

# Introduction to Revelation

## Lesson 1

### What is Revelation?

This would seem to be an odd question to ask about a book of the Bible, but Revelation is like few other books of the Bible. Is it prophecy? Is it history? Is it literal? Is it figurative? Is it art? Just what is Revelation? Here are several answers to that question:

(1) Philip Carrington said: “In the case of Revelation, we are dealing with an artist greater than Stevenson or Coleridge or Bach. John has a better sense of the right word than Stevenson. He has a greater command of unearthly supernatural loveliness than Coleridge. He has a richer sense of melody and rhythm in composition than Bach. It is the only masterpiece of pure art in the New Testament. Its fullness and richness and harmonic variety place it far above Greek tragedy.”

(2) Novelist Will Self in an introduction to a pocket edition of Revelation wrote: “In its vile obscurantism is its baneful effect; the original language may have welded the metaphoric with the signified, the ‘logos’ with the flesh, but in the King James version, the text is a guignol of tedium, a portentous horror film.”

(3) Hal Lindsey wrote in 1973: “The information in the book you are about to read is more up to date than tomorrow’s newspaper. I can say this with confidence because the facts and predictions in the next few pages are all taken from the greatest sourcebook of current events in the world.”

(4) Williams Barclay, referring to Revelation as “The strange book,” wrote: “When a student of the New Testament embarks upon the study of Revelation, he finds himself projected into a different world. Here is something quite unlike the rest of the New Testament. And

not only is it different, but it is notoriously difficult for a modern mind to understand. As a result it has sometimes been abandoned and has instead become the playground a religious eccentrics. One despairing commentator said that there are as many riddles in the Revelation as there are words. And another that the study of Revelation either finds or leaves a man mad!"

(5) "There is a choral, symphonic nature about the book of Revelation that stirs up our feelings as much as it does our ideas. It is a dramatic, forceful, yet surprisingly tender and comforting book. The result is that this remarkable book is both hard to understand fully and impossible to forget."

(6) "Beautiful beyond description is the last book of the Bible. Beautiful in form, in symbolism, in purpose, and in meaning. Where in Scripture do we find a more vivid and picturesque portrayal of the Christ, Faithful and True, going forth unto victory, seated upon a white horse, arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood, followed by the armies of heaven?"

What is Revelation? There are as many answers to that question as there are commentators. We will see how we answer that question at the end of our studies.

## What is Revelation About?

Either Revelation is almost totally neglected or it is elevated to a prominence shared by no other Biblical book. No other part of the Bible has proved so fascinating to commentators, and no other has suffered so much at their hands.

What is this book all bout? The Future? The Past? Heaven? The Church?

Most people would tell you that Revelation is all about Heaven, the second coming of Christ, and the end of the world ... and perhaps as we study the book we will find that they are right. But we need to be

very careful. Not every coming of Christ in the New Testament deals with his final coming at the end of the world.

In Matthew 24:29–30 Jesus speaks of a time when:

The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.

That sounds like the end of the world, doesn't it. But if we keep reading, we find something interesting in verse 34: "Truly I say to you, **this generation** will not pass away until all these things take place."

Verse 34 provides a time frame—the most important feature of any prophecy. Whatever the "coming" was in verses 29–30, it must have happened in the first century!

A basic principle of Bible study is that we should use the easy verses to help explain the difficult verses. And verse 34 is very easy to understand!

The language in Matthew 24 is the language of judgment, and there are many judgments in the Bible: Sodom, Gomorrah, Egypt, Edom, Tyre, Sidon, Babylon, Assyria, Judah, Israel, Jerusalem, Rome, and the World. The same sort of language used in Matthew 24 to describe a judgment against Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other judgments.

So what can we conclude about *Revelation* from Matthew 24? Only that we should be careful not to automatically assume that language of judgment must apply to the final judgment of the world. It definitely does not in Matthew 24, and we may discover that it does not in Revelation.

One thing we can say for sure is that Revelation is a book about Jesus. Some of the most wonderful titles and images of the Messiah in all of Scripture are found in Revelation, including:

- The faithful witness
- The first born of the dead
- The ruler of kings on earth
- The first and the last
- The living one
- The true one
- The one with the key of death
- The one with the key of David
- The lion of Judah
- The lamb that was slain
- The King of kings and Lord of lords
- The alpha and omega
- The bright morning star

Not only is this a book about Christ, but this is a book about the church of Christ. The most beautiful descriptions of the Lord's church found anywhere in the Bible are found in this book.

## **Does it Matter What We Believe About Revelation?**

Revelation has permeated the popular culture. There are many people who can't name the four gospels yet who have heard about 666.

Revelation forms the basis for virtually all of the predictions by the end-is-near prophets. Many feel that the Middle East and especially Israel will play a special role in the end of the world.

Here is a list of book titles from the 1980's and 1990's: *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East, Iraq in Prophecy, Holy War for the Promised Land, Prophecy 2000: Rushing to Armageddon, The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times, Global Peace and the Rise of the Antichrist, The Coming Russian Invasion of America, The New Millennium* by Pat Robertson, *Road to Armageddon* by Billy Graham, *88 Reasons why the Rapture is in 1988* and its much antic-

ipated (and unexpected!) sequel, *The Final Shout: Rapture Report 1989*, and *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey.

A simple Amazon search would turn up many more that are available today. One that I purchased recently is entitled *Armageddon, Oil, and Terror*, by John Walvoord, someone we will have more to say about later. That book lists a series of 12 catastrophic events that will supposedly take place as the fulfillment of Revelation.

Walvoord writes: “The rapidly increasing tempo of change in modern life has given the entire world a sense of impending crisis. ... How long can world tensions be kept in check? ... As alarming as these events are, they really are not surprising in light of the Bible’s end-time prophecies.” (pp. 4-5)

Let me read next from the introduction of a similar book: “It is impossible for the most thoughtless to overlook the impressive and almost unprecedented character of the age in which we live. Events, as rapid in their succession as they are startling in their magnitude, ... chase each other like waves on the sea... ”

And where did that second quote come from? From another modern end-is-near bestseller? No. It came from *The Great Tribulation, or Things Coming on the Earth* by John Cumming, **which was published in 1863** in New York at the height of the U.S. Civil War!

The first time I taught this class in 1990, we were at war with Iraq—the site of ancient Babylon. Popular books at that time told us that the locusts were smart bombs, and Saddam Hussein was the antichrist.

The second time I taught Revelation was in the aftermath of a war with Waco. David Koresh’s crazy ideas about the seven seals in Revelation were broadcast by the national media, who seemed to particularly enjoy an opportunity to heap ridicule on the Bible.

Now, the third time I am teaching the book, we are once again at war in Iraq. And once again, the books and the preachers are shouting that the signs are clear that this is the end.

Do we really believe that God's word changes with the headlines? Is that what we want the world to believe? These modern day prophets of doom are doing great damage to God's word.

Another example is *premillennialism*. As we will see, that false doctrine involves much more than simply a 1000 year reign of Christ. The premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel.

It matters what we believe about and what teach about this book.

### **Do misconceptions about Revelation make any difference?**

Yes. In fact, misconceptions about the Jews and the end of the world may have effected political decisions. Ronald Reagan said "I sometimes believe we're heading very fast for Armageddon" and told People magazine in 1983 that "theologians have been studying the ancient prophecies—what would portend the coming of Armageddon—and have said that never, in the time between the prophecies up until now, has there ever been a time in which so many of the prophecies are coming together. There have been times in the past when people thought the end of the world was coming, but never anything like this." Will a president one day mistakenly see himself as an instrument of God destined to make end time prophecies come true?

## **What is the Time Frame of Revelation?**

The time frame is vital to understanding any prophecy. It helped us understand Matthew 24 a moment ago, and it will help us understand Revelation.

Absent a time frame, we are left with what I call the Nostradamus Effect. That is, we have vague statements with no anchor in time that could apply to any of dozens of events that have happened throughout history. If I told you a king would arise, and he would be followed by another king who would do this or that, and then by a third king who would be evil, would you be surprised if it happened at some point in the next 2000 years? But what if I told you exactly when it would happen? And what if I told you that 600 years before the fact? Prophe-

cies without timeframes are usually not that impressive. For one reason, how can they ever be proved wrong?

Fortunately, Revelation has a *very clear* time frame. John says that the events dealt with in the book would occur shortly after the book was written, and he tells us that four times!

**Revelation 1:1** (The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass)

**Revelation 1:3** (Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.)

**Revelation 22:6** (And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.)

**Revelation 22:10** (And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand.)

The meaning of these passages would not be disputed in any other context. In Revelation, however, the passages conflict with men's interpretation of the book and instead of changing their interpretation many change the clear meaning of these important verses.

Walvoord recognizes the proper meaning but ignores it. Hinds inserts a word in order to have John say that his writings concern events that were to shortly *begin* to come to pass. Others say it means that the events in the book would happen *quickly*. That, however, is not what John said.

The timeframe in Revelation 22:10 is particularly instructive. In that verse, John was told to "seal **not** the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand." Daniel received a vision in 550 B.C. (described in Daniel 8) that was fulfilled 400 years later in 165 B.C. when the sanctuary was restored after the desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. In Daniel 8:26, Daniel was told to shut up the vision because its fulfillment was a long way off. In Revelation 22:10 John is

told just the opposite — Don't seal up the vision because the time for its fulfillment is at hand. By what theory do we argue that the "long way off" in Daniel is 400 years, while the "time at hand" in Revelation is 2000 years and counting? Does that make any sense?

