in Revelation, we get a vivid illustration of this great reversal in the Fall of Babylon (Rev 18). Proud and arrogant Babylon, who boasts, "I am, and there is none beside me," is toppled by God, who alone can say, "I am and there is no other."

Chapter 18 is a lament over Babylon the great city. The Old Testament contains many such laments, known also as dirges or taunt songs. These are pronouncements of doom delivered in advance by God's prophets against cities, nations or rulers who are about to be the targets of divine judgment. The primary targets of these dirges were Nineveh, Babylon, and Tyre; two weeks ago we saw that these three were the primary OT manifestations of the great city, the city of man. Jerusalem, which should have been the holy city, was also the target of lament, for she had become like the great city. John has drawn upon

these different laments to weave together a devastating dirge against Babylon the Great. Just as this Babylon is OT Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre all rolled into one, so is the lament against her made up of all the different OT laments all rolled into one. Every line in the chapter is drawn from the Old Testament.

The chapter consists of three pronouncements from heaven: a radiant angel with a mighty voice (vv 1-3), a heavenly voice (4-20), and a mighty angel (21-24).

## A. Fallen, Fallen is Babylon (18:1-3)

**After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:**

**"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!  
 She has become a home for demons  
 and a haunt for every evil spirit,  
 a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.  
 For all the nations have drunk  
 the maddening wine of her adulteries.  
 The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,  
 and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive  
 luxuries." (Rev 18:1-3 NIV)**

"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" The past several chapters have been building up to this. In chapter 14, following the installation of the Lamb on Mount Zion, an angel had proclaimed, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great" (14:8). The pouring out of the seventh bowl unleashed a devastating earthquake, so tremendous that "[t]he great city split into three parts" (16:19). Now we have an extensive portrayal of the fall of this city. This is the punishment of the great prostitute which an angel had invited John to witness (17:1).

What is Babylon the Great? The original readers of Revelation at the end of the first century would have had no difficulty recognizing the Babylon of chapter 18 as Rome. But they should also have recognized that it was more than just Rome. Every element of this chapter had previously been used of Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre, even of Jerusalem. Recognizing that this material has all been used before should keep us from restricting this chapter to Rome alone. Rome is long gone, but this chapter is still of great relevance to us today, especially here in Silicon Valley.

As we saw two weeks ago the clue to the identity of the harlot Babylon is that she is the great city (17:18). The Bible is a tale of two cities: the great city and the holy city, the earthly city and the heavenly city, the city of man and the city of God, the harlot and the bride, Babylon and Jerusalem. The great city is built by man away from God's presence. The holy city is built by God as a place for his people to dwell in his presence. God designed humanity not to live apart from him in cities of their own making, but to live with him in the city of his making. Therefore, if God is to be true to his creation purposes, the great city must fall to make way for the holy city.

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!” So complete is her fall that she will be uninhabited save for wild and unclean animals, a vivid picture of desolation. Babylon’s crimes are many as we’ll see in this chapter. The one for which she is indicted here is that she has intoxicated the nations with the seductive wine of her adulterous idolatries. She has led the nations astray into living with no reference to God.

### B. Call to Flee (18:4-5)

A second voice picks up the dirge, starting with a call to God’s people:

**Then I heard another voice from heaven say:**

**“Come out of her, my people,  
so that you will not share in her sins,  
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;  
for her sins are piled up to heaven,  
and God has remembered her crimes.” (18:4-5)**

The call for God’s people to flee Babylon, repeated several times by Isaiah and Jeremiah, signified their imminent salvation and the imminent judgment of their enemies. It was also a call to avoid entanglement in Babylon’s sins for which she was about to be judged. But we should not read it here as a call for the Church to physically remove itself from the great city. Since Pentecost God has been infiltrating his holy city deep into the heart of the great city. The seven churches to whom Revelation is addressed are located in seven cities of the Roman Empire. God wanted his churches there in these pagan cities, functioning as lampstands. The churches were to resist contamination by the great city, remaining in the city but not of it. The call to “come out” is therefore a call to live uncompromised lives, as a colony of the holy city within the great city. It seems that the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were struggling with this very issue. Pergamum was tolerating the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans; Thyatira was tolerating Jezebel the false prophetess. In both cities this teaching was leading the believers astray into the eating of food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality, best understood as a metaphor for idolatry (2:14, 20). Whatever the exact nature of this teaching, it is likely that the saints were being persuaded to take a compromising line in their relations with the world. We’ll see that the Laodicean church was in an even worse condition.

A major purpose of the book of Revelation is to wake up the churches that have compromised. John paints a black and white world in order to clarify their vision, to show them the world as it really is. To see the world as it really is requires us to see into the unseen realm, the realm that is visible only to the eye of faith. John shows the great city as she really is, a seductive harlot whom we should flee, lest, entangled in her sins, we be caught up in her judgment. Yet God still wants his churches shining in the midst of Babylon. God wants PBCC shining in the midst of Silicon Valley.

### C. Call for Judgment (18:6-8)

The heavenly voice switches from addressing the saints to calling on heaven to execute judgment upon Babylon:

**“Give back to her as she has given;  
pay her back double for what she has done.  
Mix her a double portion from her own cup.  
Give her as much torture and grief  
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.  
In her heart she boasts,  
‘I sit as queen; I am not a widow,  
and I will never mourn.’  
Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:  
death, mourning and famine.**

**She will be consumed by fire,  
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.” (18:6-8)**

Here we are shown another of Babylon’s distinctive sins: her arrogant, self-centered sufficiency. John here draws upon Isaiah’s lament over Babylon, some verses of which are worth reading in full:

**You said, ‘I will continue forever—  
the eternal queen!’  
But you did not consider these things  
or reflect on what might happen.  
Now then, listen, you wanton creature,  
lounging in your security  
and saying to yourself,  
‘I am, and there is none besides me.  
I will never be a widow  
or suffer the loss of children.’  
Both of these will overtake you  
in a moment, on a single day:  
loss of children and widowhood.  
They will come upon you in full measure,  
in spite of your many sorceries  
and all your potent spells.  
You have trusted in your wickedness  
and have said, ‘No one sees me.’  
Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you  
when you say to yourself,  
‘I am, and there is none besides me.’ (Isa 47:7-10)**

Babylon can be characterized as sensual, self-centered and self-secure. Babylon is sensual: a “wanton creature,” living a life of sensual self-gratification, driven by her senses, seeking the immediate satisfaction of her sensual desires. Babylon is self-centered: “I am, and there is none beside me,” she boasts, but this is a blasphemous parody of God, who alone can say, “I am the Lord, and there is no other.” Babylon is self-secure: “I will continue for ever—the eternal queen.” Confident of her eternal nature, her invincibility, she lounges in her security.

Sensual, self-centered and self-secure. This was true of Babylon, Nineveh and Tyre. It was true of Rome. It has been true of every manifestation of the great city. Babylon is alive and well, not least here in Silicon Valley. It is inevitable that the great city should be this way for she is the city built by man away from God’s presence. If you live your life without reference to God, this is what you become. The great danger is that this thinking contaminate the church. This had happened to the church in Laodicea, which said, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing” (3:17). That’s Babylonian thinking, great-city thinking to the core. This church had shut out even Jesus, leaving him pounding on the door, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock” (3:20). He’s not meekly knocking on the heart of an unbeliever, but pounding on the door of a church that has forgotten him.

Babylon’s thinking revolves around herself. The thinking of the Laodicean church revolved around herself. Around whom does your thinking revolve? Who is at the center of your mental map?

Judgment is pronounced upon Babylon for her self-centered hubris. There is repeated emphasis throughout this chapter that her judgment fits the crime. Judgment when it comes will take just one day, nay just one hour. The city that thinks itself eternal will be brought low in an instant.

Nineveh thought itself secure but was taken by Babylon in 612 BC. Babylon thought itself secure behind its massive walls, but was taken suddenly by Cyrus in 539 BC. Tyre thought itself secure on its island fortress, but was taken by Alexander the Great in 332 BC. Rome called itself the eternal city, but after nearly 1200 years it fell to the Germanic

tribes in AD 410. What of more recent examples? Who thought the Titanic would sink on her maiden voyage? Hitler intended his Third Reich to endure a thousand years, but it fell after only twelve. In 1989 who imagined the Berlin Wall would come down so quickly? In the euphoric days of 1999 who thought the dotcom boom would suddenly burst? On September 10, 2001 who imagined that the twin towers could collapse so quickly? Fallen, fallen in just one hour!

#### D. Three-Fold Lament (18:9-19)

The heavenly voice now describes a three-fold lament by three parties who are ruined by the fall of Babylon: the kings of the earth (9-10), the merchants (11-17a) and the mariners (17b-19).

**“When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:**

**“Woe! Woe, O great city,  
O Babylon, city of power!  
In one hour your doom has come!”**

**“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.**

**“They will say, ‘The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.’ The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out:**

**“Woe! Woe, O great city,  
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,  
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!  
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!”**

**“Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, ‘Was there ever a city like this great city?’ They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:**

**“Woe! Woe, O great city,  
where all who had ships on the sea  
became rich through her wealth!  
In one hour she has been brought to ruin!” (18:9-19)**

These three parties are drawn from Ezekiel’s lament over Tyre (Ezek 27). Together they constitute the inhabitants of the earth, the earth-dwellers who live their lives in autonomy from God, the residents of the great city living away from God’s presence. Each group responds the same way to the collapse of Babylon. Each stands afar, weeping and mourning, looking in terror on the collapse of that in which they had invested their lives. Each cries out, “Woe! Woe, O great city!” And each acknowledges that the city has collapsed in just one hour. The kings of the earth bewail the loss of the city of power. The merchants and mariners bewail the loss of the city of profit. Whether power or profit these parties had gained much from their association with Babylon and had much to lose from her fall.

The lament of the merchants is particularly detailed. They “weep and mourn...because no one buys their cargoes any more.” There follows

an extensive list, drawn from Ezekiel 27, of the cargoes that have enriched these merchants. We might put the lament of these merchants into the language of the year 2000: “The dotcom companies weep and mourn because no one buys their products any more—switches and routers; servers, disk arrays and computers; online groceries and pet food...” Noting that the list of cargoes is in a descending order of value, starting with “gold, silver, precious stones and pearls,” it is shocking to find at the end after the “cattle and sheep; horses and carriages” the “bodies and souls of men,” or as the TNIV now better translates it, “human beings sold as slaves.” The slaves are considered as mere chattel to be traded for the personal profit of the merchants. Some of you may think that you are like slaves, toiling for your bosses, but generally we are free agents. Our danger is more that we are on the side of the merchants, looking to profit from the great city. Nevertheless, there are many places in the world today where people, made in the image of God, are bought and sold for the profit of the merchants.

With the exception of the human slaves, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the list of cargo traded by the merchants. Gold and silver, wine and olive oil, cattle and sheep, are all made by God for his glory and our enjoyment. Even the products of human manufacture, the fine linen and purple cloth, are elsewhere prescribed for God’s people. Again putting this into modern terms, technology is not in itself necessarily bad. I appreciate modern technology and its benefits. I have technology in my home and am glad to use it. But I don’t make it my heart’s desire. We are not called to be Luddites or to remain fixed in yesteryear like the Amish.

The wrong attitude of the merchants and Babylon to material things is clarified by what the merchants say next, addressing Babylon: “The fruit you longed for is gone from you.” We might translate this as “the fruition of your heart’s desire is gone.” Eugene Peterson in *The Message* exactly captures the sense here: “Everything you’ve lived for, gone!” The objects of Babylon’s heart’s desire were not eternal; they vanished, never to reappear.

What are your heart’s desires? The Church has had an uneasy relationship with desire. Early monasticism, rooted in neo-Platonic thought, saw a stark opposition between the evil physical world and the good spiritual world. It had an uneasy relationship with the human body. Early monks sought to mortify the flesh, to rid themselves of physical desires for food, sleep, warmth. The more extreme even dispensed with Scripture for it was written, it was material. With the Platonists they longed that their soul would be released from its entrapment in the prison of the body. But this attitude is much closer to Buddhism: since all suffering is attributable to desire, the path to nirvana is through the surrender of all desires, even the desire to be.

This is not Biblical Christianity. God has made us with minds, hearts, wills. He has created us capable of deep desire. The problem is not that we have desires, but that we allow our desires to be too easily satisfied. Let me repeat what I said two weeks ago, quoting C. S. Lewis’ sermon “The Weight of Glory”:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>1</sup>

Since the great city is sensual, she seeks satisfaction in those things which her senses encounter. Madison Avenue understands this only too well: advertising targets our senses, seeking to arouse our appetites then persuade us to immediately gratify them. But God has not made us to live by our senses. He has made us to live by faith in relationship with him.

What are you longing for? Power? Wealth? Security? Reputation? Those are all Babylon's desires. Material things are not in themselves wrong, but when they become the objects of our longing we miss the purpose for which God has made us.

Lewis writes of two different types of longing: "The one is an *askesis*, a spiritual exercise, and the other is a disease."<sup>2</sup> Here's a sobering question for us all: Are our longings a disease or a spiritual exercise? As parents well understand, it is not necessarily good to be given one's heart's desire. Children can have such a short-sighted view, wanting only what is immediately visible. Adults are often no better!

God has filled this world with many material things for his glory and our pleasure, but he has not made these things to be the objects of our longing, nor has he made us to be satisfied by these things. He has made us capable of much greater desires. Let me repeat another portion I read two weeks ago, this one from *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, where Jeremiah Burroughs writes of a paradox in the life of the Christian:

...he is the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world...A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world, and ten thousand times more, will not content a Christian for his portion...A soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God.<sup>3</sup>

Don't allow yourself to be too easily pleased! It is only when we are deeply satisfied in God, finding all our desires met in him, that we can enjoy the material things in this world without setting our longings on them. We can take them as from the hand of God rather than as the reason for living.

The mariners ask, "Who is like the great city?" (18:18), just as the earth-dwellers had asked, "Who is like the beast?" (13:4). This is the problem. The world sees the great city and is seduced; it sees the beast and is astonished into worship. Revelation is a book about worship. Whom do you worship? To whom do you give your allegiance? Whom do you see? Revelation opens our eyes to see God, so that we ask, "Who is like God? Who is like the Lamb?"

#### E. Call to Rejoice (18:20)

In contrast to the lament of those who profited from Babylon, God's people are called to a different response:<sup>4</sup>

**"Rejoice over her, O heaven!  
Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!  
God has judged her for the way she treated you."** (18:20)

The three-fold lament of the kings, merchants and mariners is here contrasted with the two-fold call to rejoice. This call is addressed to heaven, that is the realm of God, and to God's people. In the imagery of Revelation the saints, apostles and prophets are not three categories of Christians, but three ways of describing all Christians. This rejoicing is depicted in 19:1-8 with its four-fold "Hallelujah!"

#### F. Babylon's Fate (18:21-24)

Finally a third angel takes up the dirge:

**Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:**

**"With such violence  
the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,  
never to be found again.  
The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters,**

**will never be heard in you again.  
No workman of any trade  
will ever be found in you again.  
The sound of a millstone  
will never be heard in you again.  
The light of a lamp  
will never shine in you again.  
The voice of bridegroom and bride  
will never be heard in you again.  
Your merchants were the world's great men.  
By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.  
In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints,  
and of all who have been killed on the earth."** (18:21-24)

So complete will be the fall of Babylon that she will never be found again. Then five times we hear that the positive things of life will never be found or heard or seen in her again. This prepares us for the contrast with the New Jerusalem in which there are seven things that will be no more: sea, death, mourning, crying, pain, curse and night (21:1,4; 22:3,5). The positive things are gone from Babylon; the negative things are gone from the New Jerusalem.

The dirge ends on a disturbing note. None of the positive things will be found in Babylon, but what is found in Babylon is cause for her judgment: the blood of the saints. The great city, being the construction of man living apart from God, has always been opposed to God and his people. God allows the great city to endure, up to a point, and he allows her to slay his people, up to a point. Why? Ultimately this is hidden within God's inscrutable purposes. But at the heart lies the slaying of his Son. John first mentions the great city when noting that the bodies of the two witnesses "will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified" (11:8). Jerusalem, that was to have been the holy city, had become the great city, indistinguishable from Sodom, from Egypt, from Babylon. God sent his Son, as we remember at Advent. In its climactic act of revolt against God the great city killed that Son: his blood was found in the city. God raised that Son to life and raised him to heaven where he installed him as King. Then, astonishingly, he extends forgiveness to us and calls us to leave the great city and join him in the holy city, redeemed by this shed blood of his Son.