What about 2 Peter 3:8 where we see that to God 1000 years appears as 1 day? Time does not mean the same thing to God as it means to man yet in Revelation 1:1, 3 God is not talking to himself — God is talking to man. Which time frame do you think he would use? In Daniel 8 he said that 400 years were "many days."

Many commentators ignore or try to explain away those clearly stated timeframes. We will not do that in this class.

## Why Should We Study Revelation?

The easy answer is that we should study Revelation for the same reason we study any other book in the Bible. It is the Word of God, and we should want to know everything about it. But there are other reasons that apply specifically to this book.

First, I would argue that few evangelistic tools are better than a knowledge of Revelation. Just placing a commentary on your desk at work can create an open door for spreading the gospel.

Second, people out in the world are interested in Revelation, and if we can answer their questions about this book, they may trust us on other books. People are interested in Revelation. their interest provides us with a great opportunity.

Historian Timothy P. Webber tells us that a resurgence of interest in prophetic themes is one of the most significant developments in American religion since World War II. This fact, he says, is evidenced generally in the rising flood of eschatological literature pouring forth from the so-called "Christian" publishers.

One of the most widely distributed books of the present era is Hal Lindsey's multi-million selling *The Late Great Planet Earth*. It has been translated into no fewer than 31 languages and circulated in more



than 50 nations. It was Lindsey's book that caused *Newsweek* magazine to report that in America there is a "boom in doom"!

There is a widespread popular interest in Revelation today. Unfortunately, most of the interest in Revelation seems based on a radical misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the book.

A third reason to study Revelation is that it is incredibly interesting. If you enjoy Bible studies that cause you to search for clues all throughout the Bible then you will love Revelation. If you enjoy the study of history, and particularly the history of Rome, then you will love Revelation.

A fourth reason to study Revelation is that the book is incredibly beautiful and dramatic.

Some today think we need to add drama to the gospel by presenting dramatic plays in the worship service or by adding dramatic music to cassettes of the scriptures. The Bible is already dramatic! It does not need any help from us. How exactly does man increase the drama of a story that involves the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of deity? Simply reading the book of Revelation from the pulpit would provide more drama than any play that man could ever write.

This book contains images that outdo much of what we find in the movies: Blood and horror? In Revelation 14:20 we read of a river of blood 200 miles long that comes up to a horse's bridle. Fierce creatures? How about seven headed beasts and dragons? Success of an underdog? How about the church versus the greatest political and military power the world had ever known? Happy ending? How about the church triumphant?

## **Who Wrote Revelation?**

This one is easy. Revelation 1:1-2 tells us that the author was John, who bare record of the word of God and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all things things that he saw. That could be no other than the Apostle John.

Some commentaries begin by doubting the truthfulness of that claim of authorship in the first two verses of the book. It makes me wonder why they bother to read any further!

## When Was Revelation Written?

We are going to deal with this question at length when we get to Revelation 17, but since that will be months from now I will briefly discuss it here in the introduction.

Augustus was the first emperor of Rome. (Some argue that Julius Caesar was the first emperor, but we will deal with that objection later in our studies.) Following Augustus were Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. After Nero, there was a period of civil war in which four emperors came to power in the span of about a year. The first three of those four (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius) reigned for only a short time before they were killed. The fourth was Vespasian, who was followed by his son Titus, and then by his other son Domitian.

The key verse in dating Revelation is 17:10-11, where John discusses 8 kings, and tells us that one is, one will come and continue only a short time, and then the eighth will come. If we can determine the one that “is” then we will know when the book was written.

The first problem is that I listed 11 emperors and John mentions only 8. I believe the explanation to that problem is that John ignores the three who came and went during the Civil Wars. (Daniel 7, by contrast, mentions them but says they were plucked up.) If we omit those three, then number 8 is Domitian. Counting back one, we reach Titus, who did reign only a short time as we read in 17:10-11. Counting back one more, we reach Vespasian, who then must be the king who “is.” Thus, I will argue that Revelation was written during the reign of Vespasian, although it likely was not circulated until some time later when John’s exile ended.

But there is external evidence from shortly after the time that tells us John was banished by Domitian and restored by Nerva. How can that

fit in with our proposed date for the book during the reign of Vespasian?

In December of 69, Vespasian was acclaimed emperor, but for the first half of 70, he was occupied in Alexandria, while his elder son Titus was engaged upon the siege of Jerusalem. His younger son Domitian, the sole representative of the family in Rome, accepted the name of Caesar and imperial residence and was invested with full consular authority, his name being placed at the head of all dispatches and edicts. As Josephus tells us, Domitian was ruler until his father showed up, and for over 6 months with the backing of the army that is what happened.

It was perhaps during this time that John was exiled to Patmos. That would have been in early AD 70. In June, Domitian left Rome, and shortly thereafter Vespasian arrived. In the following year he took as his colleague in the consularship, Nerva, a lawyer and a future emperor. Nerva held office in AD 71, and perhaps at that time he revoked the sentence that had exiled John to Patmos, which would mean that John's exile would have lasted almost exactly one year.

So John could have been banished by Domitian and restored by Nerva, as the tradition tells us, but in AD 70-71 rather than later when Domitian became emperor and later still when Nerva took his place.

## **Why Was Revelation Written?**

In studying any book, one should always begin with same question: Why was the book written? What was its initial purpose?

A short answer to this question is that the book of Revelation was written to provide comfort and encouragement to the people of God. The book was written to convince the church that God had not abandoned them.

If I had to point to a theme from the book itself, I would point to two verses:

Revelation 6:10 They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?"

Revelation 17:14 They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.

We will have much more to say later about the theme of the book and its initial audience, but one thing we can say now is that **we should be very wary of any view that makes us the focus of this book!** This book was written to Christians suffering under Roman persecution, and any interpretation that ignores that suffering is a fatally flawed interpretation.

God was not comforting persecuted first century Christians by telling them about some great battle that would happen 2000 years later! The focus of the problem was first century Roman persecution, and the focus of Revelation is first century Rome.

# Revelation — Lesson 2

## A Question About Matthew 24

Last week we discussed language from Matthew 24 that sounds like the end of the world. But we saw that it could not be describing the end of the world because verse 34 tells us that what that language was describing came to pass during that first century generation. In fact, that “end of world” language was actually describing the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 by the Romans.

But wait, you say. My Bible (probably an NIV or NASV version) has a footnote that tells me the word “generation” in verse 34 can mean “race.” That footnote tells you a lot more about the translation you are using than it does about Matthew 24! The word for “generation” in verse 34 is the same word that is used in Matthew 1:17 to describe the generations from Abraham to Christ (“genea,” from which we get *genealogy*). There is a Greek word for race and we find it in 1 Peter 2:9 where the church is called a chosen race (“ghenos,” from which we get *genocide*). That is not the word used in Matthew 24:34. (That footnote is dishonest, and it is a classic example of how modern versions are driven by the theologies of their translators.)

## Why Was Revelation Written?

Revelation was written to provide hope, comfort, and encouragement to first century Christians who were suffering severe persecution at the hands of the Romans.

## Why was Rome such a problem?

In most of the other books of the New Testament, Rome is seen in largely neutral terms and sometimes even positive terms. We think, for example, of Paul’s use of his own Roman citizenship in the book of Acts.

But in Revelation there is nothing but blazing hatred for Rome. Rome is a Babylon, the mother of harlots, drunk on the blood of the saints. John hopes for nothing but her total destruction. The explanation for this change in attitude from what we see for example in Acts lies in the wide development of Caesar worship and its accompanying persecution, which together form the background for Revelation and help explain why Revelation was written.

By the time of Revelation, Caesar worship was the one religion that covered the whole Roman empire, and it was because of their refusal to conform to its demands that Christians were persecuted and killed. Its essence was that the reigning Roman emperor as embodying the spirit of Rome was divine.

Once a year everyone in the empire had to appear before the magistrates to burn a pinch of incense to the godhead of Caesar and to say "Caesar is Lord." After he had done that, a man might go away and worship any god he liked so long as that worship did not infringe decency and good order, but he must go through this ceremony in which he acknowledged the emperor's divinity.

The reason was very simple. Rome had a vast heterogeneous empire stretching from one end of the known world to the other. It had in it many tongues, races, and traditions. The problem was how to weld this varied mass into a unity. Rome knew there is no unifying force like that of a common religion. But none of the national religions known to Rome could conceivably have become universal. Caesar worship could. (Constantine later discovered the universal aspect of Christianity!)

Caesar worship was the one common act and belief that turned the empire into a unity. To refuse to burn the pinch of incense and to say Caesar is Lord was not an act of irreligion, but was an act of political disloyalty. That is why the Romans responded with the utmost severity with the man who would not say Caesar is Lord, and no Christian could give that title to any other than Jesus Christ.

One of the very worst Roman emperors in this regard was Domitian. Barclay writes that he was a devil, the worst of all things, a cold blood-

ed persecutor. With the exception of Caligula, he was the first emperor to take his divinity seriously and to demand Caesar worship. The difference between Caligula and Domitian, was that Caligula was an insane devil while Domitian was a sane devil, which is much more terrifying. (And yet Suetonius tells us that Domitian “used to spend hours in seclusion every day, doing nothing but catching flies and stabbing them with a keenly-sharpened stylus”!)

Domitian launched hatred against the Jews and against the Christians. He informed all provincial governors that government announcements and proclamations must begin with the phrase “Our Lord and God Domitian commands.” Everyone who addressed him must begin Lord and God. All over the empire men and women must call Domitian god or die. All must say Caesar is Lord. There was no escape.

What were the Christians to do? What hope had they? They were confronted with the choice — Caesar or Christ. **It was to encourage men in such times that the book of Revelation was written.** The book of Revelation comes from one of the most heroic ages in church history. The book of Revelation is a call to be faithful unto death in order to win the crown of life. Revelation is the most difficult book in the Bible, but it is infinitely rewarding.

When I taught this book in the 1990’s, I had a lesson in which I compared Rome of John’s day with the United States of our day — and there *are* some similarities. But in my notes, written during the Clinton administration, I made the comment that one difference between Rome and the U.S. is that we hardly deify our leaders. In fact, at that time, Clinton was being demonized. But when I read that comment in 2009, I wondered how long that particular item will remain in the “differences” column! A Google search for the two terms “Obama” and “Messiah” returns 3.3 million hits!

## Can We Understand Revelation?

Yes! (But it will be challenging!) One problem with studying Revelation is that it is difficult to say what anything means until one has decided in a sense what everything means.

But despite its many challenges, the book is meant to be understood. Chapter 1, verse 3, provides a blessing to those who read and understand the book. Also, the very name of the book indicates that the message is *revealed*.

Some might argue that Revelation falls into the category of items dealt with by Deuteronomy 29:29 ("The secret things belong to the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.") But Revelation is not a secret thing! Revelation has been revealed! We were meant to understand it, and we can understand it.

## Why is Revelation So Different?

Even with the confidence that we can understand Revelation, we must all agree that Revelation is difficult to understand because it is so very different from anything we find in the New Testament and in almost all of the Old Testament. What makes it so different? The main reason it is different is that it is written in what has become known as *apocalyptic language*.

### What is Apocalyptic Language?

Revelation is called *Apokalupsis* in Greek, and it is from that word that we get the word apocalyptic, which means unveiled, uncovered, or revealed.

Apocalyptic language is composed of symbols that are often lurid in color, violent in tone, and easily remembered. They strike the imagination and grab hold of the mind. In addition to Revelation, such language can be found in Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and even in the gospels and epistles.



Apocalyptic language is almost always used to denote conflict and victory. It is used when God judges and smites an oppressor and vindicates his people. It is used to describe times of crisis and judgment.

All apocalyptic literature deals with these events: the sin of the present age, the terror of the time between, and the blessings of the time to come. It sees the present world as beyond mending. It looks forward to a new world after this present one has been shattered by the avenging wrath of God. It is continually attempting to describe the indescribable, to say the unsayable, to paint the unpaintable.

### **Why Does God Use Apocalyptic Language?**

Some think it was used in Revelation to shield the church from Roman retaliation. But that explanation has never appealed much to me. If we can understand the book 2000 years after it was written, then surely Rome could understand the symbols at the time it was written.

I think the reason it was used is that God wanted to use it! This book is an oil painting from God. Numbers 12:8 reminds us that God does not always speak clearly, but sometimes uses dark language, and perhaps such language is reserved for times of conflict and judgment.

### **But Shouldn't We Always Interpret the Bible Literally?**

The usual approach to interpreting the Bible is that we understand a passage literally unless forced to do otherwise. (For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us that if our right hand offends us, we should cut it off. We understand that is not to be understood literally.)

This usual approach is reversed for apocalyptic language—we should understand apocalyptic language figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise. Why? Because apocalyptic language by its very nature uses vivid and dramatic symbols to describe vivid and dramatic events. How do we know that? We know that because explanations of what the symbols mean are sometimes given in the text itself. We will see that in Revelation, and it occurs in Daniel, also. Also, we

know that because in many and perhaps even most cases, it is not possible to understand what we read literally.

But shouldn't all prophecies be taken literally? No, and I don't know anyone who does. Think about the first Messianic prophecy in Genesis 3:15. Is that just a prophecy about enmity between snakes and humans? Hosea told Israel that they were going into Egyptian captivity when in reality they went into Assyrian captivity. (Hosea knew that to a Jew, Egypt meant oppression and captivity, so he used that symbol.) To literalize Isaiah 11:6–10 is to deny that Paul applied it correctly to the first century in Romans 15:10–12. To literalize Ezekiel 16:53–55 would require the resurrection of the inhabitants of Sodom to their former prosperity despite what we read in Jude 7. To literalize Ezekiel 37:22–25 would require that David and not Jesus be Israel's eternal king.

Those who say that they take Revelation literally are never consistent in that regard. They always take some things figuratively. To Hal Lindsey, for example, the 144,000 Jews in 7:4 are literal yet the locusts in 9:3 are Cobra helicopters. To John Walvoord, the 10 days in 2:10 are figurative yet the 1000 years in chapter 20 are literal.

### **What about the Greek text?**

The language of Revelation is unique. The Greek usage and vocabulary in Revelation are so different from that of the other books of the New Testament that it has been necessary for textual scholars to develop a special grammar in order to grapple adequately with the text. The book is written in Hebraic Greek, and some have speculated that it was possibly translated into Greek from an Aramaic original form.

There are a number of passages in which the author seems to violate the simplest rules of Greek grammar and to express himself awkwardly. In several examples, these ungrammatical expressions are the unavoidable consequence of attempting to put into Greek a concept that the language cannot easily express, but not always. It is as if the author was thinking in Hebrew or Aramaic while writing in Greek.

**J. B. Phillips:** Revelation piles word upon word remorselessly, mixes cases and tenses without apparent scruple, and shows at times a complete disregard for normal syntax and grammar. ... And generally speaking, the tumultuous assault of words is not without its effect upon the mind.

Phillips presents a very interesting theory. He says that perhaps John wrote down what he saw DURING the visions. That, Phillips says, would fully account for the seeming incoherence, the strange formations of sentences, the repetition, and the odd juxtaposition of words.

Phillips also notes that once one has absorbed the initial shock of the peculiar Greek, the effect of the language of this books is most powerful. For example, a solitary eagle flying in midheaven, crying out in pity for the inhabitants of the earth, is out of its context bizarre but set as it is it is almost unbearably poignant.

## How Can We Understand Revelation?

Now that we know we can understand Revelation, the next question is *how* can we understand Revelation.

### **We must follow the rules.**

We have already mentioned a few of the rules:

- (1) We should use easy to understand verses to help us understand hard to understand verses.**
- (2) We should interpret apocalyptic language figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise.**

There are two additional rules that we will use quite a bit:

- (3) Similarity of speech does not imply identity of subjects. (The same image can be used to depict different objects.)**
- (4) Dissimilarity of speech does not imply distinctness of subjects. (Different images can be used to depict the same object.)**

**We must investigate the historical context.**

The historical context is vital. And we must do more than just *say* the context is important—we must actually pay close attention to it!

Apocalyptic language always has historical significance, so we must study history in order to properly understand the images.

What is the historical context of the book? We have already discussed aspects of it in our earlier discussions about emperor worship.

Christianity upset the Roman cults because it taught that all men were lost without Christ. It was considered politically unsafe because it worshipped a criminal that had been executed by the state. It was considered morally undesirable because the early Christians were accused of incest and cannibalism. Christians would not pray to the king, they refused military service because such service required them to wear idolatrous insignias, they preached universal dominion by Jesus, and they refused to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor.

The persecution of the church by Rome was particularly intense during the reigns of Nero and Domitian. In A.D. 66 a fire destroyed much of Rome. A rumor spread that Nero had set the fire to further his plans to rebuild the city. To dispel the rumors Nero blamed the Christians who, as everyone knew, predicted a fiery end of the world.

Tacitus describes the situation as follows:

To scotch the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First,

then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his circus, mixing with the crowds in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

This fierce persecution was reduced for awhile after the death of Nero but began again with renewed intensity when Domitian came to power. Tertullian called Domitian "a limb of the bloody Nero."

**We must see the book from a first century perspective.**

If we fail to see the book from the perspective of a first century Christian suffering persecution by the Romans, then it will not be possible for us to understand it.

Many modern commentaries are filled with a sense of urgency that the time is now and the signs of the end have at last appeared. Why then was John so urgent almost 2000 years ago? What was the contemporary meaning of that Revelation to its initial readers — a small, persecuted minority of Christians in a hostile pagan world? To wrench this book from those first century martyrs and to tell them the book has nothing to say to them but everything to say to us is the height of egotism!

### **We must study the Old Testament.**

Revelation is steeped in the Old Testament and we must be also if we are to properly understand it.

Revelation has more Old Testament references than any other New Testament book. Out of 404 verses, there are 278 Old Testament allusions by one count. One key to choosing a commentary on Revelation is to check how many times the commentator refers to the Old Testament. (It's not fool-proof, but it is a good indicator.)