When God fells the great city, what will your response be? Which city do you have your eyes on? When called to rejoice over the fall of Babylon, would you be able to do so? Or would you be lamenting with the kings, the merchants and the mariners?

God "has performed mighty deeds with his arm, he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts." Let us magnify his name. Who is like God? Who is like the Lamb?

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 [1949]), 26.

2. C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 39.

3. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1648]), 42-43.

4. NIV is wrong to punctuate verses 19-20 together as the mariners' speech, an error which the TNIV has corrected.



Catalog No. 1531  
 Revelation 19:1-10  
 31st Message  
 Bernard Bell  
 December 10th, 2006

# HALLELUJAH!

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Last week our service was shaped around the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise celebrating that in the conception of a child in her womb God had turned the world upside down, not just for her but for his people Israel: he has cast down the proud but exalted the humble.

On this, the second Sunday of Advent, our service is shaped around the Benedictus, Zechariah's song of praise after the birth of his son John:

**"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
 because he has come and has redeemed his people." (Luke 1:68  
 NIV)**

Like the Magnificat, this song is named after the first word of its Latin translation, *Benedictus*, "blessed" or "praised."

At Advent and Christmas we read the infancy narratives of Luke's gospel. Here Luke portrays a series of ordinary folk: Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna, the shepherds. These were the "little people," but they were pious, devout, expectant and longing for God. Luke tells us that they were longing for "the consolation of Israel" and "the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:25, 38). The conception and birth of John and Jesus didn't register highly in news bulletins of the day, but these little people had faith to see these for what they were: the turning point of history. They longed for God and they sang. They sang because God had given them much to sing about, though these events were unheralded by the world at large. Actually we don't know if they sang, but the Church quickly turned their poetic proclamations into song, and has continued to sing them ever since, not just at Christmas but throughout the year. These first two chapters of Luke's gospel have contributed five songs which lie at the heart of Christian liturgy: Ave Maria (1:28,42), the Magnificat (1:46b-55), the Benedictus (1:68-79), the Gloria (2:14) and the Nunc Dimittis (2:29-32).

The other great repository of songs in the New Testament is the Book of Revelation. This may still surprise some of you who see the book only in terms of Armageddon and the millennium. Revelation is the greatest book of worship in the New Testament. The whole book is about worship, both true worship and false worship. Revelation is punctuated by songs: songs being sung in heaven around the throne, around God and the Lamb. The Church on earth has long seen it appropriate to join its voice to this heavenly chorus. Two of the greatest pieces in Handel's *Messiah* are drawn from this book: the Hallelujah Chorus and Worthy is the Lamb which closes the work.

Seven years ago, when I first mentioned in a sermon that Revelation is a book about worship, a book full of songs, several people came up to me after the service, expressing their surprise and asking what the secret was to finding these songs. There is no secret! Admittedly the NASB does a poor job in laying out the text, but all more recent translations lay these songs out as poetry, so they're easy to

find. The most important thing is to read the book as a whole, not just read the "juicy parts."

Reading the book aloud in one go is a profound experience. This is how Revelation was intended to be encountered. The book is a prophetic revelation contained within a letter addressed to seven churches. These seven churches are addressed in the order in which a messenger would have traveled. As he traveled the letter would have been read aloud to each assembled church. The letter conveys a blessing on the one who reads and the one who listens: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (1:3). The reading here is not silent reading to oneself, but public reading aloud. Reading the whole book aloud to a church gathered for worship would profoundly affect our understanding of the book; it would also be a profound act of worship.

Today we come to the last set of songs in the book. Last week we looked at the fall of Babylon. After describing the lament over Babylon of the kings, merchants and mariners who had profited from her, the heavenly voice had called upon God's people to rejoice:

**"Rejoice over her, O heaven!  
 Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!  
 God has judged her for the way she treated you." (18:20)**

Now John hears that rejoicing: songs of rejoicing over the fall of the harlot Babylon which has cleared the way for the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Our text is in three units: rejoicing over the fall of Babylon (19:1-4), rejoicing in anticipation of the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:5-9), and John's response (19:10).

## A. Rejoicing over Babylon (19:1-4)

**After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:**

**"Hallelujah!  
 Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,  
 for true and just are his judgments.  
 He has condemned the great prostitute  
 who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.  
 He has avenged on her the blood of his servants."**

**And again they shouted:**

**"Hallelujah!  
 The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." (Rev 19:1-3)**

The first song that John hears is sung by a great multitude in heaven. He had previously seen this "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (7:9). Wearing white robes and waving palm branches, they sang a similar song:

**"Salvation belongs to our God,**

**who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb.” (7:10)**

These are the saints, God’s people. Now they celebrate God’s justice. The exercise of this justice is two-fold: he has condemned the great prostitute and he has avenged the blood of his servants, the saints. The great prostitute is Babylon, the great city, the city of man living away from God. Her sins have been many: in respect to herself, she has been sensuous, self-centered and self-secure; in respect to the world, she has seduced and intoxicated with her adulterous idolatries; in respect to the saints, she has killed them.

In all this, she has corrupted the earth. This is imagery from the time of Noah: because the earth had corrupted or ruined itself God ruined the earth with the Flood (Gen 6:11-13). After the Flood God was under no illusion that mankind would be any better the next time around. “Even though every inclination of his heart is evil from his childhood” (8:21), God bound himself to never again destroy all life with a Flood, and he put his bow in the sky as a sign for himself. Under this protective cover of the rainbow, humanity went about building its city again, living outside God’s presence, ruining the earth. God tolerated this evil while setting about redemption. He called Israel to be his instrument of salvation, but Israel became corrupted as well. He sent his Son, but the Son was killed: his blood was found in the great city. But God vindicated his Son, raising him to life, raising him to glory, and installing him as King. He vindicates his saints, doing to them what he did to his own Son, raising them to life, raising them to heaven. With the fall of the great city he finally avenges the blood of his Son and the blood of his saints.

At the opening of the fifth seal, John had seen the martyrs underneath the altar crying out, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (6:10). This cry of the martyrs has echoed down through history. With the fall of Babylon, God finally brings justice.

The saints rejoice that Babylon’s smoke goes up eternally. We’ve seen that one of Babylon’s sins is that she thinks herself eternal: “I will continue forever—the eternal queen!” (Isa 47:7). Every manifestation of the great city has thought this way. Rome even called herself the eternal city. But the only thing eternal about her is her judgment.

Because Babylon has ruined the earth, God will ruin her. Because she has frustrated the purposes for which he has made the earth and put people upon it, he will remove her so that he can restore the earth and its people to the purposes he intends for them. In these closing chapters of Revelation we get a picture of this glorious destiny for the earth and for God’s people. God has not made mankind to live apart from him in the city of its own construction. He fells that city so that humanity can live with him in the city of his construction.

**The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:**

**“Amen, Hallelujah!” (19:4)**

“Amen, Hallelujah!” respond the 24 elders and the 4 cherubim, as they fall down and worship God. These are both Hebrew words that have been transliterated into Greek, Latin and now English, and are used in liturgical contexts. Hallelujah means “Praise the Lord.” Each of the last five psalms begins and ends with this call, Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Here in Rev 19:1-8 it is used four times, its only use in the New Testament. Amen is an adverb meaning “surely” from a

verb meaning to be reliable, faithful or true. It is said as a response: “let it be so.” The first four books of the Psalter each ends with the response, “Amen and Amen.” The heavenly court thus voices its approval and affirmation of God’s justice.

## **B. The Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:5-9)**

**Then a voice came from the throne, saying:**

**“Praise our God,  
all you his servants,  
you who fear him,  
both small and great!”**

**Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:**

**“Hallelujah!  
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and be glad  
and give him glory!  
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready.  
Fine linen, bright and clean,  
was given her to wear.”**

**(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (19:5-8)**

Next a voice from the throne summons all God’s people to praise. In response, the great multitude again sings, this time with such a tremendous voice that it is like the roar of rushing waters or loud peals of thunder. Again they cry out, “Hallelujah!”

Babylon’s feast has been an orgy of intoxicating seduction. Her clients were interested in her only insofar as they could enrich themselves with power and profits. With the harlot removed, now we see the bride. Who is this bride? This is a brief announcement of her later presentation:

**I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.” (21:2-3)**

The bride is the Holy City, New Jerusalem, the city built by God as a dwelling place for himself and his people. The bride is the Church, the company of God’s people. She is beautifully arrayed in her wedding garments, her righteous deeds. These “righteous acts of the saints” could mean either the righteous acts that the saints themselves have done, or the righteous acts that God has done on behalf of the saints. Perhaps it is deliberately ambiguous: both are certainly true in the theology of Revelation and of the wider New Testament. God’s people are called to behavior consistent with their status as his people. In Revelation this behavior to which we are called is faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. But God has also acted in righteousness towards his people, acquitting and vindicating them. He has done so through the faithful witness of his Son.

God’s people stand robed before him fittingly dressed for her husband, his Son. Both Father and Son love her. The Father has given his Son for her. The Son has given himself for her. The robes she wears have been washed white in his blood.

**Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, “These are the true words of God.” (19:9)**

The angel instructs John to write down a beatitude, the fourth of seven in the book: “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” It is not that only a select group of Christians are the bride of Christ and the rest are merely observers, as Baptist Bride churches maintain. In John’s mixed metaphor, all God’s people are both bride and wedding guests. Perhaps we could state that the Church is the bride, and the individual believers, who of course comprise the Church, are the wedding guests.

The angel assures John that these words are the true words of God. Which words? Certainly the beatitude he’s just given, but ultimately the whole book consists of words which are faithful and true, the words of God. They testify to the one who is himself called “Faithful and True,” “The Word of God” (19:11, 13).

### C. Worship God! (19:10)

**At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” (19:10)**

John has been so overwhelmed by the visions given him that he falls in worship at the feet of the angel who has been showing him these things. But the angel is merely the messenger not the originator of the message. This book is “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:1-2). John and the angel are both servants of God and Jesus. Both are called to hold to the testimony of Jesus. What is this testimony of Jesus? It could mean either the testimony that Jesus himself bore, or the testimony that his servants bear about him. Both are true in this book. The fundamental testimony is the witness borne by Jesus; he is the faithful witness. For this faithful witness he was put to death in the great city, but vindicated by God. The saints are called to follow in his footsteps as faithful witnesses. In the imagery of Revelation, they, too, will be put to death in the great city, but they, too, will be vindicated by God. Through his faithful witness our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him.

God, through his Spirit, speaks prophetically to the churches to enable them to bear this witness. These churches are to hear what the Spirit is saying to them. Those who hold to this testimony of Jesus, whether they be angels or humans, will worship aright. “Worship God!” could be taken as a thematic statement for the whole book. That this is of fundamental importance to the book is indicated by its repetition in the last chapter, where John again falls down before the angel in worship and is again told, “Do not do it!...Worship God!” (22:8-9).

### D. Reflections on worship

Since this is the last block of songs in the book, it is appropriate here to reflect on Revelation’s portrayal of worship. As I’ve said repeatedly, this book is about worship. I’ll address the topic under three headings: whom do we worship, who worships and what is worship?

#### 1. Whom do we worship? Worship Centers

With just a couple of exceptions, everyone in the book either worships or is worshiped. It’s not a question of whether or not you worship, but whom you worship.

Revelation portrays a great company of worshipers gathered around the throne. On that throne is God and there beside him is the Lamb. There is a fundamental divide between the worshiped and the worshipers. It is fitting that God be worshiped: he is worthy to be worshiped for he has created all things (4:11). It is fitting also that the Lamb be worshiped: he is worthy to be worshiped because he has redeemed a people for God (5:9-10, 12). Revelation has an extraordinarily high Christology. The early Christians were Jewish, with an unshakable belief in monotheism, that only God was worthy of worship. Yet the early church worshiped Jesus without compromising its monotheism. It wouldn’t be until the church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries that this was worked out doctrinally, but here in Revelation we see this high Christology. God and the Lamb are both worshiped, yet God is still one. When John refers to God and the Lamb together he uses a singular verb or pronoun; he never refers to “God and the Lamb” as “them.”

The Spirit in Revelation is not himself worshiped. Though the Creed later stated that the Spirit “with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,” the Spirit is not worshiped as an independent entity. Rather, he “proceeds from the Father and/through the Son” to lead us into true worship, among other things. Our innate tendency is to do what even John does: to worship the wrong one. But God himself is at work in us, through his Spirit, to direct us away from false objects of worship, to worship him and his Son.

Worship centers us on God and on his Christ.

#### 2. Who worships? Worship Gathers

Revelation depicts great circles of worshipers gathered around the throne. Here are all the heavenly creatures: the four cherubim, the 24 elders, and myriads of angels. As created beings, as creatures, they worship God the creator. They have not themselves been redeemed, but as spectators they nevertheless worship the Redeeming Lamb.

Here too are earthly creatures who have been raised to heaven, the martyred saints. They are both created and redeemed. They worship God as the giver of life, and the Lamb as the giver of new life. This company is described as 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel: symbolically it is the full number that God called out as the seed of Abraham (7:4-8). But it is also an innumerable multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language (7:9).

Every nation, language, tribe and tongue has been deceived into worshipping the wrong one. But God is at work plundering this kingdom of Satan’s, to assemble before his throne, as his people, as a bride for his Son, a vast multitude from every nation as the seed of Abraham. When humanity gathered together to build a city and tower at Babel, God responded by calling Abraham, telling him, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3). This is the missionary basis of the Bible: God is assembling a multinational crowd as the Bride for his Son, and as his worshipers. As John Piper says, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t”—worship is the goal of missions.<sup>1</sup> We have a story to tell to the nations, calling them to gather around God’s throne.

The Church is a great melting pot of all nations gathered together to worship God and to live a new life. As we gather for worship we do so in the company of countless others throughout the world and throughout time. We started our service by singing *Holy God, We Praise Thy Name*, a setting of the *Te Deum*, a fourth-century Latin poem that expresses this idea:

We praise you, O God (*Te Deum laudamus*), we acclaim you as the Lord;  
 all creation worships you, the Father everlasting.  
 To you all angels, all the powers of heaven,  
 the cherubim and seraphim, sing in endless praise:  
 Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,  
 heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
 The glorious company of apostles praise you.  
 The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.  
 The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.  
 Throughout the world the holy Church acclaim you.

As we are gathered for worship today, we do so as part of a much larger story, as part of a much larger company of people that stretches throughout time and space, gathered around the throne. Worship gathers us.

### 3. What is worship? Worship Responds

All worship, whether true or false, is a response. In Revelation the worship around the throne is always responsive to what is seen or heard about God and the Lamb, what is seen or heard about their character and deeds. For us to worship we have to be given something to respond to. We need to be shown the character and deeds of God and of the Lamb. On Sundays we gather to have our vision refreshed and then to respond. This is why I place the bulk of our singing after the sermon: so that we can respond in worship to what we have seen of God and Christ.

What do we say when we respond? Repeatedly we find the same things being said in Revelation: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” (4:11), “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (5:12), “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (5:13), “Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever” (7:12), “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God” (19:1). These terms are used in sets of three, four or seven.

In worship we acknowledge that all power and all glory belong to God and to the Lamb and that salvation is his. But the Church doesn't have a very good track record in holding to this.

In worship we acknowledge that all glory belongs to God. In *King Henry V*, after England's miraculous defeat of the French at Agincourt, Shakespeare has Henry say, “Let there be sung *Non nobis et Te Deum*.” *Non nobis* refers to the opening line of Psalm 115: *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory” (Ps 115:1). Kenneth Branagh's film has a beautiful rendition of this.

Unfortunately too often the church and its leaders have acquired glory for themselves, building empires and programs. It is not that God is needy of our praise—that is why we seek glory. We give God the glory because he does everything. Zechariah understood this, as did Mary.

In worship we acknowledge that all power belongs to God. The American church, especially, has this mistaken notion that it needs power: power in all three branches of government. But if the church plays the power game it will either lose because the other side always

has more power, or it will become corrupted. Neither is good. It is good news that the power belongs to God not to us. The church can then stop trying to play the power game, and instead follow the lead of the Lamb.

Pope Benedict created a great stir in his speech at Regensburg University, Germany in September, in his comments about the validity of force in religion. Thirty-eight distinguished Islamic authorities wrote a response: “jihad...means struggle, and specifically struggle in the way of God. This struggle may take many forms, including the use of force.”<sup>2</sup> Though the Church has a pretty sorry record of using power and force, we are called not to resort to power. All power rests in the hands of God. Instead our weapon is our faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was himself the faithful witness to God. We bear testimony to God's redeeming love expressed through his Son. He gave that Son, on whom the world vented all its force. Now he bids all come and know his grace.