We are going to have to spend a lot of time in the Old Testament ourselves. Of the 66 books in the Bible, perhaps Revelation above all is dependent upon the rest for its proper interpretation. As one commentator observed, the marginal references in your Bible are often more enlightening than any commentary.

### **We must pay close attention to numbers.**

We need to pay particular attention to numbers and periods of time. They have special meanings that we must carefully deduce from the evidence.

Most of the symbols behind the numbers make perfect sense immediately once you see them. For example, 3 is the number of God, 12 is the number of God's people, 10 is the number of completion, 7 is the number of perfection, 6 is the number of imperfection, 4 is the number of the earth, 2 is the number of confirmation or strength, and 3.5 is a broken 7. Some require a little detective work, such as 1,260, 144,000, and 1,000. (1,260 days, for example, is 3.5 years at 360 days per year.)

How do we know all of this? Why shouldn't we just take all of the numbers in this book literally?

Let's think for a moment about Chapter 7, which is a beautiful chapter that describes the blessings of God's people — no hunger, no thirst, no tears, etc. It was a message that God's people really needed to hear when this book was written and Roman persecution was raging. In that chapter, the number 12 occurs 12 times, and the sum of God's

people is given as 144,000, which is 12 times 12 times 1000. What are we to think of this? Have we ever seen the number 12 used before anywhere in the Bible? Twelve tribes? Twelve apostles? Can we not see how 12 could be used to depict the people of God? Or can we really imagine God turning to the poor persecuted Christian wearing the number 144,001 on his chest and saying "Sorry, but you're a day late and a dollar short! Better luck next time ... if there were going to be a next time!" At some point, common sense must kick in and tell us that numbers are being used figuratively in this book.

Again, we should try to read this book through first century eyes. We are much more quantitative than they were. It may be difficult for us to see numbers in figurative terms, but it would have been natural for a first century reader to have done so. Graffiti from Pompeii, for example, reads "I love her whose number is 545."<sup>1</sup>

## Who is the Villain in Revelation?

Everyone agrees there is an evil villain in this book, but not all agree on the identity of that villain. I will argue that the villain in this book is Rome of the first century, and particularly certain of the emperors of Rome.

### How Did Rome Begin?

Rome's early history is shrouded in legend. According to Roman tradition, the city was founded by the twins Romulus and Remus in 753 BC. Archaeological evidence supports the view that Rome grew from settlements on the Palatine Hill very possibly from the middle of the 8th century BC. The original settlement developed into the capital of the Roman Kingdom (ruled by a succession of seven kings, according to tradition), and then the Roman Republic (from 510 BC, governed by the Senate), and finally the Roman Empire (from 27 BC, ruled by an Emperor).

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1. *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism*, p. 95, by Maurice Harry Farbridge.

We should pause here to note that the prophet Daniel lived around 600 BC, and in Daniel 2:40, 44 he wrote the following:

And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. ... And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.

That fourth kingdom of Daniel 2 was Rome! That was the kingdom, as strong as iron, that ruled the earth when God's eternal kingdom was established in Acts 2. No one looking at those Roman settlements in 600 BC would ever have predicted that they would someday subdue all other worldly kingdoms, and yet Daniel knew 600 years before it happened!

Rome was part of God's plan in ushering in his kingdom. We know that because Daniel tells us, but we also know that from the historical evidence.

In Galatians 4:4-5, Paul writes, "But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." It was not by accident or happenstance that Jesus came into this world when he did. God had been planning for his arrival since the foundation of the world, and those plans had become very specific by the time of Daniel in 600 BC.

When Daniel prophesied that a fourth kingdom as strong as iron would rule the world at the time of Christ, and that three kingdoms would precede it, the history of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome was predetermined for the next 600 years. Daniel and Revelation are bookends between great empires.



# Revelation — Lesson 3

## Rome Played an Important Part in God's Plans

Daniel 2 tells us about four kingdoms that would rule in the 600 years from the time of Daniel to the time of Christ. The history of those great empires was determined by God long before it happened.

And history shows us the hand of God in those historical events. How else can we explain the rise of Greece under Alexander the Great? How else can explain the ascendancy of Rome over such great powers as Carthage, and the Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedon, Syracuse, and the Seleucid empire? How else can we explain the triumph of the church over the mighty Roman empire even though Rome attacked when Rome was at its height and the church was in its infancy?

Listen to a few sentences from the introduction to the recent book, *Roman and Her Enemies: An Empire Created and Destroyed by War*: "Lying at its heart is a mystery as profound as any in the records of human civilization. How on earth did the Romans do it? How did a single city, one that began as a small community of castle-rustlers, camped out among marshes and hills, end up ruling an empire that stretched from the moors of Scotland to the deserts of Iraq?" The answer is that it happened because God made it happen, just as he had already told Daniel that it would happen.

It is interesting to study about the interplay of Greek and Roman culture at the time of Christ. As Horace famously stated, Rome may have conquered Greece, but Greek culture conquered Rome. The combination of Greek culture with Roman might created the perfect cradle for the coming of Christ and the beginning of his kingdom, and it was not by accident!

The Greeks brought reason, rationality, logic, and language. Rome brought peace, roads, trade, law, and communication. Although Roman religion later brought emperor worship and persecution, ini-

tially it was open and tolerant. This situation allowed Paul to do what he did and take Christianity beyond Jerusalem into the Greek world.

The importance of the Roman peace, the *pax Romana*, cannot be overstated. The Greeks' hobby was war. The church would have had a much more difficult time reaching beyond Jerusalem had the Greeks still been in charge.

Another important factor was the Greek language, which had been around since 800 BC and had twice the vocabulary of Latin.

Those who believe that Christianity is anti-intellectual and irrational should note that Christianity began at a time of Greek intellectualism and rationality, and again that was no accident. It is no accident that the church was established, not in a time of superstition, but in a time of rational inquiry. Greek thought is admired even to this very day. In fact, it has been said that the Greek contribution to western philosophy was western philosophy!

### Who Were the Emperors of Rome & Why Should We Care?

We are going to spend quite a bit of time discussing the early Roman emperors. Who were they and why should we care?

We should care about them because Daniel and John wrote about them. In fact, Daniel sketched out the history of the first 11 Roman emperors 600 years before they came to power. John described them while they were in power. We will need to understand that historical context if we are to understand this book.

As we discussed earlier, our focus will be on the first eleven emperors. (Where even though we say *first* we should keep in mind that Rome was a monarchy *before* it was a republic as well as *after* it was a republic. We are starting our count *after* the republic.)

Julius Caesar was killed by those who feared that he was leading Rome toward a monarchy. His death in 44 B.C. marked the end of the Roman republic. His adopted son Octavius became Augustus—the

first Roman emperor. The first five emperors make up the Julio-Claudian Dynasty.

- Augustus was the first emperor (although no one at the time would have called him that). Many argue that the list should begin with Julius Caesar, and in fact the classic work by Suetonius (*The Twelve Caesars*) does begin with Julius. However, history tells us that Augustus was the first emperor. Further, he was the emperor at the time of Christ, which is another reason to start with him. Finally, as we will see, the internal evidence supports using Augustus as our starting point.
- Tiberius was the stepson of Augustus.
- Caligula was the adopted grandson of Tiberius.
- Claudius was the uncle of Caligula.
- Nero was the stepson of Claudius.

The next three emperors ruled during the Civil Wars of AD 68-69.

- Galba reigned 7 months and then was hacked to pieces in front of the Forum on Otho's orders.
- Otho reigned 95 days and then killed himself after Vitellius defeated his army.
- Vitellius reigned 8 months and then was killed after Vespasian's army entered Rome.

The next three emperors make up the Flavian Dynasty.

- Vespasian (along with his son Titus) put down the Jewish revolt of AD 67-70 and destroyed the Jewish temple.
- Titus was Vespasian's eldest son and reigned for only 26 months.
- Domitian was Titus's younger brother.

These 11 emperors are depicted in Daniel 7 and Revelation 17.

### How and When Did Rome Fall?

In our studies of Revelation, I will argue that its judgments are largely directed toward Rome, who was then persecuting the Lord's church.

That argument will present us with some important questions: When did the Roman empire fall? How did the Roman empire fall? What factors contributed to the fall of the Roman empire? How was the fall of the Roman empire a divine judgment? Did the fact that "Christianity" had become the official state religion indicate that the enmity between the Roman empire and God had ended?

The imperial period of ancient Roman history began in 27 B.C. when Octavian, later called Augustus, became the first emperor of Rome and ended in A.D. 476 when the last Western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was overthrown. The Roman empire continued in the East for another 1000 years until the invasion by the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century.

According to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, four primary reasons stand behind the eventual collapse of the Roman empire: External invasion, Inner decadence, Inner strife, Injury of time and nature.

Daniel 2 described the inner weakness of the yet future Roman empire as follows:

And as you saw the feet and toes partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle.

This description from Daniel 2 fits well with Gibbon's theory as to why Rome fell. In any event, if Rome is indeed the villain of this book,

then it is clear that Rome is judged in this book. How and when did that judgment occur?