One of the most impacting books I've read in the past year is Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, subtitled “How the obscure, marginal Jesus Movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries.” The early church had no power; Rome had all the power. But the early church had a powerful weapon. Stark writes,

The simple phrase ‘For God so loved the world...’ would have puzzled an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd... the idea that God loves those who love him was entirely new.<sup>3</sup>

Remarkably, Stark wrote this as an unbelieving sociologist. The church has a powerful weapon: its testimony to the love and grace of God shown in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In worship we acknowledge that salvation belongs to God and to the Lamb, and that God saves through his Son, whom the world slew but he raised to life.

In worship we are centered onto God and the Lamb, we gather as his great company of people, and we respond. Finally, in our response to God, we fall down on our faces before him and shut up. This is what we see repeatedly throughout Revelation. Worship is not about singing so that we feel warm and fuzzy. Worship is about having such a vision of God and of his Christ that we ascribe all glory and power to him, and then, overwhelmed in awe and enraptured at God and his Son, we shut up.

*Praise be to you, O Lord, the God of Israel, because you have come and have redeemed your people. Sovereign Lord, now dismiss your servants in peace, for our eyes have seen your salvation.* (Luke 1:68; 2:29-30 alt.)

1. John Piper, *Let The Nations Be Glad!* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 11. The title is from Ps 67:4.

2. Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.

3. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 211.



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32nd Message

Bernard Bell

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# JESUS, OUR GREAT SAVIOR

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

This past week the world has been celebrating the life of William Wilberforce. On Friday the movie *Amazing Grace* was released, timed to coincide to the day with the 200th anniversary of the passage by the British House of Commons of Wilberforce's bill for the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce persevered for twenty years, through tremendous opposition, even ridicule, and through numerous defeats, to get this bill passed. Even after its passage, he did not rest. He continued to press for the abolition of slavery itself. Twenty-six years later a bill to this effect finally passed the Commons on the very day that he died. Wilberforce was a man of principle and integrity, through the sheer weight of which he became the elder statesman of British politics, a man with a sterling reputation. Within hours of his death the government decided to bury his body in Westminster Abbey, perhaps the highest honor that can be afforded in Britain.

I attended the same college as Wilberforce: St John's College, Cambridge. In my first year I lived just above the room that he had occupied, a room now known as the Wilberforce Room. Last weekend the college hosted a conference to mark this 200th anniversary. Last Sunday a special service was held in the college chapel. The Dean concluded his commemorative sermon—a sermon devoid of God or Christ—with these words:

The best legacy the abolitionists we remember today could have would be a people, us, who took the time to understand why they couldn't always sleep, a people who faced the truths of history without averting our eyes; a people who had the courage to try and understand our world as it really is; a people prepared to make a commitment to the scrutiny of our society and its assumptions, and to a renewal of our moral energies, energies for the task of transformation, action and yearning for a world not limited by the present structures, perceptions or even pieties.<sup>1</sup>

Is that so? Would Wilberforce call us simply to face our history, renew our moral energies, and pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps? What was it that kept Wilberforce awake at night? What would he wish as his legacy?

Though St John's College now applauds Wilberforce, the College would not want any of its students to emulate his student life. He was rich and indolent; today we would call him a "party animal." At 21 he won election to parliament by outspending his rivals, and embarked on a career as a self-seeking politician—it all sounds so modern! But at the age of 25 God got hold of him, partly through the ministry of John Newton, and he became a changed man. It was his faith in God that undergirded his integrity and his persistence through constant opposition. It was his thoughts of God that kept him awake at night.

Today the world applauds Wilberforce as a principled man who took a stand against evil, even at great cost to himself. But the world is less comfortable with what motivated him. Hence we have a commemorative sermon with no mention of God.

What are we to do about the evil that is present in the world? The Left, reluctant even to use the word "evil," calls for us to repent of our history, and to imagine a new world, to "visualize world peace," to sing with John Lennon, "Imagine all the people, living life in peace...it's easy if you try." The Right calls for us to respond to evil with force or with legislation. Yet for all the visualizing of the Left and the force of the Right, evil persists. Tragically, 200 years after Wilberforce, the evil of slavery persists. Is this due simply to a failure of our imagination or to insufficient force and legislation?

What should we as Christians, who take our lead not from the Left nor from the Right but from the Scriptures, think about evil? What should we do about evil? More importantly, what is God doing about evil?

The book of Revelation, to which we return today, has much to say about evil. There is deep, systemic evil, evil that runs much deeper than a failure of our own imaginations. There are malevolent forces at work in the cosmos, forces that are implacably opposed to God. Revelation identifies these symbolically as the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. At the root of evil is the dragon, the ancient serpent, also known as Satan or the devil. Constantly working behind the scenes to oppose God and his people, the dragon employs the beast and the false prophet as his visible agents. The beast is the totalitarian ruler. The false prophet deceives the earth-dwellers into worshipping the beast rather than God. Christians at the end of the first century lived in a world in which the beast and the false prophet were clearly visible—clearly visible, that is, for those who had eyes to see. A major purpose of this book is to open the eyes of these Christians to see these realities. The beast was Roman imperial power; the false prophet was the system that orchestrated the worship of Rome and its emperor. Rome and its emperor are long gone but the beast and the false prophet are alive and well in our world today. Behind the beast and the false prophet stands the dragon, Satan. But where does Satan come from? Where does evil come from? We're not really told. The Bible is far more interested in showing us what God is doing about evil than in explaining the origins of evil.

The previous section of Revelation (17:1–19:10) showed the Fall of Babylon, the human city, the city of those who worship the beast. But the fall of this earthly city does not remove evil from the earth. The city of man's creation must fall to make way for the city of God's creation, but the deeper forces of evil must also be removed before heaven and earth can be joined as one holy realm. Between the fall of Babylon and the descent of the New Jerusalem John has another series of visions (19:11–21:8), visions which show this removal of all evil.

I find it helpful to think of Revelation as an art gallery. Each of John's visions is like a painting on the wall. These paintings are arranged in groups, like rooms in an art gallery. Often the last painting in the room forms the doorway into the next room. The chronology is the order in which we view the paintings, not of the events de-

picted in the paintings. The final painting in the previous room, the Babylon room, showed the rejoicing in heaven over the fall of that city. That heavenly scene also forms the entrance into this next room, which begins, “I saw heaven standing open” (19:11).

In this room hangs a series of paintings, seven or eight depending on how you count them. We can think of them in four groups, corresponding to the four walls of our room. On the first wall hang three paintings: the rider on the white horse, an invitation to a gruesome feast, and the defeat of the beast and false prophet (19:11-21). On the second wall hang two highly controversial paintings of the millennium: one shows the dragon bound, the other shows martyrs reigning with Christ (20:1-6). On the third wall hang two paintings of final judgment: one of Satan, the other of everything else (20:7-15). The final wall contains a single painting of the New Jerusalem (21:1-8), which serves as the portal into the next room, the New Jerusalem gallery.

I suggest that if you try to read these paintings chronologically you will get very muddled. Instead, we should allow these visions to remain as paintings on the wall, as we stand in front of each one and ponder its meaning. We’ll find that, as usual, John has made extensive use of Old Testament imagery in composing these paintings.

Over the next three weeks we’ll look at the paintings on the first three walls. On these walls we see three stages of God’s response to evil: he has appointed a great Savior, he has bound evil so as to enliven a new people, and he will ultimately remove all evil from the earth. Today we approach the first wall to look at the first three paintings (19:11-21).

### A. The Rider on the White Horse (19:11-16)

**I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:**

**KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (Rev 19:11-16 NIV)**

The first painting is dominated by an awesome figure mounted on a white horse. The imagery is militaristic, drawn from both the Old Testament and contemporary Roman culture. After a great victory, the successful general, or later the emperor, was awarded a triumph: a grand parade through the streets of Rome, in a chariot pulled by white horses, followed by his army. Jesus is here portrayed as the conquering warrior and hero. His eyes are like blazing fire, and he is armed with a sharp sword for the defeat of his enemies. His robe is blood-stained. Whose blood is this? Some suggest that this is his own blood, or even the blood of the saints, but this aspect of the vision is an echo of an Old Testament text portraying God robed in garments splattered with the blood of his enemies as he comes to work salvation (Isa 63:1-6).

On his head are many crowns: the diadems of majesty. These are worn by only three figures in Revelation, indeed in the whole New Testament. The dragon has seven (12:3), the beast has ten (13:1), for

in the visible world they seem to have all the power and worship. But they are imposters; their diadems are falsely worn. It is Jesus, visible only to the eye that sees into heaven, who wears the true diadems.

Jesus is the divine warrior, God’s appointed deliverer before whom all fall. He judges and makes war; with his sword he strikes down his enemies to impose his rule; he treads the winepress of God’s wrath. This militaristic imagery leads many to expect Christ to appear in bloody vengeance, slaying his enemies left and right in the battle of Armageddon.

But is this really how God defeats his enemies, in a great blood-bath with Jesus at the head? No wonder many are uncomfortable with the bloody scenarios painted by the *Left Behind* books. But there are other aspects of the vision which should give us pause.

Look at the names of this conquering warrior. True, he is the King of kings and Lord of lords, but how did he come to bear that title? His other names tell us: by being Faithful and True, by being the Word of God. In the prologue, Jesus is first introduced to us as “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). Jesus both bore faithful witness to God and he was God’s faithful witness to the world. For this faithful witness he was put to death by a world which shut its ears to God’s word. But God has raised his faithful witness to life as firstborn from the dead, and has installed him as King over all. This King also bears a name “that no one knows but he himself,” which most understand as a reference to God’s own name: this faithful witness now enthroned as King of kings is God himself.

This is crucial to understanding what God is doing about evil. Because there was no true and faithful witness on earth, God sent his own Son to be that witness: the Son who both bore witness to the word of God and was himself the Word of God. Israel and Rome combined in unholy alliance in Jerusalem which had become Babylon to kill the Son. God allowed it to happen. God allowed evil to make its utmost assault upon the only one whom it did not control. On the cross God drew all evil onto his Son. Then in the resurrection God declared that evil, sin and death were defeated. Over the body of his own Son God broke the back of evil. It is this Son that he has installed as King of kings and Lord of lords. The decisive victory has been won.

This scandal of the cross was the centerpiece of the preaching of the early church.

Peter on the Day of Pentecost: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ...Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:36, 38).

Peter to the crowd amazed at the healing of a crippled beggar: “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead...It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing” (Acts 3:15).

Peter to the Sanhedrin investigating this healing: “...Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10).

Peter to the Sanhedrin again: “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel” (Acts 5:30-31).

It is this Jesus, killed by humanity but raised to life by God, who is the conqueror. No mere human could play this role of savior, for we are all implicated in evil. Israel could not play this role, for it had become indistinguishable from the other nations. Therefore God took upon himself this role. This is how God has shown his righteousness, his justice. Now we see that the sword with which Christ smites the nations comes out of his mouth: it is the Word of God.

Just as a Roman general in his triumph was followed by his victorious army, so Jesus is followed by his army: the armies of heaven. Mounted on white horses, they are dressed in white linen, symbolizing their victory and their purity. Some think that these must be angels since they are described as heavenly, but these are the saints. John has seen this group twice before.

In chapter 7 they are the 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel, bearing the seal of God, who are also the countless multitude from every nation gathered around the throne. These are robed in white, for “they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). Their salvation is not of their own doing. Instead they sing, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10).

John saw them again in chapter 14 as the 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion. Here God has installed his King in the face of the dragon, beast and false prophet portrayed in chapters 12–13. As for these saints, they sing and “They follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4).

Now here are the saints again, following the conquering hero as his victorious army. They have conquered in the same way as Jesus, by being faithful witnesses to the word of God. In the visible world the beast seems to have overcome them, but God has vindicated them as he vindicated his Son, raising them to new life and exalting them to heaven. This is the Lamb’s army, but this army never actually does any fighting. It follows the Lamb wherever he goes, and it sings the praises of God and the Lamb. This imagery is so well expressed in the Moravian seal: “Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.”

## B. Invitation to a Feast (19:17-18)

**And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, “Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great.” (19:17-18)**

The second painting shows an invitation to a gruesome supper. John here borrows imagery from Ezekiel, where the Lord pronounced judgment upon Gog, ruler of the land of Magog (Ezek 39:4, 17-20). This great supper of God is a parody of another supper earlier in the chapter, the wedding supper of the Lamb. The saints, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, are the guests at the one supper. God’s enemies are the food at the other.

## C. Victory (19:19-21)

**Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth**

**of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. (19:19-21)**

The third vision shows the final battle to which the first two paintings have pointed. On one side are the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered together for war. On the other are the divine warrior and his army. This is the third of four times John sees a great battle. In chapter 16, demonic spirits from the dragon, the beast and the false prophet gather the kings of the earth “for the battle on the great day of God Almighty” at Armageddon (16:14, 16). In chapter 17, the ten kings allied with the beast “make war against the Lamb” (17:14). Here the beast and the kings of the earth “gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army” (19:19). In chapter 20 the dragon gathers the nations for battle, surrounding “the camp of God’s people, the city he loves” (20:8-9). In each vision the forces of evil gather together to war against God’s people. Are these four different battles? Reading these chapters chronologically results in a muddle. This is the same battle: the battle which has been fought, is being fought and will be fought. God’s enemies are constantly assaulting Christ and his people. To earth-bound eyes the beast seems all-powerful: he has ten horns and seven heads (13:1). His victory seems certain.

But, but, but... The gathering at Armageddon is immediately followed by the declaration, “It is done!” (16:17) and the fall of Babylon. “[B]ut the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (17:14). “But the beast was captured” (19:20). “But fire came down from heaven” (20:9). We never actually see the battle being fought. God’s enemies gather against his people, but they are immediately defeated.

This third portrayal of the battle shows the beast captured. With him is taken the false prophet who has deceived the world into worshiping the beast. Let me remind you that all people in this book worship and they all bear something on their forehead. Many have been deceived into worshiping that which is not fit to be worshiped: the beast who has set himself up as king. Though he seem all-powerful in the visible world he is an imposter, a counterfeit. His worshipers bear the mark of the beast on their forehead, showing their allegiance to him. But there is another group, who worship God and the Lamb, who alone are fit to be worshiped, God as Creator, the Lamb as Redeemer. They bear the seal of God on their forehead, for they belong to him, purchased for him by the Lamb, and they are protected by him.

The beast and the false prophet, these two henchmen that the dragon uses in his evil assault against God, are thrown into the lake of fire. Hitherto the visions of Revelation have been seen on three levels: heaven, earth, and the Abyss. The Abyss is the abode of Satan; it is the antipode of heaven, but unlike heaven it is not eternal. Satan has been hurled down from heaven to earth (12:9), and hurled down from earth to the Abyss (20:3). From the Abyss he summons the beast and his demonic army to assault the earth. But there is a realm lower than the Abyss. This is the lake of fire into which are hurled all that is evil: the beast and the false prophet (19:20), Satan the dragon (20:10), death and Hades (20:14), and those whose names are not in the book of life (20:15). From this place there is no access to earth. God currently allows evil to rise from the Abyss and assault the earth; John is repeatedly shown that God allows this to happen. But this is not the end: God will one day completely remove evil from the world with no possibility of its return. We’ll look more fully at that in the next two weeks.

After their captain is disposed of, the beast's armies are killed. But note again that the weapon is not the physical sword. This is not a physical bloodbath at Armageddon. Instead, God's enemies are felled by the word.

#### D. God's Response to Evil: The Slain Lamb

In conclusion, what are we to think as we look at these three paintings? What were the Christians at the end of the first century to think? They lived in a world of much evil. Their world looked to the Roman Emperor as its savior and hero. To him this world offered its worship while opposing any who refused to give such worship. But the Christians saw things differently. They saw heaven opened. They saw that the beast was but an imposter, that he was unworthy of worship. They saw, instead, one who was worthy, for he was Faithful and True. They saw that God had appointed a conquering lion, but they saw also that this lion had conquered by being the slain Lamb.

Yes, we live in a world in which evil is afoot. But we see into heaven. We see that God has broken the back of evil on the body of his own Son. At the heart of God's response to evil is the conquering lion who is the slain Lamb. Evil has already been broken; God will one day remove it entirely. How will God finally remove the instruments of evil, the beast and the false prophet? I don't know what it will actually look like, but the last thing I expect is a pitched battle on a field running with blood. God's weapon is not the physical sword but his word of truth. That word is ultimately the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who is Faithful and True.