One theory is that Rome was judged when the Western empire fell and the city was invaded in A.D. 476. A potential problem with this view is that it pushes the judgment off for quite some time, which could cause a concern with the time frame of the book. Another potential problem is that the much ballyhooed fall of Rome in A.D. 476 was not viewed at the time (according to some) as much of a fall and, in fact, the Eastern Roman empire continued on for another 1000 years. It is possible, however, that the judgment in view in Revelation is against the *city* of Rome rather than the entire *empire* of Rome.

Another theory is that Rome was judged when Nero died in A.D. 68 and the Julio-Claudian dynasty came to an end and was further judged when Domitian, the last of the emperors considered in Revelation, was murdered in A.D. 96 and the Flavian dynasty came to an end. As for the emperors that followed Domitian from AD 96 to 180, Gibbon writes:

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world when the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would without hesitation name that period which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors whose characters and authority demanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, (Five Good Emperors) who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws.

Although we should note that Christians were persecuted by emperors who ruled after Domitian (Diocletian in AD 303, for example).

We will have more to say about these two theories as we proceed into the text. (If you have been reading the 1990 commentary from our website, you will notice that it takes the first approach.)

### **But Didn't Rome Convert to Christianity?**

Hadn't Rome become a "Christian empire" by the time it fell in A.D. 476? How could that fall then be a judgment by God?

It certainly appears to some that Christianity conquered Rome under the emperor Constantine, and many historians so argue, but is that really what happened? In order to answer this question, it will be helpful to first consider the life and supposed conversion of Constantine the Great. History books portray Constantine as a great champion of Christianity and a friend of the church. but was he?

Constantine was born in about A.D. 285 and came to power through a complex series of civil wars. At this point, his primary concern centered about how to unify the empire under his authority. With this aim, he embraced Christianity as a unifying force, staked everything he had on its support, and began to use it for his own purposes.

Was Constantine's conversion genuine? This question has long been a subject of debate and speculation. Michael Grant has the following to say regarding Constantine's motivations:

The emperor's motives have been endlessly analyzed and discussed. But it appears that he and his advisors experienced a growing conviction that, however uninfluential the Christians might be at present, the course of events was working, or could be made to work, in their favor—since they alone possessed the universal aims and efficient, coherent organization that, in the long run, could unite the various conflicting peoples and classes of the empire in a single, all-em-

bracing harmony which was “Catholic,” that is to say, universal.

A politician exploiting Christians for his own personal power and benefit — where have we ever seen that before?

Constantine not only ended the persecution of Christianity but he began to treat Christianity as though it were a state religion which, in fact, it later became. He authorized state money to be used for the construction of elaborate church buildings.

His own personal lack of conviction is evidenced by the facts that he had his son, Crispus, put to death, his wife, Fausta, put to death, and he retained his position as the chief priest of the pagan state religion.

Ramsay Macmullen wrote the following with regard to Constantine’s view of Christianity:

Few of the essential elements of Christian belief interested Constantine very much—neither God’s mercy nor man’s sinfulness, neither damnation nor salvation, neither brotherly love nor, needless to say, humility. Ardent in his convictions, he remained nevertheless oblivious to their moral implications.

Some peoples’ religion is so private they don’t even impose it on themselves! There are many modern-day Constantines!

Alistair Kee in his excellent book *Constantine Versus Christ* described Constantine’s attitude toward religion as follows:

[His attitude toward religion] played an important part in his ambition to conquer and unify the Empire. ... Religion was too important to his strategy to leave in the hands of the ecclesiastics.

Was Constantine a positive influence on the Church? Alistair Kee makes the following point with regard to this question:

Because of his relationship to the church, Constantine was able to influence it and Christianity at a profound level. We must now consider how Constantine's values infiltrated the church: not how he was converted to Christianity, but how through his religious policy he succeeded in converting Christianity to his position.

Kee states later that "the values of Constantine replaced the values of Christ within Christianity" and that "Christianity was enlisted in his own personal crusade to gain control of the Empire and in the process Christianity was transformed."

The Roman empire's *embrace* of Christianity did more to damage the Church than did the earlier persecutions. Persecution, in a sense, allowed the Church to remain "pure" by effectively excluding anyone not willing to face death for his or her beliefs.

Remember Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 12:10 — For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Alistair Kee mirrors these thoughts when he states:

Only a sadist would wish that persecution continue in the church, only a masochist welcome it, and yet suffering seemed an inescapable experience for early Christians. ... [T]he history of the church till the fourth century was of random and often intensive persecution. Whenever the Emperor or the traditions of the Empire seemed threatened, it was open season on persecuting Christians. And yet this tiny minority, insignificant, weak and defenseless, not only survived but grew. ... To Christians ... it was not at all incredible that persecution could actually strengthen the church: it brought precisely the experience in which God was made known to them in strength. The later Roman influence effectively weakened the Church from within.



This is always the effect that society has on the church. When we let the world into the church and start letting the world change us rather than seeking to change the world, we weaken the church from within.

“Under Imperial favor the Church experienced a rapid growth. Many who thronged into it did so from expediency, rather than deep religious conviction, and the moral and spiritual quality of the Christian community suffered.”

The marriage of Rome and the church was an adulterous one and the resulting offspring matured into Roman Catholicism. Although it is both common and, in an initial sense, understandable to treat Constantine as a great champion and benefactor of the Church, a close examination reveals that his influence was far from beneficial.

F. W. Mattox described Constantine’s influence as follows:

Out of respect to Constantine for the favors he showed, the church gave up her independence and began to rely upon the head of the state for its organization and authority. The leaders seemed too concerned with present problems to see the danger in these developments.

Alistair Kee described Constantine’s influence by stating:

The fundamental issue is not whether Constantine called himself a Christian or not, but how he actually used Christianity and how, in the course of using it, he transformed it into something completely different. ... [I]n gathering up lines of thought often already present in the church and developing them in a certain way, they combined to effect something which had never been accomplished hitherto, the replacement of the norms of Christ and the early church by the norms of the imperial ideology. **Why it has been previously thought that Constantine was a Christian is not because what he be-**

**lieved was Christian, but because what he believed came to be called Christian.**

Finally, the following excerpt, also from Dr. Kee's book, provides a sobering lesson in the dangers of compromise. The church of Constantine's day, in embracing Rome, rejected Christ. (Did Rome become more like the Church or did the Church become more like Rome after Constantine? Ask a *Roman Catholic*.) After commenting upon the strength that the Christians had obtained through their persecution and suffering Kee notes:

[I]t is therefore all the more tragic that Christians should, in the moment of victory, forsake the Revelation in Jesus, for its opposite in Constantine. The church did not need the protection of Constantine; it had already taken on the Empire, century after century, and had in the end been victorious. ... If Constantine had in turn persecuted the church, he too would have failed to conquer it. How was it then that he was able to succeed where his predecessors had failed? How was it that by a little kindness, a word of praise here, a grant to build a new church there, he was able to induce the church to forsake what they could not be made to forsake under threat of torture or death? The Emperor offered so much, beyond the dreams of Christians recently under constant threat. He offered in effect at least a share in the kingdoms of the world. When Satan is seen to offer such rewards, the temptation is rejected. When one comes professing to be a follower of the One God, then his offer is accepted. ... And once again the Son of Man was betrayed with a kiss. Not that the betrayal took place in a moment. It was a gradual process. Gradually the church came to have faith in the Emperor, to trust him and to see in him and in his ways the hand of God.

## How Should We Approach Revelation?

Numerous approaches to this book have been proposed, and we will next briefly review the major ones.

### What is the Historical Approach?

The Historical Approach is sometimes called the standard Protestant interpretation and is taken, for example, in the *Gospel Advocate* commentary by Hinds.

This approach views the book as a forecast in symbols of the history of the church. The Roman Catholic church often plays the role of the villain in this approach.

And it is certainly true that the Roman Catholic Church and the Roman Empire have much in common. Listen as historian Will Durant describes the relation between the two, and specifically describes the transformation of Rome into the Roman church:

Christianity... grew by the absorption of pagan faith and ritual; it became a triumphant Church by inheriting the organizing patterns and genius of Rome.... As Judea had given Christianity ethics, and Greece had given it theology, so now Rome gave it organization; all these, with a dozen absorbed and rival faiths, entered into the Christian synthesis. It was not merely that the Church took over some religious customs and forms common in pre-Christian Rome—the stole and other vestments of pagan priests, the use of incense and holy water in purifications, the burning of candles and an everlasting light before the altar, the worship of the saints, the architecture of the basilica, the law of Rome as a basis for canon law, the title of Pontifex Maximus for the Supreme Pontiff, and, in the fourth century, the Latin language as the noble and enduring vehicle of Catholic ritual. The Roman gift was above all a vast framework of government, which, as secular au-

thority failed, became the structure of ecclesiastical rule. Soon the bishops, rather than the Roman prefects, would be the source of order and the seat of power in the cities; the metropolitans, or archbishops, would support, if not supplant, the provincial governors; and the synod of bishops would succeed the provincial assembly. The Roman Church followed in the footsteps of the Roman state; it conquered the provinces, beautified the capital, and established discipline and unity from frontier to frontier. **Rome died in giving birth to the Church;** the Church matured by inheriting and accepting the responsibilities of Rome.”

We should be careful before we take a first century description that could apply to Rome and lift it out of that context to apply it instead to the Catholic church, even those these striking similarities suggest the description might very well appear to closely fit the Catholic church.

A major problem with the historical view is that it operates with the unstated assumption that we are presently living close to the end of the world. For all we know, there may be a million years of church history yet to come in which case the 2000 years we have seen so far will seem like a drop in the bucket. Remember, the end of the world will come like a thief in the night; there will be no signs!

Any theory that is based on an assumption that we can know that we are living in the end times is deeply flawed! It is based on a faulty premise.

This view ignores John’s clearly stated time frame for the book, that the things described therein were not to be sealed up but rather were to shortly come to pass.

In addition to ignoring the time frame, this approach makes the book to be of little significance to its initial readers. Further, it quickly becomes absurd in its attempt to match historical details to the visions in the book. As in the popular book by Nostradamus, something in

Revelation can be found to fit almost any historical fact if the context and time frame are ignored.

### What is the Futurist Approach?

The Futurist or Eschatological Approach claims that nothing in Revelation from chapter 4 until the end of the book has been fulfilled yet. Instead, the entire book will be fulfilled at some time immediately preceding the second coming of Christ and the end of the world. This approach includes the very popular dispensationalist view that is summarized below:

- Jesus came to establish a visible rule on earth.
- The Jews did not accept Christ so the offer to rule was withdrawn.
- The establishment of the kingdom was postponed until his return.
- The church was established for the interim period. The church is a parenthesis in history and is not a fulfillment of any Old Testament prophecy. The church is a mistake! (This is always a part of pre-millennialism. They downplay the importance of the church—the body of Christ!)
- The church age will end with a “rapture” in which all believers will meet Christ in the air. This is the first stage of the second advent.
- During the next seven years, the antichrist will rule the earth, the Jews will be restored to Palestine, the temple will be rebuilt, and the sacrificial system will be reinstituted. Those saved during this time are called tribulation saints.
- The antichrist will break a covenant with the Jews after 3½ years and a terrible persecution will follow.

- After another 3½ years Christ will appear a third time, defeat the antichrist, and rule on earth for 1000 years.

Hal Lindsey's *original* scenario of the end is even more imaginative:

- For 3½ years Satan will rule the world through a Jewish antichrist in Rome.
- The Jews will be allowed to rebuild the temple.
- Many Jews will be converted and a worldwide evangelism program will be undertaken by 144,000 Jewish preachers.
- After 3½ years the antichrist will set up his own image in the newly rebuilt Jewish temple.
- World War III will break out.
- Egypt will invade Israel.
- Russia will invade the Middle East and trample both Egypt and Israel.
- The Roman dictator will invade Israel.
- Rome will launch a nuclear attack against Russian forces in Israel.
- 200,000,000 Chinese troops will march on Palestine to battle the Roman army.
- The battle of Armageddon will begin and lead to worldwide destruction.
- Jesus will return to reign on earth for 1000 years.

If this seems dated, we are not the only ones to notice. Lindsey recently released a new book with an updated schedule of events.

Time does not permit us to discuss everything that is wrong with such an approach. First, it ignores the time frame as did the first approach that we considered. Further, it causes the book to have little significance to its initial readers. Finally, it changes as quickly as the headlines. Many thought Hitler was the antichrist— some still do. The political scene that caused Lindsey to reach his conclusions in 1974 is quite different in 2009.

Many saw Gorbachev as the antichrist— he even came complete with a built-in ‘mark of the beast’! More recently Hussein became their antichrist du jour as he threatened Israel with destruction while based near the site of historic Babylon. When asked about his changing views, a local dispensationalist preacher in Dallas said he wasn’t worried because everything he had said (and later retracted) was Biblical!

The ‘end-is-near’ crowd is not unique to our time. They have existed in every century since and including the first. A recent book entitled *AD 1000: Living on the Brink of the Apocalypse* shows how the ‘end of the world’ mentality raged near the end of the first millennium. That book begins with the following sentence: “On the last day of the year 999, according to an ancient chronicle, the old basilica of St. Peter’s at Rome was thronged with a mass of weeping and trembling worshippers awaiting the end of the world.” Even Paul battled those who thought that the end was near in the first century.

Although the purpose of this study is not to expose premillennialism, we will next consider a few of the basis tenets of that popular but badly misguided approach to this book.

### **What About the Millennium?**

Does it make any difference what we believe about premillennialism? Is it all just a matter of opinion? Does it have anything to do with the so-called core of the gospel?

Carroll Osborn, the Carmichael Distinguished Professor of New Testament at ACU, wrote a book entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom* in which he grouped premillennialism among items that are just matters of opinion on which we should just agree to disagree. (On the same list

he placed the issue of whether baptism is *for* the remission of sins or *because of* the remission of sins.) **He is badly mistaken.**

John Walvoord, a leading **proponent** of premillennialism, has the following to say about the importance of the dispute:

If premillennialism is only a dispute about what will happen in a future age which is quite removed from present issues, that is one thing. If, however, premillennialism is a system of interpretation which involves the meaning and significance of the entire Bible, defines the meaning and course of the present age, determines the present purpose of God, and gives both material and method to theology, that is something else. It is the growing realization that premillennialism is more than a dispute about Revelation 20. It is not too much to say that millennialism is a determining factor in Biblical interpretation of comparable importance to the doctrines of verbal inspiration, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection.

It does make a difference what we believe about this subject. The premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel.

We owe a great debt to Foy E. Wallace for keeping premillennialism out of the Lord's church. Foy Wallace (then the editor of the Gospel Advocate) debated Charles Neal (minister of the Main Street Church of Christ in Winchester, Kentucky) in 1933 about the 1000 year reign. He was largely responsible for keeping that false doctrine from infiltrating the church. We have an "anti-debate" attitude today seemingly for fear we might offend someone by our knowledge and conviction, but I am certainly glad that was not the attitude back when Foy Wallace was preaching (and the church was growing!). Christians of his generation were much more interested in pulling perishing people into the boat than they were about not rocking that boat!



# Revelation — Lesson 4

## The Terminology

The “millennium” refers to the 1000 years mentioned in Revelation 20:4, where it is described not as a reign *of* Christ but rather as a reign *with* Christ.

“Premillennialism” takes the 1000 year period literally and teaches that the return of Christ will occur *prior* to the millennium (hence the “pre” in its name).

“Postmillennialism” takes the 1000 year period literally and teaches that the return of Christ will occur *after* the millennium (hence the “post” in its name). Under this view, the final coming of Christ would be preceded by a 1000 year period of peace. Understandably, this view is not very popular anymore. (Alexander Campbell’s *Millennial Harbinger* was post-millennial.)

“Amillennialism” takes the 1000 year period figuratively, noting that it a power of 10, which denotes completeness.

The first thing we should note about premillennialists is that they base almost their entire understanding of the Bible (by their own admission!) on one verse from Revelation 20! Remember, we should interpret difficult to understand verses by using easy to understand verses — and their are *many* easy to understand verses that prove premillennialism false.

## Brief review of the tenets of premillennialism

### (1) The Restoration of the Levitical Priesthood

Premillennialists teach that the Levitical priesthood is going to be restored during the millennium. This view arises from a misinterpretation of Ezekiel 44.

**But what does the Bible say?**

The role of the Levitical priests was to offer the sacrifices for sin that were demanded by the Law of Moses. Jesus' perfect sacrifice put these people out of business permanently (Hebrews 10:12, 18).

The Levitical system was imperfect, weak, and useless (Hebrews 7:11, 18) and was set aside by Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:18).

The coming of reality in Jesus Christ meant that the shadow of the Levitical system was removed forever. (Premillennialists say that all of the shadows will return.)

Further, Jesus could not be a priest if the Levitical system were still functioning. Under the Law of Moses (Numbers 18), only Aaron's sons could be priests. The Law of Moses and the Levitical system cannot be separated—one cannot exist without the other (Hebrews 7:12). In addition, the old and new covenants cannot coexist (Romans 7:1–6). The first covenant was taken away so that the second could be established (Hebrews 10:9–10). Jesus cannot be priest on earth under the Levitical system (Hebrews 8:4).

**(2) The Restoration of the Sacrificial System**

Premillennialists teach that bloody sacrifices for sin will be restored during the millennium. This view arises from a misinterpretation of Ezekiel 43–45 and Zechariah 14.

**But what does the Bible say?**

Animal sacrifices were never able to cleanse the soul. They simply shadowed the coming sacrifice that would provide true cleansing. Jesus' sacrifice was all sufficient. His perfect once-for-all sacrifice meant that future sacrifices were unnecessary (Hebrews 10:17–18).

Those who have remission of sin have no further need of sacrifice.

The premillennial view undermines the sufficiency of Christ's sacrificial atonement. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:21 that "if justification were through the Law, then Christ died to no purpose."

### **(3) The New Covenant is not in force now**

Premillennialists teach that the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31ff is not yet in force and that it will not come into force until the millennium. Walvoord says that the new covenant applies only to Israel and has no relation with this present age.

#### **But what does the Bible say?**

In Luke 22:20 Jesus says "this cup is the new covenant in my blood."

In Hebrews 9:15 we read that Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant.

In 2 Corinthians 3:5-6 Paul writes that "our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant."

The problem of sin is the motivation behind both covenants. The new covenant provides forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Walvoord claims that Christ's blood produced two new covenants.