Our eyes are on Jesus, our great Savior. So were Wilberforce's eyes. He wrote,

If we would...rejoice in [Christ] as triumphantly as the first Christians did; we must learn, like them to repose our entire trust in him and to adopt the language of the apostle, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Jesus Christ" [Gal. 6:14], "who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" [1 Cor. 1:30].<sup>2</sup>

It was God's saving grace in Christ which motivated Wilberforce. This is the legacy he would have wished for us. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

*May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)*

1. Duncan Dormor, sermon during Gospel Mass to mark the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act, 1807. St John's College, Cambridge, February 18, 2007.

2. William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity* (1797), quoted in John Piper, *Amazing Grace in the Life of William Wilberforce* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 72.

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33rd Message

Bernard Bell

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# PLUNDERING THE STRONG MAN'S HOUSE

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

In the Lord's prayer we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We all pray for God's kingdom to come. But how does it come, where does it come, when does it come, and for whom does it come? On these matters there is much disagreement. Nowhere is this disagreement more focused than on our text for today. The first six verses of Revelation 20 are among the most disputed in the entire Bible. In these verses we read of a period of a thousand years, a millennium. The phrase "thousand years" occurs six times, once each in verses 2-7. The phrase occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in 2 Pet 3:8, "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day," itself a quotation from Psalm 90:4. Although the millennium is described in only this one text, a great amount of doctrine has been developed around the concept of the millennium. Into the millennium is poured much of people's understanding of the whole flow of biblical history. For many Christians, especially evangelical Christians here in America, what you think of the millennium is a very serious issue, serious enough to break fellowship over. Millennial positions are written into doctrinal statements of churches and seminaries.

In Rev 20:1-6, John describes two visions. In the first he sees Satan bound in the Abyss for a thousand years, after which he is set free for a short time. In the second vision, John sees souls living and reigning with Christ for a thousand years. What are we to make of these two visions?

Over the last 2000 years, Christians have interpreted these two visions in very different ways. All agree that the visions of Satan bound and the saints reigning represent some aspect of the kingdom of God, and all agree that Jesus will return to earth. But over the relationship between these two events and over the nature of the millennial kingdom there is very great disagreement.

Premillennialism says that Jesus will return before (pre-) the millennium. Premillennialism comes in two major flavors. Historic premillennialism, so-called because of its heritage in the early church, teaches that there will be a future time of tribulation of unknown duration, after which Christ will return to establish his rule over God's kingdom on earth.

Dispensational premillennialism is much more recent, developed in the nineteenth century. This teaches two returns of Christ prior to the millennium: Jesus will return secretly and remove Christians from the earth in the Rapture. Then follows the Tribulation, a seven year period of intense turmoil on earth; this is the 70th week of Daniel. Some suggest that the Rapture occurs not at the beginning of the Tribulation (pre-tribulation) but half-way through it (mid-tribulation). At the end of the Tribulation, Christ returns visibly to fight the battle of Armageddon. After Jesus and his armies win a decisive victory, Satan is bound. With the church removed from earth in the Rapture, Israel is restored to center-stage. The prophetic promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in her. From David's throne in Jerusalem Jesus rules over God's kingdom Israel. The temple will be re-

built in Jerusalem and sacrifices resumed. Classical dispensationalism teaches that the church was not foreseen by the Old Testament. Jesus offered the kingdom to the Jews, but they rejected it. Their rejection of Jesus stopped the prophetic clock, which will not resume until the Rapture and the Tribulation. Meanwhile the church is a parenthesis in Biblical prophecy. Classical dispensationalism was popularized by the Scofield Bible (1909), Dallas was its pre-eminent seminary, and it became the dominant position within American evangelicalism. This is the view of Hal Lindsey, the *Left Behind* books, and all the charts.

Twenty years ago a major new flavor of dispensationalism emerged. Progressive dispensationalism accepts that the church is a spiritual fulfilment of Old Testament promises, but insists that these promises must be fulfilled literally and physically in Israel.

Postmillennialism says that Jesus will return after (post-) the millennium. The classic postmillennial position has been that the gospel will so prevail in the world that the world will become Christianized. God's kingdom will thereby be made visible in the world; this kingdom need not last for a literal thousand years. This was the dominant view of the 18th and 19th centuries. Recently there has been a new flavor of this: reconstructionism or theonomy, which seeks to make this country a theocracy and so inaugurate God's kingdom on earth.

Amillennialism says that there is no (a-) millennium, at least not the sort of millennium envisaged by the other two positions. Instead the millennium is symbolic for the entire church age, which is a time of tribulation. This was the dominant view for over a thousand years after Augustine established it.

Premill, postmill or amill; pretrib, midtrib or posttrib; classical or progressive dispensationalism; it's enough to make your head spin like a windmill.

Despite these very major disagreements, there are certain matters on which all agree. All agree on the authority of Scripture, though they disagree on how to read Scripture. All are convinced that they are reading Scripture rightly, that they are "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15 KJV), but are usually equally convinced that others are reading it wrongly. All agree that Jesus will return again. All agree that there will be a final judgment. All agree that the millennium is not the ultimate goal, that there is something that lies beyond: the new heavens and the new earth. However, some positions so focus on the millennial kingdom that the new heavens and new earth fade into the background. Finally, each of the positions is held by those who dearly love the Lord. This alone suggests that we need a healthy measure of humility as we approach this text.

My task today, however, is not to make sense of the millennial views but to make sense of John's visions in Revelation 20.

Last week I used the analogy of an art gallery. Each of John's visions is like a painting on the wall, with the paintings arranged in

rooms. We are currently in a room between the Babylon room and the New Jerusalem room. In this room are eight paintings hanging on four walls. The chronology is the order in which we view the paintings, not of the events depicted in the paintings. Though the visions of chapter 20 are seen after the visions of chapter 19, there is no need for the things depicted in those visions to follow in chronological order. This is extremely important. Much millennial eschatology depends upon chapter 20 following chronologically after chapter 19. The visions of chapter 19, which I likened to three paintings hanging on the first wall of our current room, show Jesus riding triumphantly on a white horse, the beast captured, and the beast and false prophet hurled into the lake of fire. Dispensationalism interprets this as Christ triumphant at the battle of Armageddon, which ushers in the kingdom. Postmillennialism sees this as the triumph of God's word, for the victor's sword issues from his mouth; this too inaugurates the kingdom. Most amillennialists see this as Christ's return at the end of the age, immediately before final judgment; they then have to assume a major leap back in time at 20:1 for the amillennial kingdom begins at Jesus' first advent.

I argued last week that we don't need to tie chapter 19 down to an end-point in history. Jesus is triumphant now, conquering the forces of evil through the word; indeed he is the word. Nor do we need to understand the things depicted in chapter 20 as following chronologically after the things of chapter 19.

With this in mind, let us proceed to the two paintings hanging on the second wall, two paintings of the millennium.

### A. Binding Satan (20:1-3)

**And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. (Rev 20:1-3 NIV)**

The vision itself is simple enough: Satan the dragon is seized, bound, and cast into the Abyss, which is then locked and sealed over him. But when does this happen and what does it actually look like in real life? Over this there is great disagreement. A major issue, as we've seen, is the temporal relationship between this vision and the visions of chapter 19, how the binding of Satan relates to the victory of the rider on the white horse. But this is the wrong question to be asking. The important question is how the binding of Satan relates to chapter 12 where John first saw the dragon Satan. Chapters 12 and 20 have numerous parallels.

In chapter 12 John saw a woman about to give birth, and the dragon standing ready to devour the child. A son is born, the dragon pounces, but the son is snatched up to heaven out of his grasp (12:1-5). Next John describes a war in heaven between the dragon and Michael and their armies of angels. The dragon lost and was pitched out of heaven:

**The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. (12:9)**

There is widespread agreement, even among premillennialists who otherwise insist on a strictly chronological approach to the book, that the birth of the son is the birth of Jesus. Satan attempted to destroy the Son, but God snatched his Son out of Satan's grasp, enthroning

him in heaven as King. The deposition of Satan is associated with the birth and exaltation of the Son. But we know that the way this came about was through the death and resurrection of the Son. The Son both bore faithful witness to the Father and he was the Father's faithful witness to the world. For this faithful witness he was put to death; it seemed as though Satan had conquered. But God turned the tables on Satan, raising his Son to new life and enthroning him as King. Satan's power is broken.

The vision of Satan being hurled out of heaven is followed by a cry of joy:

**“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God,  
and the authority of his Christ.  
For the accuser of our brothers,  
who accuses them before our God day and night,  
has been hurled down.  
They overcame him  
by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
they did not love their lives so much  
as to shrink from death.  
Therefore rejoice, you heavens  
and you who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
because the devil has gone down to you!  
He is filled with fury,  
because he knows that his time is short.” (12:10-12)**

The ejection of Satan from heaven is good news and bad news. It is good news for the saints, despite the fact that they die. Seeing that he is thrown out of heaven, the dragon pursued the woman, but she was snatched out of his grasp (12:13-16). Enraged, he turned his attention to the saints, and God allowed him to proceed. He pursues the saints to death and seems to be victorious. But it is the saints who emerge victorious, overcoming Satan by the blood of the Lamb, for they have been redeemed out of his domain by the shed blood of Jesus, and overcoming him by the word of their testimony. But the ejection of Satan is bad news for the earth, as Satan rampages across her, seeking whom he may devour.

Chapter 12 shows Satan hurled to the earth; chapter 20 shows him hurled into the Abyss. What is the relationship between these two events? It is clear that the hurling to earth is associated with the events of Jesus' first coming. I see no need to move the hurling into the Abyss to a time yet future.

The angel has the key to the Abyss. In his opening vision John saw Jesus holding the keys of death and Hades (1:18); it is because of his victory over death that Jesus now holds these keys. Death and Hades are the realm of Satan, but it is the risen Jesus not Satan who now holds the keys to this realm. The Abyss is the realm of Satan, but here he is not sovereign. It is because of Jesus' victory that the angel can hurl Satan into the Abyss. Shutting Satan in this Abyss does not mean that he has no access to the earth; the realm from which he will have no access to earth is the lake of fire. Satan is the ruler of the Abyss: he is Abaddon, Apollyon, the Destroyer (9:11). But he is not sovereign: all that he does is permitted him by God. He can do nothing but that which God permits.

The Abyss is Satan's prison (20:7). Elsewhere in the New Testament we read of the evil spirits being bound in chains and cast into prison (1 Pet 3:19; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6). The Abyss is the realm of the

demonic forces opposed to God, but it is also their holding pen, pending their final judgment and consignment to the lake of fire.

This raises several questions. Why didn't God dispose of Satan right away? The Bible doesn't tell us much about the origins of Satan or evil. Once they did enter the world, why did God not immediately remove them? When Jesus won the decisive victory over Satan, why did God not hurl him straight into the lake of fire? Because it pleased God not to do so; and with that I must be content. What the Bible shows me, though, is what God does about evil. As I suggested last week, that is the theme of this room in the art gallery: visions showing what God is doing about evil. Central to God's response to evil is the appointment of a great Savior who has already won the decisive victory.

Jesus was victorious over Satan in his life. He proclaimed liberty to the captives: he healed the sick, forgave sinners, ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. The Jewish authorities misunderstood him; they thought that by associating with these people Jesus showed that he was part of their realm, that he was demon-possessed. But, using a parable, Jesus explained that he had tied up the strong man and was plundering his house. He was liberating captives to form a new society, a new family (Mark 3:20-35).

Jesus was victorious over Satan in his death and resurrection. Though it seemed that Satan finally had him in his realm, the realm of death, Jesus broke free.

Satan is bound and there is nothing he can do about it. On earth, the beast has control over every tribe, people, language and nation (13:7); all the earth-dwellers worship him. But Jesus, through his blood, is redeeming unto God a people from every tribe, language, people and nation (5:9; 7:9). The slain but risen Lamb is plundering Satan's realm and there is nothing Satan can do about it.

Jesus sent his disciples out as his "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Witnesses not just to the Jews, but to the Gentiles, for God is now expanding his kingdom deep into Satan's realm. Missionaries can have confidence as they take the gospel to the uttermost ends of the earth: the powers of death and darkness have been defeated. As both the psalmist and John Piper put it, "Let the nations be glad" (Ps 67:4).

## B. Reigning with Christ (20:4-6)

**I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. (20:4-6)**

The second painting is as problematic as the first. Like the first, the imagery itself is not too difficult. It's knowing what the imagery represents that is controversial.

Sitting on thrones are "the souls of those who have been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God," and who "had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark." Does this refer to one group of people or to two?

The first term describes those who have been killed for their faithful witness to Jesus, the word of God. These are the martyrs. The Greek word martyr means a witness, but so many Christian witnesses died that the word came to have a narrower meaning: those who are killed for their witness. Although this narrower meaning had not yet developed at the time Revelation was written, the book makes it clear that those who bear faithful witness to Jesus and the word of God must expect to die. They are called to walk in the footsteps of Jesus who was himself the faithful witness (1:5), for which he was killed.

The second term refers to those who worship God rather than the beast. The imagery of this book is binary, black and white. There are only two groups of people. One group worships the beast, bears the mark of the beast, dwells in Babylon, and is described as the earth-dwellers; this group has been deceived by the false prophet into worshiping what is false. The other group worships God and the Lamb, bears the seal of the name of God and the Lamb, and is on its way to its dwelling in heaven; this group has been liberated by the blood of the Lamb, and now worships what is true. Those seated on these thrones are the faithful saints, who have been faithful even unto death. They form a subset of the faithful witnesses, but all faithful witnesses must be prepared to be numbered in their company.

The NIV and most English translations say that to these saints was given "authority to judge." This evokes the picture of the saints sitting in judgment upon other people. But this is an unfortunate and unnecessary translation. Rather, "judgment was given to them" (NASB). Here, as elsewhere in the book, John has drawn on imagery from Daniel 7 to compose his painting. Daniel saw four beasts arise from the sea; he is told that these represent a succession of four kingdoms. Then a horn arose, "waging war against the saints and defeating them, until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High" (7:21-22). To earthly appearances it seemed that the saints were defeated by brute force, by Satanic mis-rule. But in the heavenly realm, seen by those with the eye to see, the saints are vindicated by God, who pronounces them to be in the right.

The martyred saints that John sees enthroned are not given authority to judge others. What they are given is a ruling in their favor. God has pronounced them to be in the right, he has vindicated them. This understanding fits much better with the rest of the book. At the opening of the fifth seal, John

**saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (6:9-11)**

The martyrs had cried out for vindication. Here they have it: God's declaration that they are in the right.

John sees that these vindicated saints "came to life." Here is another problematic statement! Does this refer to a physical or a spiritual resurrection? When does this resurrection occur? In John's very first vision he sees a resplendent Jesus who says, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!" (1:18). To the church in Smyrna Jesus presents himself as the one "who died and came to life again" (2:8). This was important for the church in Smyrna, for Jesus warns the saints that they are about to die under persecution. They need not fear because Jesus has broken through death into new life. This is what John sees in chapter 20. It is not a physical resurrection on earth. The saints have been killed for their

faithful witness, but they live! This is their vindication! In this, as in all things, they follow the Lamb: in faithful witness, through death, to life beyond. They live because Jesus holds the keys to death and Hades. Death cannot hold his people.

In contrast the rest of the dead do not come to life during the millennium. These are those who worship the beast, who bear the mark of the beast on their forehead. For them death leads into Hades, the holding place for humans pending final judgment. Contrary to what many think, the statement that they “did not live until the thousand years were completed” does not imply that they came to life after the millennium is over. No, they stay dead, in Hades, until death and Hades give up the dead to be brought before the judgment seat (20:13).

John interjects with a beatitude, the fifth of seven in the book. Blessed are those who participate in the first resurrection; the second death has no power over them. The first resurrection and the second death are explicit; there is also an implicit first death. The first resurrection is obviously this passage of the saints through death into life beyond. The unmentioned first death is presumably the physical death they suffer at the hands of the beast. Jesus tells his people not to fear this. His words to the church in Smyrna apply to all his people:

**Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life... He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (2:10-11)**

The second death is the lake of fire (20:14), into which all God's enemies are ultimately hurled.

By paying attention to the rest of the book, the meaning of these two visions has become clear. Jesus, the faithful witness, is the first-born from the dead. Though he died, killed by evil Satanic forces, yet he now lives. Death could not hold him, as he burst open Satan's domain. The risen and exalted Victor is now plundering Satan's realm, redeeming a world-wide people for God. These people follow the Lamb in faithful witness, through death, into life. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

How does this fit in with premill, postmill or amill scenarios? I'll leave that for you to figure out. I don't really care!

Death is wrong. We sense that every time a loved one dies, every time we gather for a memorial service. Death is not a natural part of God's creation. Death entered because of human sin, behind which lies Satan. Death is the domain of Satan. But we have good news to proclaim: it is Jesus not Satan who has the keys of death and Hades. Those who follow the Lamb need have no fear of the first death; they will follow the Lamb through this death into life unending.

The early church was fearless in the face of death. A century after Revelation was written Tertullian expressed this attitude in a defense of the faith he addressed to the “Rulers of the Roman Empire.” He said of the church,

We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but

the temples of your gods...The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.<sup>1</sup>

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The more Christians the beast kills the stronger the church grows. This is what the church in China has been experiencing.

I entitled my first sermon on Revelation, six years ago, “Power on earth to stand in the face of hell,” a line from a song by Iona. These two visions give the church courage to do just that: stand on earth in the face of hell.

We are currently in Lent, approaching Easter. On Easter Sunday the church sings great hymns proclaiming Christ's victory over death:

Up from the grave he arose,  
with a mighty triumph o'er his foes.  
He arose a victor from the dark domain,  
and he lives for ever with his saints to reign.  
He arose! He arose!  
Hallelujah! Christ arose.

The strife is o'er, the battle done;  
The victory of life is won;  
The song of triumph has begun. Alleluia!

Crown Him the Lord of life:  
who triumphed o'er the grave,  
Who rose victorious in the strife  
for those he came to save.  
His glories now we sing,  
who died and rose on high,  
Who died eternal life to bring  
and lives that death may die.

Here is God's second response to evil. Having appointed a great Savior who has broken the power of Satan, of death, of sin, he is now plundering Satan's realm, the strong man's house, to build a new society in the face of evil. Ultimately God will remove all evil, including Satan and death, from his world. But those paintings hang on the third wall which we'll look at next week.

Our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him.

*“Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?”*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:55-58)*

Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.

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 Revelation 20:7-15  
 34th Message  
 Bernard Bell  
 March 11th, 2007

# DEATH OF DEATH AND HELL'S DESTRUCTION

SERIES: *THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Jesus is once again in the news. Ten days ago *The Jesus Family Tomb* was published, a book in which the two authors claim to have discovered just that.<sup>1</sup> Jesus, they say, married Mary Magdalene and they had a son, Judah. There's nothing new in that assertion. Long before Dan Brown did so in *The DaVinci Code*, people have been claiming that Jesus married Mary Magdalene. But these authors go further: they claim that ossuaries (bone boxes) found in 1980 in a tomb at Talpiot, in the southern suburbs of Jerusalem, were used for the remains of Jesus and his family: his mother, his wife and his son. A film was made to accompany the book, directed by the principal author and with James Cameron (*Titanic*) as executive producer; last Sunday *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* premiered on the Discovery Channel.

The story has caught the imagination of the cartoonists. Cameron Cardow of the *Ottawa Citizen* speculated that the filmmakers had also found the bones of the family dog and cat.<sup>2</sup> Last weekend another of his cartoons ran in the *Mercury News*: "The skeptics last week... 'Jesus never even existed!' This week... '...and they just found his tomb in Jerusalem.'"<sup>3</sup>

Last Wednesday's *Mercury News* contained a full-page ad from Dick Bernal of Jubilee Christian Center denouncing James Cameron for his lies. The blogosphere has been buzzing with denunciations from many scholars, including those whose work is used in the book and film.

On the other side, N. T. Wright, a highly respected New Testament scholar, recently wrote a 800-page, scholarly defense of the resurrection, in which he argues that it is difficult to explain how the church got going if there was no resurrection.<sup>4</sup>

What happened to Jesus? Do we affirm with the Creed that Jesus Christ "was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father." Or did Jesus' bones end up in a box after he had married and had a son? Was the resurrection just a hoax?

In the mid-50s the church in Corinth struggled with the matter of the resurrection. In our Scripture reading this morning Paul told the Corinthian church,

**If there is no resurrection from the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Cor 15:13-16 NIV)**

Are we the victims of an ancient hoax? Are we to be pitied more than all people? Has my preaching these past few weeks been in vain? This was a major concern for Paul, for he devoted a long chapter to it. At the beginning of his argument he states,

**For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he**

**was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor 15:3-4)**

Why is the resurrection important? This isn't just some academic debate about a dry, abstract point of doctrine. Much depends on the resurrection of Jesus, as Paul told the Corinthians: the fate of Christians, whether alive or dead, the fate of God's enemies, and the fate of death itself. Two weeks ago we saw the centrality of the resurrection in the preaching of the early church from the very first day: repeatedly Peter proclaims "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 4:10; cf. 2:36; 3:15; 5:30).

The death and resurrection of Jesus is central also to the book of Revelation. The key to history is the conquering lion who is the slain Lamb. Yes Jesus has conquered, but his path to victory lay through faithful witness, death, resurrection and enthronement. He is the only one who can open the seals on the scroll that contains God's purpose for the world; he is the one on whom history turns. Without the resurrection the scroll would not be opened.

I have been using the metaphor of an art gallery as we travel through Revelation. We are currently in the second last room of the gallery, a room whose theme is God's response to evil. Three paintings on the first wall (19:11-21) show his first response: he has appointed a great Savior, a strong deliverer who effortlessly cuts down God's enemies: the beast, the false prophet and the kings of the earth. Jesus is the conquering hero, but his path lay through death and resurrection.

Two paintings on the second wall (20:1-6) show God's second response to evil: Satan is bound, and God's people are being delivered from death to life. Jesus can deliver his people from death, from Satan's realm, because it is he, not Satan, who holds the keys of death and Hades (1:18). He holds these keys because he broke the bonds of death. Following the Lamb wherever he goes, the saints follow him through death to new life. Again the resurrection is crucial.

Today we come to the third wall on which hang two paintings showing God's third response to evil: he removes all evil from his world. The first painting shows the banishment of Satan, the second the banishment of both the dead and death itself.

## A. Banishment of Satan (20:7-10)

When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

For a thousand years Satan has been bound and imprisoned in the Abyss. I argued that this binding took place through the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. Because Jesus has passed through death to life, he now holds the keys to Satan's realm of death and Hades. It is because of this victory that Satan has been cast down.

I take the thousand years to be a symbolic period, just as every other number in the book is symbolic. It is symbolic of a long and full period. After the thousand years Satan "must be set free for a short time" (20:3). Notice that little word "must" and the use of the passive voice. Satan is not sovereign; he is no longer master, even of his own realm. He was seized, bound and hurled into the Abyss; there was nothing he could do about it. Then he must be released; again there is nothing he can do about it. Who sets him free? It must be God. Repeatedly this little word "must" emphasizes the sovereignty of God. Repeatedly these "divine passives" emphasize that it is God who is control.

Satan is a deceiver, the master of lies, in whom there is no truth. He is the antithesis of Jesus who is faithful and true. It was to prevent Satan from deceiving the nations any longer that he had been thrown into the Abyss (20:3). When released, he returns to his old ways of deception. He deceives the nations throughout the world to gather them for a final assault on God and his people. These nations are identified as Gog and Magog. John here borrows imagery from Ezekiel who saw that "Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal" would advance against God's people, but fall under God's judgment (Ezek 38-39). Meshech and Tubal are in Anatolia; Gog is perhaps Gyges, king of the Anatolian kingdom of Lydia. But John has taken this imagery of Gog of the land of Magog and expanded it to be a metaphor for all nations gathered to make war against God's people. They go up against God's people, described in metaphorical terms as both a camp and the beloved city.

This is the fourth time that John has seen this final battle (16:14, 16; 17:14; 19:19; 20:7-9). In each vision the forces of evil gather together to battle God's people. I've argued that these are all the same battle, the eschatological battle between God and his enemies. Though this battle is eschatological, in that it is the battle of the last days, we should not put it off to some distant time yet future. We are in the last days, and have been since the decisive victory of Jesus the Messiah. God's enemies are constantly assaulting Christ and his people. The enemy seems powerful; here his army is as numerous as the sand on the sea shore. His victory seems certain.

But, but, but... We never actually see the battle being fought. God's enemies gather against his people, but they are immediately defeated (16:17; 17:14; 19:19; 20:9-10). In this case their defeat is accomplished by fire raining down from heaven, a frequent Biblical metaphor of divine judgment. In just a moment Satan is thrown into the lake of fire.

So we see that Satan is released from the Abyss only in order to go to his place of final judgment. The Abyss is his prison. Today prisons are used as places of judgment, where offenders serve the penalty for their offences. But in the ancient world prisons served a different purpose. They were holding places pending judgment. Paul was in prison in Caesarea and in Rome not as punishment for his crimes, but pending judgment by the Roman authorities. This is the function of the Abyss. Satan is held there pending his final judgment. His release from prison is so that he might go to this place of final judgment, the lake of fire.

Why didn't God get rid of Satan much sooner? Satan is the ancient serpent who appeared in the garden to deceive Adam and Eve. God had entrusted the security of this garden to Adam, his earthly representative. Adam failed in this task, he failed to drive out this creature that mis-spoke God's word. Why did God allow the serpent to enter the garden? Why did he allow Adam to fail as guardian? Why did he allow Eve to be deceived? I don't know. I don't know why God allows evil in his world. The Bible gives little help in answering that question. But the Bible shows me very clearly what God is doing about evil.

Contrary to the serpent's assertion, but just as God had warned, death entered the world when Adam and Eve ate the fruit. They hid from God, but God was not content to let them hide from him. He called to them, and he immediately set limits around evil. God pronounced the serpent cursed, consigning him to futility and frustration, to a dead end. In the meantime God allows Satan to operate, but he is continually frustrating Satan's schemes, rendering them futile. This is what it means to be cursed: nothing works. It is the opposite of blessed, which means that life moves forward positively.

Furthermore, God told the serpent,

**"I will put enmity  
between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel." (Gen 3:15)**

God would ensure that a son was born; Satan would try to prevent the birth of this son who would crush him. But because Satan is cursed, God would frustrate Satan's every effort. Yet in the visible realm it usually seems that evil has the upper hand: we see this in the early chapters of Genesis. But though God knew that humanity was desperately wicked, he put his rainbow in the sky; he made a covenant commitment to keep the earth going while he dealt with evil. Everything that has subsequently taken place is under the protective care of that rainbow. This includes all evil, every deception of Satan.

The son was born and to our surprise we find it was God's own Son. So widespread was evil that no son after the pattern of Adam could play the role required. Evil did its worst on this Son, the only one whom it did not control. Evil reached its greatest intensity when humanity rejected God's Son, killing him instead. God allowed this to happen, for even this was under the protective cover of his rainbow, his covenant with creation. God drew all evil onto his Son, allowed evil to focus its full intensity on him, but in so doing God broke the back of evil. Because there was no evil in Jesus himself, death could not hold him. God raised his Son to life in vindication. The Son burst the chains of death, of sin, of evil. He defeated Satan, taking from him the keys to death and Hades. The resurrection is central. With the death and resurrection of Jesus Satan has been cast into the Abyss, his prison where he awaits his final sentence.

The day is coming when God releases Satan from his prison to his final destiny, the dead end to which God's curse has consigned him. Such is the lake of fire, the place to which Satan is banished away from the presence of God.

These are the three major stages in how God deals with Satan. He cursed him, he sent his Son to defeat him by drawing all evil onto himself, and finally he will remove him completely. In cursing him he assigned him to a dead-end, to frustration and futility. In defeat-

ing him in the cross and resurrection he has hurled him into the Abyss. In the end he will hurl him into the lake of fire.

Why has God chosen to do it in these three stages? I don't know; that's hidden in his inscrutable purposes. But what we can say is that it magnifies the grace of God expressed in his Son, and it magnifies the grace of God experienced by his people.

## B. Final Judgment (20:11-15)

**Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.**

John sees a throne, on which is seated one who is presumably God. Again John has borrowed from Daniel 7, where "thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat... The court was seated, and the books were opened" (Dan 7:9-10). The flight of earth and sky is an apocalyptic metaphor of the end, for this is the final judgment at the end of history.

Who must appear before this awful judgment throne? Four times John states that it is the dead who stand before this throne. These are "the rest of the dead" (20:5). Excluded from their number are those who have passed through the first death into the first resurrection. The faithful saints who die follow the Lamb through death into new life. Though they die, they do not stay dead; instead they live and reign with Christ (20:4), the Lamb whom they follow. The rest of the dead do not pass through to new life during the thousand years, nor after it. Instead they are brought before the judgment throne. This is the implicit second resurrection, a resurrection not to life but to judgment and death.

All the dead, both great and small, must appear before this throne: "no one is so important as to escape judgment, nor anyone so unimportant as to render divine judgment inappropriate."<sup>5</sup> The sea, death and Hades, all realms of the chaotic forces opposed to God, must give up their dead. Hades, or Sheol in the Old Testament, is the holding place of the dead pending final judgment. Just as Satan was released from his holding place, so are the dead released from theirs.

Ultimately every person will have to face God. Some will find this terrifying, others will find it glorious. For those who have lived their lives with their backs turned to God, the last thing they want to see is his face. At the opening of the sixth seal, "the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid... They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb'" (6:15-16). But for those who have lived their lives turned toward God, the sight of him is their great reward, the fulfillment of every longing: "They will see his face" (22:4).

Do you want to see the face of God? If you don't want to see it now, then you will have to face it at the judgment seat. If you want to see his face now, then you will not have to face it at the judgment

seat, for you will pass into the New Jerusalem, there to see his face. C. S. Lewis writes,

In the end that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.<sup>6</sup>

As each of the dead is brought before the judge, two books are consulted: the book of deeds and the book of life. The book of deeds shows each one condemned. A glance at the book of life shows each name missing. All names are missing from the book of life, for each of those written in the book of life has passed through the first death to the first resurrection, and now lives and reigns with Christ; they never come before this judgment seat. Each of the dead is condemned by his or her own deeds. In the imagery of Revelation these deeds amount to allegiance and worship.

There are only two sets of people in the book. One group live their lives without reference to God. These are the earth-dwellers, living with no thought of heaven. They bear the mark of the beast and worship that which is false. Their city is Babylon and their destiny the lake of fire. Their allegiance is to the dragon and the beast. They pass from death to the second death. The other group live their lives with reference to God and the Lamb. On their foreheads they bear the seal of God and the Lamb, for they belong to him and are protected by him. They are on their way to their dwelling in heaven. Their city and destiny is the New Jerusalem. They pass through death to life beyond.

The lake of fire is the place of permanent removal from God's presence. Hell is an unpopular concept. How could a loving God send people to hell? I believe that the lake of fire was not intended in the first instance for people. It is the place of banishment for all evil: the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, the demonic powers, even death and Hades—"death of death and hell's destruction" as the hymn puts it.<sup>7</sup> It is the destiny that God had in mind when he cursed the serpent. It is Satan's dead end. But, tragically, there are people who would rather live without God. This is the tragedy of Cain: he went out from the Lord's presence (Gen 4:16). Here, outside the Lord's presence, the first city was built, the archetype of the great city, Babylon. The great city is the human city, the city of human construction, built away from God's presence. Its opposite is New Jerusalem, the city built by God, whose chief characteristic is that God is there. It is the city for those who long to live in God's presence.

In the end God gives people what they want: his presence or his absence. C. S. Lewis writes,

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell.<sup>8</sup>

Why would those who have spent their whole lives avoiding heaven, ever think that they would find it an agreeable place to spend all eternity? Why would those who have turned their back on God all their lives find joy in living with him and seeing his face? In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis imagines a bus tour by some residents of hell to heaven. They find heaven terrifying and quickly want to go back to hell. Lewis writes,

Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell; and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.<sup>9</sup>

We so easily think of salvation, of the forgiveness of sins, as being just our ticket to heaven; now that we have our future settled, knowing that we have eternal life there, we can go back to living our same lives in the present. In Christ and through his Spirit, God gives us eternal life for the present; he gives us the life of the age to come to live in the present. He calls us to start living heavenly life now. The church, which is the community of God's people on earth, is a colony of heaven on earth. The life that the church lives is a foretaste of the life that will be lived in God's presence. As for the earth-dwellers, they live in a colony of the Abyss on earth.