The new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is the covenant that we are under today. This covenant provides salvation and forgiveness through the blood of Christ and there is no need for any other covenant.

Premillennialists have trouble explaining the need for their theories. Either Christ is all sufficient or he is not. If he is, then why do we need the restoration of the Old Testament shadows?

### **(4) Jesus is not presently ruling over Israel**

Premillennialists deny the complete Lordship of Jesus. They insist he is not presently ruling over Israel.

Walvoord and Lindsey both claim that although Jesus has the right to rule the earth, he is not exercising that authority at this time. For proof they point to the mess that the world is in.

### **But what does the Bible say?**

Psalm 29:10 reminds us that God reigned (and rained!) at the time of the flood even though the world was in a mess at the time.

Paul told the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:21 that Jesus is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” in this age. In Revelation 2:26–27 Jesus claims to have already been given the authority over nations that was prophesied in Psalm 2:8–9. In Revelation 1:5 we see that Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Psalm 110 depicts Jesus as sitting at God’s right hand and ruling in the midst of his enemies. This passage is quoted many times in the New Testament as having been already fulfilled. What does Walvoord say? He claims that although Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 110:4 have been fulfilled, the remaining verses in Psalm 110 have not been fulfilled.

### **What is the Extreme Preterist Approach?**

The Extreme Preterist Approach is also called Realized Eschatology, the 70 A.D. Theory, or Max Kingism. I generally will not spend too much time on what could be called “crackpot” theories, but since this one originated in the Lord’s church, I think we should spend some time discussing it.

Max King claims that although the kingdom came on the day of Pentecost following the ascension of Christ, it did not come with power and glory until A.D. 70. Max King claims that the event commonly referred to today as the “second coming of Christ” has already happened, and it occurred with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Max King claims that both the Christian and Jewish faiths were in operation from the day of Pentecost until A.D. 70. When the temple was destroyed, the church (the body) was resurrected—it had been buried under Judaism for 40 years.

Max King claims that there is no resurrection of the body and that Christ will *never* return to claim his people. All prophecy was fulfilled

in A.D. 70 and there is not a single prophecy that has not been fulfilled.

It is tempting to disregard this as just so much nonsense, but we should be careful. First, there are many sincere members of the church who have been lead astray by this false doctrine, and I personally know of two congregations that have been divided because of it. Max Kingism denies several of the basic tenets of the Christian faith; namely, the resurrection of the body and the final judgment.

So that we can confront it when (and if) we see it, I want to quickly go over several key reasons why this approach is wrong.

Its biggest mistake is that it violates one of the interpretive rules we discussed earlier: Similarity of language does not prove identity of subject. There are many judgments in the Bible (Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, Edom, Jerusalem, Rome, and the final judgment), but the same language is used to describe each. King focuses on the Jerusalem judgment in the New Testament and assumes that all judgment language refers to it.

We often confuse the judgments ourselves, and King exploits this to get his foot in the door. I will be the first to admit that many passages that we often take to refer to the end of the world actually refer to the end of Jerusalem. (Matthew 24:1-34, for example.) However, this does not mean that all such verses refer to the end of Jerusalem. (Our confusion sometimes causes us to think that the apostles mistakenly thought that Jesus was going to come again within their lifetimes. The apostles were not mistaken about the date of Christ's return! They were inspired by God!)

Max Kingism is based on the premise that the focus of Revelation is the fall of Jerusalem. This idea is contrary to all of the evidence — both internal and external — and is one of its weakest links.

There are numerous verses that can be used to respond to this false view. Acts 1:11, for example, tells us that Jesus will return in the same manner as he left. 1 Corinthians 11:26 tells us that the communion proclaims the Lord's death until he comes. 1 Corinthians

15:25–26 tells us that death will be destroyed when Christ returns. 2 Timothy 2:17–18 reminds us that those who deny the resurrection can overthrow people's faith, and sadly that has happened with Max King and his followers. And we could go on and on.

God's word is not decided by majority vote, but we should be concerned when we come up with something that no one has ever thought of before. **Novel theories about the Bible are generally wrong theories about the Bible.** Max Kingism is such a theory.

### What is the Preterist or Contemporary Historical Approach?

The Preterist or Contemporary Historical Approach applies the book primarily (or completely) to the conflict between the Church and Rome.

Some taking this approach apply the book to the conflict between the Church and Jerusalem, but that theory is seriously flawed. The villain in this book is Rome, not Jerusalem. We will see why as we work our way through the text, but let's pause to consider one reason right now.

A coin minted during the reign of Vespasian (the time when Revelation was written) depicts the goddess Roma sitting upon the seven hills that surrounded the city of Rome. Chapter 17 depicts the villain in Revelation as a bloodthirsty harlot sitting upon seven hills. If you lived in the first century, if you had that Roman coin in your pocket, and if you read Revelation 17, who would you think John was writing about? How could there be any answer other than Rome?



The preterist approach does not violate John's claim that the prophecies in Revelation were to come to pass shortly. This approach makes the book meaningful to its initial readers in that it gives comfort and assurance of victory to those being persecuted. According to this approach the book is not primarily eschatological— that is, it is not primarily concerned with the end of the world, but is instead concerned with the end of Rome.

The remainder of the course will provide an extended description of this approach.

## Can We Be Certain About Anything in Revelation?

**Chesterton:** "What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction; where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. . . . We are on the road to producing a race of man too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table."

One must be careful about presenting dogmatic answers to anything about Revelation. However, several points should be made in this regard:

1. It is possible to make some dogmatic assertions about what this book says. The third verse of the book says that those who read and understand this book will be blessed. Clearly, God meant for us to understand this book. Just because we can't be dogmatic about everything does not mean we can be dogmatic about nothing.
2. We must have an open mind—but as Chesterton observed an open mind is only good when it clamps down on something solid.

At times, however, we will have to settle for presenting several different interpretations, each of which could be true. Our inability at times to state with certainty what something means does not mean that we

cannot state with certainty what it does not mean. In fact, on occasion we may find ourselves proceeding by the process of elimination.

Many of the Old Testament prophecies had dual fulfillments—one that was immediate and one that was fulfilled later by Christ. In our study, we will seek to explain the immediate fulfillment without denying that there may be some secondary meaning. One should be careful however in this regard since secondary meanings are much harder to identify since such meanings generally have little to do with the immediate context of the book.

## Is Revelation Relevant?

This book deals with the persecution of God's people by government authorities. Is this relevant today? Are Christians facing persecution today? They certainly are outside of the U.S.A. Is it possible inside the U.S.A.?

Those who don't think that the tide has changed in this country have not been watching the tides! Politicians used to align themselves with Christian positions in order to get elected. Now they *oppose* those Christian positions in order to get elected.

Could we face government sponsored persecution here? Not all government opposition to religion is as blatant as the former Soviet Union, which actually distributed booklets in the 30's entitled *Teach Yourself to be Godless*. But here, freedom *of* religion has become freedom *from* religion.

In Europe, a preacher was jailed for simply proclaiming what the Bible has to say about homosexuality. Could that ever happen here? Could Christians ever be prosecuted for violating so-called hate crime laws?

Before World War II, Germany was the virtually unmatched fertile soil for religious worship, theology, sacred music, and evangelism. It was the birthplace of Luther and the Reformation. Even today, German is a required language for those seeking advanced theological degrees. The peaceful Amish and the Mennonites are of German origin. As we



know, the scene in Germany changed rapidly in just a short period of time, and it did so because of economic turmoil. Hitler's rise to power can be traced directly the stock market crash in the U.S. If you ever wonder whether the love of money really is the root of all evil, I encourage you to study the history of Hitler's rise to power.

We tend to see the church and the government in the same way that the early church saw themselves and Rome. What can we do? The church is so small and the government is so powerful? The church is more important and more powerful than the U.S. government! We make a mistake when we look to the government for our salvation—it has no salvation to give. The government should be looking to the church and not vice versa. We have God on our side! We have the power of prayer on our side! We need to see the world as God sees the world!

If the book does not appear very relevant today then perhaps we should be thankful that such is the case. Perhaps our prayer should be that this book *not* become very relevant to us.

## Chapter One

1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. 3 Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.

We are about to proceed through the text a few verses at a time, and we should recall the truism that dissection is not infrequently the death of beauty. If this book is an oil painting from God (as it is

sometimes described) then we need to do more than just analyze each individual brushstroke. We need to keep the entire painting in mind, and we need to frequently step back so we can see the entire painting.

Verse 1 tells us that the revelation in this book was from Christ, that it was received by John, and that it concerns things that must soon take place. Many “liberal” commentaries reject the notions that this revelation is from Christ and that John received and recorded it, and the “conservative” commentaries rightly castigate them for disbelieving the opening words of the book they purport to explain. **But many of those same “conservative” commentaries then proceed to ignore the equally clear statement in the same opening verse that this revelation concerns things that must soon take place!** Why don’t we just believe **ALL** of verse 1?

“The Revelation *of* Jesus Christ” means that the Revelation is given *by* Jesus Christ, not that it is a Revelation *about* Jesus Christ, although it certainly does have much to tell us about Jesus Christ.