There are two deaths, two resurrections and two destinies. The first resurrection and the second death are explicit. The second resurrection and the first death are implicit. The first death leads to the first resurrection; the second resurrection leads to the second death. The first resurrection is a resurrection to life, the second is a resurrection to death. The first resurrection is into New Jerusalem and the presence of God. The second death is into the lake of fire and the absence of God. Which do you want: the presence or the absence of God? Not as an insurance policy for the future, but right now. If you don't want God's presence right now, then you're hardly likely to enjoy him for eternity. But if you do want him now, he will satisfy you for all eternity.

Most people think of Revelation as a book full of judgment. But it is also full of the gospel of grace. At the end of the book is a wonderful invitation,

**The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (22:17)**

The bride is the church, God's people who have been given life; the Spirit is God himself speaking to and through the church; the one who hears is the one who has heard what the Spirit is saying to the churches. They are all calling for Jesus to come. They invite all to share in this longing: the water of life is freely available. But first you have to realize you are thirsty, and then you have to come. Do you share their longing? Do you long for Jesus to come? Do you want to see God's face? The good news of Revelation is that there is a book of life into which are written the names of those who follow the Lamb. Our names are written in there because of the cross and resurrection. Those whose names are written in that book will never have to face the opening of their book of deeds.

Here, then, we have God's three-fold response to evil: he has appointed a great Savior, this Savior is delivering many from death to life, and God will ultimately remove all evil, even death itself. Central to these is the death and resurrection of his Son, the conquering lion who is the slain Lamb.

But there is more: having delivered his world from evil, what does God do? There is a fourth wall in this room, on which hangs one more painting. "I am making everything new!" declares God (21:5). A great cry goes up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). "It is done" (21:6). It is a painting of the new Jerusalem where God's people live in his presence. We'll look at this painting on our next visit to the gallery.

**One thing I ask of the LORD,  
this is what I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to seek him in his temple...**

**My heart says of you, "Seek his face!"  
Your face, LORD, I will seek. (Ps 27:4, 8)**

1. Simcha Jacobovici and Charles Pellegrino, *The Jesus Family Tomb* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007)
2. Cameron Cardow, "Debunking Christianity," *The Ottawa Citizen*, February 27, 2007.
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4. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
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6. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.
7. William Williams, *Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah* (1745, 1772).
8. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 74.
9. Lewis, *Great Divorce*, ix.

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Revelation 21:1-8

35th Message

Bernard Bell

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# AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

“Somewhere over the rainbow way up high, there’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.” So sang Dorothy in her monochrome world of Kansas. Was she right? Is there a technicolor land beyond the rainbow? Or, to use another metaphor, is there a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? What lies at the end of your rainbow? For many the pot of gold is “the American dream.” This used to be a white picket fence with a station wagon in the driveway and three cleanly-scrubbed kids. A few years ago it was the payout from a successful IPO. Those particular visions might have faded a bit but the dream lives on. Perhaps it’s getting a job at Google, or making VP. We’re told that the emerging generations are disillusioned with these dreams of their parents, but there are plenty of others who want in on the action. The current immigration debate is partly about how to ration access to this pot of gold, and in what order people should stand in line.

If people have a vision of the future they can endure all manner of hardship in the present. But people without the sense of an ending lose hope and even the will to live. Tragically, many in the closing years of their lives realize that what they’ve striven for has been in vain. Maybe they found the pot of gold, but it didn’t bring them the satisfaction they were expecting. Maybe they didn’t find the pot at all. And so they spend the closing years of their lives desperately trying to tie together the loose ends of their narrative, trying to find the sense of an ending.

The Bible understands life with God as a pilgrimage, a journey towards a destination. The way is not always easy, and calls for faith. Israel made a journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. This journey is portrayed in the second bay of our new window. Each year the Israelites were invited to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, there to feast with God. The destination of Israel’s journey was God himself, indwelling his temple in Jerusalem. The New Testament also understands the Christian life as a journey. Our service today is shaped around this theme of pilgrimage.

What lies at the end of your journey? What lies at the end of your rainbow? Do you have the sense of an ending? More importantly, what lies at the end of God’s rainbow?

A rainbow arches across our new window. Our Scripture reading this morning (Gen 8:20-22; 9:1, 8-17) describes the origins of this rainbow in the aftermath of the Flood. Mankind had quickly frustrated the purposes for which God had made him. Just six chapters into the Bible, “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5). He wiped the earth clean with the Flood, and began over with Noah. But God was under no illusions that this had solved the problem of human sin and evil. Nevertheless, he committed himself to keep his creation going: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done” (Gen 8:21). He put

his rainbow in the sky as a sign of this commitment. All that happens subsequently, including all evil, happens under the protective cover of this rainbow, this commitment of God to keep his world going.

The rainbow is a testament to God’s covenant loyalty. Our call to worship called on us to “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Ps 118:1, 29). The Hebrew word for love here is *hesed*, for which we have no word in English. It denotes actions that are loyal to covenant. This truth became a foundational creed for Israel; we find it throughout the Hebrew scriptures, especially the psalter: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.” The Lord’s loyal love endures forever, to the far horizon of time. What lies on that far horizon? What lies at the end of God’s rainbow? Today, 66 books and nearly 1200 chapters after the beginning of the rainbow, we finally arrive at its end.

I liken Revelation to an art gallery in which each of John’s visions is a painting on the wall. These paintings are arranged in rooms. We are currently in the second last room (19:11–21:8), whose theme is God’s ultimate response to evil. Three paintings on the first wall (19:11–21) showed God’s conquering hero who effortlessly cuts down his enemies. Two paintings on the second wall (20:1–6) showed Satan bound while God’s people are delivered through death into new life. Two paintings on the third wall (20:7–15) showed the removal of all evil: Satan, death and Hades. We now turn our attention to the fourth wall on which hangs a single painting, showing the final aspect of God’s response to evil. It also serves as the doorway into the next room, the New Jerusalem room (21:9–22:5). Here in these last two chapters of the Bible, all the different strands of the Biblical story, of the metanarrative, are gathered together in consummation. We are given a magnificent ending, one which makes sense of the entire Bible.

## A New Creation (21:1)

**Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. (21:1 NIV)**

The first thing that John sees is a new heaven and a new earth. The first cosmos had been marred by sin, but God had kept it going, putting his bow in the sky as a sign of that commitment. With all evil removed to the lake of fire, the cosmos is now renewed. What is the relationship between this world and the future world? People make two different mistakes here, belittling either this world or the future one. It is important to affirm that at the end of the rainbow lies a very real place. A popular image of heaven is of sitting on a cloud strumming a harp. No wonder people don’t think much about heaven! This new cosmos will be a very real place, indeed far more real than we can possibly imagine. As C. S. Lewis describes it in the closing pages of *The Last Battle*, compared to that world we are now living in the Shadowlands. I cannot imagine what that future world will be like, for I cannot imagine a world without decay and death.

The future world will be real beyond imagining but this doesn't mean I should belittle this world. The fact that the cosmos will be renewed does not mean that we can abuse the current cosmos. This is still my Father's world, and we are still entrusted with stewardship of this earth.

In this renewed cosmos John sees that there is no longer any sea. This does not mean that all who love the beach and the ocean will be disappointed. Throughout Scripture the sea is symbolic of chaos and disorder. When God started to form the first cosmos the earth was a blank slate, covered with sea and darkness; it was neither formed nor filled (Gen 1:2). Into this unformed world God spoke order, driving back the darkness and the sea. He did not entirely eliminate the darkness and the sea, but in the new cosmos the sea and the darkness will be completely eliminated. Creation began with an undifferentiated world: only darkness and sea. The renewed cosmos will again be undifferentiated: no darkness or sea. One has no order, the other has complete order.

The new cosmos which John sees is not just a restoration of the world to the state of Genesis 1, but a perfection of it. Though the world which God formed in Genesis 1 was very good, that is, it fulfilled the purposes for which God created it, there is a realm which lies beyond the very good. We have an intimation of this in the seventh day which God sanctified, moving it into a realm beyond the other six days. Beyond the very good lies the perfect. It will become clear in these last two chapters of Revelation that the new cosmos is entirely holy. But this is the same as saying there is no more sea.

We live in the middle of times in which God speaks order into chaos. He did so in the beginning. He does so now, speaking order into our disordered world:

**For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor 4:6; 5:17)**

God is already at work bringing about his new creation in the lives of his people.

### **New Jerusalem (21:2-4)**

**I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (21:2-4)**

John's next vision is more focused: within this new cosmos he sees the new Jerusalem. Revelation, and indeed the whole Bible, is a tale of two cities: the earthly city and the heavenly city. The earthly city is built by human hands; it was first built when Cain went out from the Lord's presence (Gen 4:17). It is portrayed in Revelation and elsewhere as a prostitute for it seductively deceives its inhabitants into idolatry. It is the great city, built by those who live outside God's presence. It is Babylon. The heavenly city is the holy city, in which God's people dwell in his presence; it is portrayed as the bride. The city that John sees is a new Jerusalem. It is new because the first Jerusalem was ruined: it had become indistinguishable from Babylon the great city. John sees this city coming down from heaven for its

builder and architect is God. It is the holy city. The next vision, which we'll look at next week, shows that this city fills the whole cosmos.

Here, as elsewhere in this book, we have a juxtaposition of what John sees and what he hears; the two must be taken together to understand the vision. The voice which John hears speaks from the throne; it speaks with divine authority, giving God's explanation of the significance of the new Jerusalem. The holy city is the place where God and his people dwell together. This was true of the first Jerusalem, the destiny of Israel's pilgrimage. As Israel made this pilgrimage, God put his presence among his people in the tabernacle. The English "tabernacle" is derived from the Latin word for tent. Though the Hebrew Bible does refer to the tabernacle as "the tent," its usual word for it is *mishkan*, which means "dwelling place." The tabernacle was God's movable dwelling place where he was present in the midst of his people.

Once Israel reached the Promised Land and king David had taken possession of Jerusalem, the tabernacle was replaced by a permanent structure, the temple. But the theology remained the same: God's dwelling place in the midst of his people, the temple within the city. At the heart of both tabernacle and temple was the Holy of Holies, the Most Holy Place. Here God placed his presence, manifest as his glory cloud—what Jews would later call his Shekinah, his "indwelling."

Repeatedly God said to Israel, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." It was in Jerusalem that God did just that. Tragically, Israel rebelled against God's presence, until God removed that presence, prior to handing the city over to Babylon for destruction. In Jesus, God again put his presence among his people, as John wrote:

**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)**

Again Israel rebelled against God's presence, and again God removed his presence before handing Jerusalem over to the new Babylon, Rome. But God will not be put off his covenant purposes by the lack of cooperation by the people he has made. At the end of his rainbow lies a new Jerusalem. Here the climactic cry goes up, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Here in the new Jerusalem God and his people live together in fulfilment of his covenant purposes. This is why God has kept his cosmos running under the protective sign of his rainbow: so that he can redeem a people for his presence.

God has no need of our presence, for the triune Godhead is a community of perfect love and fellowship. Nevertheless God delights in our presence, because this is what he has created us for. As Augustine put it in the opening paragraph of his *Confessions*, God has made us for himself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him. The children's carol petitions Jesus to "fit us for heaven to dwell with Thee there." Fitting us for heaven to dwell with him there requires dealing with the problem of sin. This is what God has done in Christ and is doing through his Spirit.

In chapter 18 John saw the fall of Babylon. Babylon, the earthly city, must fall to make way for the heavenly city to descend. John saw that in this fallen Babylon certain things would not be seen or heard again: the music of harpists and musicians, light, the voice of bride and bridegroom (Rev 18:22-23). In these last two chapters John

sees and hears that within the New Jerusalem there are also certain things that will no longer exist—seven of them: the sea (21:1), death, mourning, crying and pain (21:4), night (22:5), and any cursed thing (22:3). In this New Jerusalem all is put right, all is brought to a satisfying ending.

### It is Done! (21:5-8)

**He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”**

**He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” (21:5-8)**

Next John hears God himself speak, the first time he has heard his direct voice since 1:8. God’s statement, “I am making all things new!” confirms John’s vision of a new cosmos (21:1). God commands John to write this down, because these words are faithful and true. The faithful and true word of God is a major theme of this book. John describes the entire contents of this book, everything he saw, as being “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:2). Believers are called to hold on to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. The word of God is ultimately Jesus himself, who, as God’s faithful servant and prophet, both bore testimony to that word and is that word. Among his names are “Faithful and True” and “the Word of God” (19:11, 13).

Jesus is God’s answer to all the lies and deceits of the world. Into a world which had turned its back on God’s word, God sent his own Son both to proclaim God’s word and to be that very Word. Still the world turned its back on God’s word, killing the Son on the cross. Darkness covered the world: God had sent his light into the darkness, but the world preferred the darkness. But even this great evil happened under the canopy of God’s rainbow. Still God kept his world going. This is the scandal of the cross. God is making everything new. His Word is trustworthy and true. His words are trustworthy and true. God does not allow the counterfeit to win. God does not allow the darkness to again cover the earth.

Bearing faithful witness to that word is costly. Jesus was killed for his faithful witness, as was Antipas of Pergamum (2:13). John was exiled to Patmos for his witness (1:9). The believers are called to hold on to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, no matter what happens, because it is faithful and true.

God’s next declaration is “It is done,” a cry we’ve heard once before. Revelation is about the things which must happen (1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). What must happen? Twice John hears the cry, “It has happened!” The earthly city must fall—that’s the first proclamation (16:17). The heavenly city must descend—that’s the second proclamation (21:6). God has not made us to live in Babylon, the city built by human hands for those who live outside his presence. He has made us to live in Zion, the holy city built by him for his people to live in his presence. Because God’s word is true, Babylon must fall, and the New Jerusalem must descend. Under the cover of his rainbow God keeps his world going while he turns those who are habitually rebellious

into those who are fit for his presence, while he turns residents of Babylon into residents of Zion.

God does this because he is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is the Beginning and the End. He is the originator of all things, the creator of the first cosmos. He is the consummator of all things, the creator of the restored cosmos. In all things he has the pre-eminence. Therefore our thinking must begin and end with him. This is why the Alpha and Omega symbol is at the very top of our window. This is why we can rely on his word. This is why it is faithful and true.

God is the author and sustainer of life: “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Now he graciously invites all to come to him and find life. The popular conception of Revelation is that this is a book full of judgment. Yes, there is judgment, but it is also full of the gospel. What is the gospel? It is the good news that God has triumphed over evil. As Peter repeatedly tells the Jews in the early chapters of Acts: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (2:36); “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead” (3:15); “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead” (4:10); “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree” (5:30).

We are all complicit in the death of the Son; we have all preferred darkness to life, the counterfeit to the true. But even the death of the Son took place under God’s protective bow. Even when the world killed his Son, he kept the world going. He put his bow in the sky knowing that “every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Gen 8:21). After evil had done its worst on the only one it did not control, God raised his Son to new life and exalted him to his right hand. As we have been singing of late, “Jesus is Lord, the cry that echoes through creation.” Therefore, because of what God has done in Christ, he now invites all to admit their thirst, to admit they’re drinking out of broken cisterns, to admit they’re chasing after the wrong pot of gold, and come to him for the only water that can quench. He calls us to draw water from the wells of salvation (Isa 12:3).

God follows this invitation with a word about the overcomer. Each of the seven messages ended with a promise to the overcomer. The overcomer, or the conqueror, or the victor, is the one who heeds what the Spirit is saying to the churches. He resists what is false and counterfeit, and holds to what is true, namely the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. The evil Satanic powers of this world may kill him, thereby seeming to conquer him, but it is the martyrs who conquer Satan and the beast “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony” (12:11). The saints can resist the dragon and beast because their eyes are on Jesus. They don’t fear the evil forces set against them, because it is God that they fear in holy reverence. “Fear him ye saints and you will then have nothing else to fear.” But if you don’t fear God you will have everything else to fear.

The great reward for each overcomer is entrance into the New Jerusalem, there to hear God say, “I will be his God and he will be my son.” What a great text for Father’s Day!

God immediately follows this word of encouragement to the victor with a sobering reminder that not every one’s journey ends in the new Jerusalem. The eight categories of people whose journey ends in the lake of fire are best understood in antithesis to the overcomer. This verse, like the whole book, serves as a warning to the followers of Jesus at the end of the first century and throughout church his-

tory. The seven churches were living under great pressure—pressure to conform to surrounding society.

There is a disturbing amount of porn in this book: over a third of all the New Testament references to porn are here. The group of Greek words beginning with “porn-” can refer to sexual immorality, as rendered here by most English versions, but all 19 instances in Revelation are likely metaphorical, referring to spiritual adultery, that is, idolatry. Since most pagan religious rites of the ancient world involved real sexual immorality, there is not a large gap between the literal and metaphorical uses of the word group. Babylon is the great prostitute (*pornē*), who has intoxicated the entire world with her seductive adulteries (*porneia*). The earth-dwellers turn their backs upon God and refuse to worship him. Such seductions have sadly penetrated some of the churches. The church in Pergamum tolerates the teaching of Balaam (2:14); the church in Thyatira tolerates the false prophetess Jezebel (2:20). Their teachings are identical: they mislead God’s people into adultery (*porneia*) and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. People in these two churches were being deceived into compromising with the world, presumably in the hopes of an easier life.

The cowardly are those who succumb to this temptation. The unbelieving are those who cease to persist as faithful witnesses. The adulterers, the magicians and the idolaters have all abandoned the worship of him who alone is worthy to be worshiped. They have abandoned the true for the false, the genuine for the counterfeit. They have become people of the lie.

Both the positive statement of verse 7 and the negative statement of verse 8 are a call from God to the saints to persevere in their journey through life.

Revelation is a book about worship; everyone worships. There are two sets of people in the book. One set are the earth-dwellers; they bear the mark of the beast; their city is Babylon, the great city, the prostitute, the earthly city; they worship what is false and counterfeit, what is not worthy to be worshiped. They have “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25). The other set bear the seal of God; their city is the new Jerusalem; though they are present on earth, their destiny is to be heaven-dwellers; they worship what is true: the one seated upon the throne and the Lamb.

God has given this Revelation through Jesus and his angel to his servant John (1:1) to encourage his people to persevere. He opens their eyes to see the unseen realities that lie beyond the seen world. He sharpens their vision so that they can faithfully navigate their pilgrimage through this earthly life. We don’t live in the hostile world of the Roman Empire, but we still live in a world that is hostile to faithful pilgrimage. Far too often Revelation is considered useful only for filling in our charts of the future. By now I hope you’ve seen that this book has much to say about living our daily lives in the present. It is a call to faithful witness to the one who alone is fit to be worshiped: God and the Lamb. And so we sing, with John Newton, “By faith in Christ I walk with God, with heaven, my journey’s end, in view.”

This is where God’s rainbow leads: to the declaration, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God,” followed by, “It is done!”

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)*

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## CITY OF GOLD: A VISION OF GLORY

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

What is heaven like? Is there more to heaven than just sitting on a cloud strumming a harp? We have a problem trying to envisage heaven. Despite the claims of some people to have had out-of-body experiences, no mere mortal has really visited heaven and come back to tell us about it. Though heaven is outside our experience, God has given his servants occasional visions into heaven: Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel, and New Testament prophets such as John. Their visions into heaven usually left them flat on their faces, not writing books.

What do we mean by heaven? Heaven is the realm where God is fully present and where his will is perfectly done. Heaven is a realm that exists today, and has always existed. Periodically John sees heaven opened. Each time, he sees that the central feature of heaven is a throne, and one seated upon it. Around the throne are gathered circles of worshipers, praising God for who he is and what he does. Also on the throne, receiving worship, is the Lamb. There God is fully present and his will perfectly done. But that is there and we are here.

We can perhaps imagine a heavenly realm removed from earth, where God's will is done; and we can pray that God's will be done on earth as in heaven. But what would it actually look like if God's will were perfectly done on earth? What would an earth purged of all evil look like? At the end of Revelation, John is given a vision of just that: a new heaven and a new earth in which God has made all things new. We might call this the heaven of the future. This, too, is completely outside our experience and access. John is given a vision which pulls together all the strands of the Biblical narrative. We are given a most satisfying ending to the Bible, one that makes sense of everything from the beginning of Genesis onwards. But we will not understand this vision unless we're familiar with the Biblical narrative to which this forms the fitting climax. The elements of John's vision, the furniture of heaven, as it were, are drawn widely from the Old Testament, which has served all along as his database of images. Using these Old Testament images John gives us in these last two chapters of the Bible a vision of glory.

In our tour through the art gallery of Revelation we have arrived at the final room. It is helpful to think of the final six chapters of the book as three rooms which together form a separate wing of the gallery. The first and third rooms are complementary: the one shows the destruction of Babylon, the earthly city; the other shows the arrival of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city. In between is a room showing how God's deals with evil: after purging all evil from the earth he makes all things new. The final painting of that room showed all things made new: John *saw* the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, and he *heard* the declaration, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). That painting, which we looked at last week, serves both as the final painting of its room, showing that God's final answer to evil is to make all

things new, and as the doorway into the next room. In this room John is given a much fuller vision of the new Jerusalem. To this we now turn—the new Jerusalem, a vision of glory.

### Come and See (21:9-10)

**One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (NIV)**

In chapter 17, one of these seven angels had invited John, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute" (17:1). The angel then carried him away in the Spirit into a desert, where he saw the woman, Babylon. Now at the end of the book John is given a vision of another woman, to counterbalance that earlier one. Again one of the same seven angels invites John, "Come, I will show you," but the woman he will now be shown is a bride not a prostitute. Again he is carried away in the Spirit, this time to a high mountain.

Revelation, and indeed the whole Bible, is a tale of two cities: the earthly city and the heavenly city, the great city and the holy city, the prostitute and the bride, Babylon and Jerusalem. The great city is built by human hands, by those living outside the presence of God. The holy city is built by God so that his people can live in his presence. Babylon, the earthly city, has fallen so that the heavenly city can descend. We're given this vision to challenge us as to which is our city. If our vision is of the heavenly city we can live here in the midst of Babylon without being seduced by its intoxicating wares.

### The New Jerusalem (21:11-21)

**It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.**

The angel who talked with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city, its gates and its walls. The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man's measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh

jasinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass.

To understand this vision you have to understand the first Jerusalem. Today you can take a tour of Jerusalem or a virtual one in Google Earth, or look at picture books, but none of this will help you understand the new Jerusalem. What you need to know is not the physical geography of Jerusalem but its spiritual geography—the spiritual geography of a temple within a city.

Like any ancient city, this city has walls, gates and foundations. But the most important characteristic of this city is the one John describes first: the city “shone with the glory of God,” with a radiance like a precious jewel. The presence of God’s glory indicates that this is the temple, for that was where in the Old Testament the glory of the Lord took up residence. After the tabernacle was completed under Moses, “the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40:34). When the temple was completed under Solomon, “the cloud filled the temple of the Lord... the glory of the Lord filled his temple” (1 Kgs 8:10–11). It was the infilling with God’s glory that made the tabernacle and the temple what they were: the dwelling place of God. The glory of the Lord represented the Lord’s presence, but it was a concealed presence. His glory was visible as a cloud, even the thick darkness of a heavy cloud. God concealed himself in the cloud so that his radiance would not destroy his people. Yet even the presence of the cloud was overwhelming. When the cloud entered the tabernacle, “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting” (Exod 40:35). When the cloud filled the temple, “the priests could not perform their service” (1 Kgs 8:11). When Isaiah “saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted,” the temple was filled with smoke and he found himself undone (Isa 6:1–5).

God’s glory took up residence at the heart of the tabernacle and later the temple in the Holy of Holies. Here it dwelt between the cherubim, above the atonement cover (the mercy seat), with the ark of the covenant as its footstool. This room, totally covered in gold, was God’s throne room on earth. But no one ever got to see the splendor of this room. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter this room, and he only once each year, on the Day of Atonement. When he went in, he was to burn incense so that the smoke of the incense would conceal the atonement cover, lest he die (Lev 16:13). This presence of the Lord, indwelling the temple in Jerusalem, came to be known as the Shekinah, meaning “indwelling.” Certain Christian circles today make much of the Shekinah glory of the Lord.

In the old Jerusalem the Lord’s presence was a concealed presence, but in the new Jerusalem it is no longer concealed. John sees that the city shone with the Lord’s glory. No longer is that glory concealed as in a cloud; now John sees God’s glory in its full radiance, radiance that he can compare only to a bright jewel. In the Old Testament the Lord’s presence was also a restricted presence, restricted to the small room that was the Holy of Holies. But in the new Jerusalem it is no longer so restricted: it fills the city. The boundary between temple and city has vanished.

The temple, and specifically the Holy of Holies, was the dwelling place of God. The surrounding city was the dwelling place of God’s people. The principle is God living in the midst of his people in fulfillment of his repeated purpose statement: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.

The city has a high wall, gates and foundations. An ancient city, by definition, had a wall for defensive purposes; each night the gates

were closed and barred. But the gates of this city need never be shut (21:25), for there is no more evil. The wall has twelve gateways, inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The wall has twelve foundations, inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. The number twelve indicates the people of God, for Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God’s people. The twelve Old Testament tribes are numbered together with the twelve New Testament apostles. There is only one people of God, the people whom God began to call together in Abraham. In the Old Testament this people was primarily ethnic Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham. There were occasional Gentiles who joined themselves to Israel through faith in Israel’s God, and there were Israelites who perished from Israel through lack of faith in God. Now in the New Testament age the people of God is made up of Jew and Gentile together, who share faith in what God has done through his Messiah. In either age the defining characteristic of God’s people is their faith in who God is and what he has done.

The twelve foundations of the wall are adorned with twelve precious stones. This is most likely a reference to the twelve precious stones which adorned the breastplate of the high priest in Old Testament Israel (Exod 28:15–21; 39:8–14). Each stone was engraved with the name of one of the tribes of Israel, so that symbolically the high priest carried the names of all Israel as he entered the Lord’s presence (Exod 28:29). Here, again, the imagery identifies the city as the residence of God’s people in God’s presence.

This identification of the new Jerusalem is further enhanced by the dimensions of the city. The city is 12,000 stadia on a side, and the walls are 144 cubits thick. Regrettably, the NASB, which claims to be a literal translation, renders these as 1500 miles and 72 yards. It is true that 12,000 stadia is about 1500 miles; and that 144 cubits is about 72 yards. Physically these are two pairs of identical dimensions, but symbolically they are far different. 1500 and 72 have no symbolic value, while 12,000 and 144 are richly symbolic, as is most every other number in this book. The meaning lies in the number not in the physical dimension. Twelve represents the people of God. The city has these dimensions because it is the city built by God for his people. The width of the walls expresses this perfectly: 12-squared. I take 1000 to represent a large number, so that 12,000 indicates that the city of God’s people is very large, yea infinite in size.

Furthermore, John sees the shape of the city. He specifically describes it as of equal length, width and height. It is true that this could describe a pyramid, but that would have no symbolic value here. We find the identification and meaning of this shape if we look to the Old Testament, John’s primary image bank. There is one other thing in Scripture that is specifically described as being of equal length, width and height: the Holy of Holies, first in the tabernacle (10 cubits per side), then in the temple (20 cubits). The Holy of Holies was the most holy place on earth, the place where God put his presence among his people. That the new Jerusalem is a cube indicates that it is the Holy of Holies; that it is 12,000 stadia on a side indicates that it fills all of creation and that God’s dwelling place and his people’s dwelling place have been conjoined. In the Old Testament God’s glory was concealed within the Holy of Holies, a small room at the center of the city. In the new heavens and the new earth God’s glory is clearly visible in the Holy of Holies, which now fills the entire city, which in turn fills the entire cosmos. Heaven and earth are joined together and all is holy.

A city that is 12,000 stadia in size, walls 144 cubits thick, 12 gates inscribed with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel, 12 angelic gate-

keepers, 12 foundations of 12 jewels inscribed with the names of the 12 apostles: this abundance of imagery indicates that this new Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God's people, where they live in his presence. That the city is a cube and God's glory fills the city indicates that the whole city is also the dwelling place of God. The dwelling places of God and his people have been brought together. This can only mean that heaven and earth are joined together.

What will this actually look like? I've no idea! But the last thing I expect will be a 1500-mile cube or pyramid descending upon the earth like a spaceship. I don't know what it will look like, but I do know what I'm looking for: to dwell in God's presence. The whole Bible has pointed to this, as God repeatedly said to his people, "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." It was the declaration that this had finally happened (21:3) that elicited the proclamation from God, "It is done!" (21:7). Revelation is about the things which must happen. This is what must happen: God and his people must dwell together.

### Glory (21:22-27)

The new Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God's people, but its most important feature is the radiance of God's glory. John now picks up this theme of glory:

**I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.**

For the only time in this book, John tells us that he did not see something. What he did not see is very significant: he saw no temple in the city. Unlike the sea and the darkness, there was nothing wrong with the temple in the Old Testament. It was a very gracious gift of God to allow his people to build him a structure in which he would dwell in their midst. The temple concealed God's glory lest the people perish. The temple restricted the presence of God's glory, establishing zones of holiness in the surrounding world. The closer to the temple the more holy the space, and the fewer people could approach. But when all is holy, there is no longer a need for a temple. God's glory need no longer be concealed or restricted; his presence is universal, accessible and fully-visible. The whole cosmos has become the temple. City, temple and cosmos are all co-extensive.

When the radiance of God's glory fills the cosmos, even the brightest sun would be invisible. Such is his radiance that neither sun nor moon is necessary. Since the first creation, the sun and the moon have marked time. Within Israel they demarcated holy time from ordinary time. But when all is holy there is no longer any need for these heavenly time-pieces. Space and time as we currently understand them will cease to exist. Space and time limit and separate us. Despite advances in transportation and communications, we cannot be fully present across the barriers of space and time. When all space and all time is holy, God is fully present. And somehow we, too, will be fully present.

In this new realm, the universal glory of God serves as a beacon, drawing the nations and the kings of the earth to its light. Previously

in Revelation, these kings of the earth have been hostile to God. John sees them won over, bringing in their glory. At last recognizing a glory greater than theirs, they humbly bow down and come in. Their only qualification for entry is that their names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

### Paradise Regained (22:1-5)

The angel has shown John the new Jerusalem, the city-temple which fulfils all the Old Testament imagery of Israel, the imagery of the people God used as his agent of redemption. Now the angel shows John yet more ancient imagery, imagery that goes back to creation itself. He shows him the water of life and the tree of life in paradise regained.

**Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.**

The river flows from God himself, for it flows with life from him who is life. This river had flowed from the garden in Eden, God's first earthly sanctuary (Gen 2:10-14). Ezekiel saw the river flowing from a rebuilt temple, whence it brought life to the barren wilderness and the Dead Sea (Ezek 47). God, the author and sustainer of life, will give life to all in his realm. Here humanity will again have access to the tree of life, access it has been denied since expulsion from the garden of Eden. In this paradise there will be no cursed thing here, for all will be under God's blessing. The curses of Genesis 3 had reached their dead-end in Revelation 20. Now universal blessing resumes.

Here God's people will serve him. This is hard for us to envisage for we work in the age of painful toil, part of the curse God has inflicted upon the earth to ensure that the earth never provides us ultimate fulfilment. We think of work and service as negative. Our service will not be toilsome labor with head bowed, serving a harsh task-master. No, our service will be a high calling indeed. God created Adam to serve him: to be a vice-regent ruling over his creation, a vice-gerent administrating his sanctuary by guarding and keeping. God called Israel to be his servant, again guarding and keeping. Within Israel he called the Levites to be his servants, again guarding and keeping. There is no higher honor in the Old Testament than to be called the servant of the Lord. He asked even his own Son to become a servant. It is to his servant that he says, "I will be his God and he will be my son." There is no contradiction in serving God and seeing his face. It is to his servants that he unveils his radiance.

Because God's radiance fills the cosmos-city-temple, his people shall see his face. To see the face of God is the destiny of everyone in this book. The recipients of his judgment try to hide from his face (6:16); it's the last thing they want to see. But for God's people, to see his face is their great reward. As C. S. Lewis writes,

In the end that Face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.<sup>1</sup>

## A Vision of Glory

What will heaven actually be like? I don't know and I really have no way of knowing. What I do know is that God will be fully present in the radiance of his glory. The radiance of his glory is already visible in heaven now to the heavenly beings and to the saints who have already passed from this world. But a time is coming when that presence which is fully present in heaven will be fully manifest on earth as well. In that new world, God's glory will fill all, and we shall bask in the radiance of that glory which he shines upon us. One of the few people to have reflected on this is C. S. Lewis in his address, "The Weight of Glory." In opposition to those who say the most important thing is how we think about God, he writes,

How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important... It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can scarcely sustain. But so it is.<sup>2</sup>

And so we come to the end of the Biblical story. There is still an epilogue to this letter (22:6-21), but this is the end of John's visions of what must happen. These last two chapters round out the first two chapters of Genesis, just as the third last chapter rounded out the third chapter of Genesis. The story began, before Genesis 1:1, with God in eternal glory. The triune Godhead enjoyed perfect love and relationship. The Son shared glory with the Father before the world began (John 17:5). The story ends with God in eternal glory, but now shining that glory upon his people. His people bask in the radiance of his glory, enjoying the perfect love and relationship which he extends to them—not because he needs them, but because, as the self-giving God he chose to create humanity for this purpose. All to the praise of his glorious grace.

We begin with God in eternal glory; we end with God and his people in eternal glory. At the center lies the cross where God revealed his glory through his Son. His Son on whom he periodically shone the radiance of his glory and proclaimed, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." His Son whom he welcomed back to heaven, "Well done good and faithful servant."

Did you notice the centrality of the Lamb in these verses? The Lamb is mentioned exactly seven times in this closing vision. The Lamb is so closely identified with God that the throne is the throne of God and the Lamb, and it is God and the Lamb who together are the temple of the new Jerusalem. I am forced in English to use a plural verb there, something that John would never do; so closely does he associate God and the Lamb that he never uses a plural verb for them.

Because of the work of his Son, God will welcome us into his presence, saying, "I will be his God and he will be my son" (21:7). He will shine the radiance of his glory upon us and say, "This is my son/daughter, whom I love; with him/her I am well pleased." To each of the conquerors he will say, "Well done good and faithful servant." What does it take to be a conqueror? We are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, in faithful witness, through death and into new life in the presence of God, there to bask in the radiance of his glory.

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! ...now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:1-2)*

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)*

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.

2. Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 34.



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 Bernard Bell  
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# COME, LORD JESUS

*SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN*

Today we reach the end of the book of Revelation after a journey of six years. Today we emerge from the visions into the epilogue. Using the analogy of an art gallery, we have emerged from the rooms in which hang the paintings, and find ourselves back in the foyer. We were in this same foyer on our way into the gallery: Revelation has both a prologue (1:1-8) and an epilogue (22:6-21), and they share many similarities. The termination of the visions at 22:5 might tempt people to switch off, to stop paying attention, just as movie-goers rise to leave as soon as the credits start rolling. But this would be a mistake. Though the epilogue lacks the dazzle of the visions, it is important that we read it. It is also important that we not show up late and miss the prologue. These two bookends give important guidance on how to understand the book.

## The Prologue

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

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

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

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

So shall it be! Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Rev 1:1-8 NIV)

## The Epilogue

The angel said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”

“Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But he said to

me, “Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God!”

Then he told me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near. Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy.”

“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.”

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

He who testifies to these things says, “Yes, I am coming soon.”

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen. (Rev 22:6-21)

## What is the Book of Revelation?

What is the book of Revelation? The prologue and epilogue tell us that it is simultaneously three things: a revelation, a prophecy, and a letter. Each of these three categories is frequently misunderstood.

### 1. Revelation

The book announces itself as “The revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:1). It is an apocalypse, indeed *The Apocalypse*, derived from the Greek word used here for revelation. Unfortunately the word apocalypse has come to mean “great or total devastation.”<sup>1</sup> The book does indeed contain images of great or total devastation, but this is not the primary revelation of the book. An apocalypse is an uncovering or revealing of things otherwise hidden. This is reflected in my title for this series: *The Seen and the Unseen*. This unveiling occurs on both

temporal and spatial levels: what will happen in the future, and what is happening now in realms unseen to the naked eye.

The prologue tells that this revelation is given to show “what must soon take place” (1:1). The main sequence of visions is introduced by an angel telling John, “I will show you what must take place” (4:1). Now the epilogue tells us that God “sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (22:6). What must happen? Twice we are told that it has happened: “It is done!” The earthly city Babylon must fall (16:17), and the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, must descend (21:6). This must happen because God has made humanity to dwell in his presence. He will not allow the earthly city, where people live outside his presence, to flourish indefinitely. At the end stands the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, where God’s people dwell with him and see his face.

This revelation is also an unveiling of things going on now in otherwise-unseen realms. John sees into heaven and into the Abyss. In heaven he sees the one seated upon the throne and he sees the Lamb. In the Abyss he sees evil forces opposed to the rule of God.

This is the “revelation of Jesus Christ.” While this does mean the revelation belonging to Jesus which he passes on to others, it also means the revelation about who Jesus is. Revelation has a very high Christology, a very high understanding of who Jesus Christ is. In the prologue God introduces himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8). John’s first vision is of the exalted Christ, who announces himself, “I am the First and the Last” (1:17). In the closing visions God describes himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (21:6). In the epilogue Jesus proclaims himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (22:13). All things begin and end with God. This much was clear in the Old Testament where God described himself, “I am the first and I am the last” (Isa 44:6; 48:12). Apart from him there is no God. Yet here we see these titles applied to Jesus without compromising monotheism. Jesus Christ is on the throne alongside God, receiving the worship of the heavenly choir, yet God is still one.

All things begin and end with God, but there with him in the beginning and at the end is the Lord Jesus Christ. And there in the middle are God and Christ together. God has always been on his heavenly throne, but in the middle of history John sees Jesus on that throne as well. John sees God worshiped as Creator, as he has always been. He sees Jesus worshiped as Redeemer, for through Jesus God has turned the world around. But he has done so in an unexpected way: the Lion has conquered by being the slain Lamb. The slain but risen Lamb is God’s answer to all the evil arising from the Abyss. This is the hinge on which all history turns. The Old Testament, from which John draws so much of his imagery, pointed forward to Jesus. Therefore in the epilogue Jesus describes himself as “the Root and Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star” (22:16); he is the one who was promised.

So, this book is a revelation, an unveiling of things otherwise unseen. On the horizontal plane, this is the revelation of the things which must happen: “the kingdom of the world” must “become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15). On the vertical plane this is the revelation of the supreme place of Jesus Christ in how God brings this about.

## 2. Prophecy

This book is more than just a revelation; it is identified also as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7,10,18-19). Here too we frequently misunderstand the term “prophecy,” taking it to mean the prediction of future

events. A prophecy is a proclamation from God to affect current behavior. It may involve warnings of future judgment or promises of future blessing, but those are given to influence current behavior. John is God’s prophet, his mouthpiece, to the churches. The whole book is a prophecy, God’s words for his people, proclaimed through his servants John and the other prophets. Within this, the seven messages are more focused prophetic proclamations to the seven churches. This prophecy is trinitarian. Each of the messages is a prophetic proclamation by Jesus. Each is also an appeal by the Spirit to the churches who are urged to hear what he is saying. This same Spirit is at work in the prophets, conveying God’s words through them. Both the whole book and the seven messages contain a mixture of warning and promise directed to God’s people, designed to affect their current behavior. God’s prophecies here, as everywhere, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. The prologue pronounces a blessing on the one who hears the words of this prophecy (1:3). The epilogue pronounces a blessing on the one who keeps the words of the prophecy (22:7).

## 3. Letter

Revelation is more than just a revelation and a prophecy; it is also a letter. Here too there is misunderstanding; we commonly think of the book containing seven letters, but the whole book is a single letter addressed to all seven churches. These are not all the churches of Asia, but as seven they are representative of all churches. The so-called letters are really prophetic messages to each church. The book contains a standard epistolary beginning: “John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you...” (1:4), and a standard ending: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen” (22:21). It was a public letter to each of these churches, for in each it was read aloud. It is a pastoral letter, written to help the believers in these churches live their daily lives. It was written by John, a man with a pastor’s heart who presumably knew these churches and their members.

## The audience

This apocalyptic prophetic letter is communicated through a chain of revelation. It starts with God. Because the words start with God, they are trustworthy and true (22:6). God gave the revelation to Jesus to show his servants. Jesus “made it known” to these servants “by sending his angel to his servant John” (1:1). This angel acted as John’s guide or interpreter in all that he saw and heard. John wrote all that he had seen and heard in a letter and sent it to seven churches in Asia. As each of these churches gathered, a reader proclaimed the whole book as the rest of the church listened. That’s the setting in which this book was intended to be encountered: a church gathered together. Many scholars suggest that this gathering would be a liturgical one for worship and the eucharist.

There is thus a chain of revelation: from God to Jesus to the interpreting angel to John to the reader to the hearers. God, Jesus, the angel and John all affirm the reliability of this revelation. In the epilogue it can be difficult to discern whether it is Jesus, the angel or John who is speaking. In the end it doesn’t really matter because each speaks with the authority of God who stands at the head of the chain. In addition to this chain, God speaks through his Spirit to the prophets, and he speaks through his Spirit to the churches.

Revelation is addressed to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. These seven are representative of all the churches of Asia, all the churches of the late first century, and all churches throughout

time and space. I think every church can find itself addressed in the seven prophetic messages, and certainly we are all addressed by the book as a whole. These seven churches were living in a world that was hostile to the following of Jesus. These churches differ considerably in their spiritual health. Smyrna and Philadelphia suffer persecution but are spiritually healthy. Ephesus and Sardis have the appearance of much life, but underneath they are cold and dead. Pergamum and Thyatira have compromised with the surrounding world. Laodicea has nothing to commend itself for it has shut the door on Jesus. Each of these churches needs a revelation of Jesus, a prophetic proclamation from God, and a pastoral letter from John. Each needs ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches and eyes to see the revelation of Jesus Christ.

### The Life to which Revelation calls us

The revelation is given, the prophecy is proclaimed, and the letter is written to influence the daily behavior of the Christians within these seven churches. These Christians are called to persevere in holy living, in worship, in faithful witness, and in eager longing for Jesus.

#### 1. Holy living

The epilogue pronounces a blessing on those who wash their robes (22:14). Previously John has seen the martyred saints in heaven; these who have persevered through tribulation “have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). In the imagery of Revelation, the donning of these robes is not just a one-time event in the past, but an ongoing life of holy living, following in the footsteps of the Lamb. Those who persevere in this holy living are those who hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. These are the victors, the conquerors, the overcomers. At the end of their journey, they are granted admittance to the tree of life and the new Jerusalem.

This book is a call to holy living. It also contains many warnings of the consequences of unholy living. The promise to those who wash their robes is immediately followed by the statement that evil-doers end up outside the holy city (22:15). These are the idolaters who pursue what is false. Their destiny is not the new Jerusalem but the lake of fire. The angel starkly states that the wrong-doer will continue to do wrong (22:11). But he who pursues what is right and holy is urged to persevere.

Throughout the book the hearers are presented with two ways of living life: the true and the false, the holy and the unholy, the way of Babylon or the way of the new Jerusalem, the way of the beast and the harlot or the way of the Lamb. Unfortunately, the ways of the false, the unholy, have intruded themselves into some of the churches.

#### 2. True Worship

The call to holy living includes a call to worship that which is true. As I will never tire of saying, Revelation is a book about worship. It's not a question of whether you worship, but whom you worship. Everyone worships, everyone that is except the holy trinity (God, Lamb and Spirit) and the unholy trinity (dragon, beast and false prophet). In the realm of the true, God is rightfully worshiped as Creator. He has placed the Lamb on his throne, who now rightfully receives worship as Redeemer. The Spirit moves through the prophets and the churches to foster true worship. In the realm of the false, the dragon has placed the beast on his throne, and the false prophet deceives the world into worshiping this imposter. Even John can be deceived.

The epilogue shows him bowing in worship at the feet of the angel, in response to what he has seen and heard (22:8). The angel has to dissuade him, commanding him to worship God alone.

The book ends with a warning to those who add or subtract from this book of prophecy (22:18-19). John is likely drawing on imagery from Deuteronomy where Moses warns the Israelites not to add or subtract from the Lord's commands he is giving them (Deut 4:1-2). That warning is given in the context of a reminder to Israel of their propensity to idolatry. This is a propensity in all of us. Our hearts are endless factories of idolatry. We so easily give our affections to things or people that are not worthy of them. We have been made for God and our hearts are restless till they find rest in him. Revelation should cultivate our affections for God and the Lamb, should make us long to see God's face, should make us eager to add our voices to the heavenly chorus around the throne.

The seven messages show that idolatry has penetrated into some of the churches. Pergamum has been tolerating the teaching of the Nicolaitans and the teaching of Balaam (2:14-15). Thyatira has been tolerating the false prophetess Jezebel (2:20). The teaching of the Nicolaitans, Balaam and Jezebel is the same: misleading God's people into adultery and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. The adultery is spiritual idolatry, though it could be physical as well. The eating is feasting in the idolatrous temples of the non-gods.

True prophecy fosters the worship of God; false prophecy diverts worship away from God. Throughout this book the worship of the Lamb alongside God is classed as true worship, as true prophecy.

If, in reading Revelation, your heart is moved to fill in your time-tables, you are missing the point of the book. This should quicken our spiritual affections, intensify our appetite for God and Christ, and evoke songs of praise and worship. I hope that over the past six years I have enabled you to read this book in a way that cultivates your affections for God and the Lamb.

#### 3. Faithful witness

Revelation is a call to faithful witness. In the greeting at the beginning of the letter Jesus is described as the faithful witness (1:5). He both bore witness to God's word and he was that word. The world rejected this faithful witness, putting him to death. But God vindicated his faithful witness, raising him to life and exalting him to heaven there to share his throne. God's people are called to follow in the footsteps of the Lamb. We are called to a life of faithful witness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. This isn't about how many copies of the *Four Spiritual Laws* we hand out. It's about how we live our lives. In all that we say and do we proclaim that it is God the Creator of all who is on the throne, that he has conquered evil through the slaying and resurrection of the Lamb, and that he has enthroned Jesus as Lord of all. We proclaim this gospel at all times, using words when necessary. The world may reject this witness, putting us to death. In America this is unlikely, but there are many places in the world today where God's faithful witnesses are being killed. In this, as in all things, we are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

Revelation presents a black and white world. There are only two sets of people: evil-doers who worship the beast, bear his mark, and live in Babylon versus the holy saints who worship God and the Lamb, bear his seal, and are headed for the new Jerusalem. The epilogue shows that in these days when the end is near, as it has been ever since the death and resurrection of the Lamb, evil-doers will continue to do evil, while the holy are called to persevere in holiness

(22:11). But people are not locked into these positions. The devil had formerly deceived all people into opposing God, but Christ is plundering Satan's house, redeeming a people for God from every nation, language, tribe and tongue. This book contains the gospel of God's grace in Christ. The thirsty one is invited to come and take the free gift of the water of life (22:17). It will cost him nothing other than admission of his thirst and of his inability to find living water anywhere else. God gives freely to those who finally realize their need.

God uses the faithful witness of the saints in this gospel outreach. His judgments do not bring about repentance. Instead it is the death and resurrection of his faithful witnesses that finally brings rebels to give glory to God: the death and resurrection of the Lamb, and the death and resurrection of those who follow the Lamb.

But this gospel invitation serves also a warning. It is possible for the churches to forget their need for God's life-giving waters. This is what has happened in Laodicea, where the church boasts, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing," not realizing that it is "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (3:17).

#### 4. Longing for Jesus

Three times in the epilogue Jesus says, "I am coming soon" (22:7, 12, 20). Throughout the book Jesus says "I am coming" seven yea ten times (seven times with one verb, three times with a synonym). But this statement by Jesus can be a promise or a warning; again it comforts the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable. For the churches in Ephesus (2:5), Pergamum (2:16) and Sardis (3:5) these words are a warning of judgment. For the churches in Thyatira (2:25) and Philadelphia (3:11) they are a promise of salvation. One of the seven beatitudes is a blessing upon the one who stays alert for the coming of Jesus (16:15).

So excited is John at this prospect of the coming of Jesus that he excitedly writes in the prologue, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him," to which he adds, "So shall it be! Amen" (1:7).

In the epilogue, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!'" (22:17). God himself, speaking through his Spirit, animates the church to cry for Jesus to return. The one who hears, that is, the one who hears this prophecy, who hears what God is saying through his prophets and his Spirit to the churches, adds his voice, "Come!"

The book ends with Jesus, the one who bears witness to all the things in the book, saying, "Yes, I am coming soon." To which John responds, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20). Is that your response when we get to the end of the book: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus"? If not then you've probably misread the book. Are you ready for Jesus to come? If he were to come tonight would you be delighted because you long for him, or would you be disappointed because there are still so many things you are hoping and longing for here on earth?

Like the seven churches in Asia, we live in a world that is hostile to holy living, to true worship, to faithful witness, and to proper longings. In America we don't face the tyranny of the beast, but, especially here in Silicon Valley, we live amidst the idolatrous seductions of Babylon. We need this book; we need this revelation of Jesus, this prophetic word from God to his people through his Spirit, and this pastoral letter from John. May we have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

We are called to follow the Lamb wherever he goes. Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow him.

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

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Rev 1:4b-6)*

1. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

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