The Greek word for Revelation is Apokalupsis where “Apo” means “away from” and “kalupsis” means a “veiling.” Thus, the Revelation is an unveiling. The message of the book is not hidden or veiled, but rather is unveiled. It may have formerly been a mystery, but no longer. This book unveils the struggles through which the church would pass and unveils its ultimate triumph under Christ.

This same word translated “revelation” is used elsewhere in the Bible but is used only here in this book. In Galatians 1:11–12, we see that Paul received the gospel by *apokalupsis* from Jesus Christ. In Galatians 2:2, Paul says that he went up to Jerusalem “by Revelation” to preach. See also 1 Corinthians 14:6 and Ephesians 1:17.

The story of the Bible is one of revelation, with the ultimate revelation being Jesus’ perfect revelation of the Father. In John 14:9, Jesus said, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” In God the Father there is no Christ-unlikeness! If you want to know how God the Father would react to something or some-

one, look in the gospels to see how Jesus reacted. When you see Jesus, you see the Father. He reveals him perfectly.

It is a wonderful and comforting thought to know that *God reveals*. God wants to us know; He wants us to understand; He is not in the business of hiding things from us. Men, by contrast, try to hide from God as in the Garden, and they try to hide their evil deeds. When Christ comes, he will “bring to light the hidden things of darkness.” (1 Corinthians 4:5) In Revelation 6:15, we will find people who say to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” God reveals; Man hides. What a contrast!

As we have already noted, the time frame given here is crucial to understanding the book. John was shown things that must “soon take place” in verse 1 and was told that the time is near in verse 3. In other contexts, the interpretation of those clear statements would present no difficulty, and yet here for some reason they are almost universally ignored and rejected.

The Greek word *eggus* meaning near or soon is used in verse 3 (and in 22:10). Here are some other verses in the New Testament where that same Greek word is used:

- Matthew 24:32 Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is **nigh**. 33 So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is **near**, even at the doors.
- Matthew 26:18 And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is **at hand**; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples.
- John 2:13 And the Jews' passover was **at hand**, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
- Romans 10:8 But what saith it? The word is **nigh** thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach.

- Ephesians 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made **nigh** by the blood of Christ. ... 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were **nigh**.
- Philippians 4:5 Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is **at hand**.

Again, the usage of the term elsewhere seems clear. Under what theory of interpretation should we take an *opposite* meaning when the word is used here in verse 3? **The time is near! It is not far off!** Those who pride themselves in interpreting each word of the Bible *literally* should start with this word!

The things in this book “must” take place. God has spoken and Rome has been judged. Those judgments must now take place.

In verse 3, a blessing is given to those who read and keep the book. This book is meant to be understood! Otherwise that blessing is just an empty promise!

In fact, there are seven blessings in this book:

- Those who read, hear, and obey are blessed in verse 3.
- Those who die in the Lord are blessed in 14:13.
- Those who are awake and watchful are blessed in 16:15.
- Those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb are blessed in 19:9.
- Those who share in the first resurrection are blessed in 20:6.
- Those who keep the words of this book are blessed in 22:7.
- Those who do what God commands are blessed in 22:14.

There are a remarkable number of “hidden sevens” in this book. By one count there are 29 different words that occur precisely seven times in this book. The word “signified” (“made it known”) in verse 1

is one such word, and it is also a clear link to the gospel of John, which uses the same word repeatedly to describe the miracles of Christ.

Notice that John refers to “he” who reads and “those” who hear. Typically, a public reader would have read the revelation in front of an assembly, and in doing so, both were blessed. I think there are some lessons here for us. First, we know the importance of public Bible reading. (1 Timothy 4:13) But, second, the readings are intended to be a blessing for both the reader and the listeners! Sometimes our readers seem so bored with what they themselves are reading that I wonder how any blessing can flow from their dull monotone to what seems to be an equally bored group of listeners! How can the word of Almighty God be boring? And yet we sometimes make it appear so.

It is a great privilege to hear God’s word read in our own language. Not everyone enjoys this privilege. The scripture reading is one of the most important parts of our worship service, but like every part of our worship we need to give it our very best. The secret to spiritual renewal is time with God’s word.

4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

The seven churches addressed here and in Chapters 2-3 were not the only churches in Asia. In particular, Colossae (Col. 1:2), Hierapolis (Col. 4:13), Troas (2 Corinthians 2:12; Acts 20:5), and Miletus (Acts 20:17) also had congregations. Why then single out these seven?

Some suggest that these seven churches were the centers of seven postal districts. Others feel that John must have had some special relationship with these seven churches. Still others feel that since the number seven is used 54 times in this book in a manner that often depicts perfection or completeness, this may have been John’s way of addressing the book to all churches. I think the latter is most likely.

## Revelation — Lesson 5

1:4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, 5a and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

The phrase “from him who is, who was, and who is to come” is similar to other descriptions and titles for God. For example, in Exodus 3:14 God says “I am that I am,” in John 8:58, Jesus says “Before Abraham was, I am.” In Hebrews 13:8, Jesus is described as being the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The Greek in verse 4 is quite unusual. Various translations include “The Being, the Was, the Coming,” and “The Being One and the Was One and the Coming One.” The definite article precedes each of the nouns, “the was, the is, the is to come.”

Barclay tells us that John bursts the bonds of grammar to show his reverence for God. Where we have “from him who is,” John retains the nominative case and in effect has “from he who is.” John’s reverence for God will not allow him to alter the form of his name even when the grammar demands it.

Further, where we have “from him who was,” John has “from the ‘he was.’” John uses a grammatically impossible construction to avoid using a form of “to become” that might imply that God could change. Those suffering persecution were particularly concerned with the changelessness of God. He had saved his people in the past—he would save them now.

I sometimes wonder if we have the same reverence for the changelessness of God. I am certain that the denominational world does not. God is the fixed point; we are not. And yet many denominational songs (some of which are in our own songbook) sound as if just the

opposite were true — that man rather than God is the unchanging fixed point. When we sing songs (as we often do) that picture us placing a crown on Jesus' head — who is changing?

There is a very unusual form of the Trinity in these verses in that we have the Father, the Son, and the Seven Spirits who are before God's throne. The figure of the seven spirits is used elsewhere in the book. In Revelation 3:1 we read:

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has **the seven spirits of God** and the seven stars. 'I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead.

In Revelation 4:5 we read:

From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are **the seven spirits of God**.

In Revelation 5:6 we read:

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and **with seven eyes**, which are **the seven spirits of God** sent out into all the earth.

Some suggest that the Spirit is *one* in name but *sevenfold* in virtue. See, for example, Isaiah 11:2, where we read:

And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

But there are only 6 virtues listed there! The seventh is the spirit of godliness and is found in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

Also, the seven spirits may correspond to the seven churches. Hebrews 2:4 speaks of God as giving “gifts” (“shares” in Greek) of the Spirit and thus these seven spirits may be the seven shares of the Spirit given to the seven churches. Again, the symbolic nature of the number 7 likely indicates completeness.

There is likely also an allusion here to Zechariah 3:9 and 4:6, 10, where we find the seven eyes set upon the stone before Joshua the High Priest. Compare again Revelation 5:6 (seven eyes).

This passage contains several descriptions of Christ. Jesus is called a witness because he has first hand knowledge of God. He is the perfect witness. Recall John 18:37.

Pilate said to him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. **For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.** Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.”

Jesus is the first-born of the dead. This points to the resurrection of Christ. Paul used the phrase “first-born of the dead” in Colossians 1:18 and the phrase “firstfruits of them that sleep” in 1 Corinthians 15:20.

The term “first-born” also points to preeminence. Jesus is the one with power and honor, the one in first place. In Psalm 89:27, God said of David that “I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.” David was not the first-born son of his father Jesse but he was certainly the preeminent son of Jesse. Recall Colossians 1:15, 18:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; ... He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be **pre-eminent**.

Jesus is the ruler of kings. This may refer again to Psalm 89:27, this time as a reference to the Messiah rather than just to David. Nero and Domitian thought they were all powerful and answerable to no one, and yet Jesus was their king. That Jesus is the King of kings means



that he is the King over everyone and everything. We do not make Jesus king when we obey him — we obey him because he is already king!

Hal Lindsey claims that Jesus is *not* ruling now. But what does the Bible say? In 1 Peter 3:22 we see that all powers have been made subject to him. In Ephesians 1:22 we read that all things are in subjection under him. In Revelation 2:27 we see that Jesus has power over nations. Finally, in Matthew 28:18, we see that Jesus has all authority in Heaven and on Earth. Jesus is king!

*5b To him who loves us and has freed us  
from our sins by his blood 6 and made us a  
kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to  
him be glory and dominion for ever and  
ever. Amen.*

This is a wonderful description of what Jesus has done for man. What did he do? He loved us. He freed us from our sin. He made us a kingdom of priests.

The phrase “washed us from our sins in his own blood” in the King James Version should probably read “set us free from our sins at the price of his blood.” The best Greek manuscripts have ‘lusanti’ (freed) and not ‘lousanti’ (washed). As Israel was freed from Egyptian bondage to become a new kingdom, so we have been freed from the bondage of sin and death to become a new kingdom.

He loves (present tense) us and set (past tense) us free. The death of Christ was a singular past event that is a continuous expression of God’s love.

Further, Jesus made us a kingdom of priests to God. In Exodus 19:6 God said “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” Under the old law only the priests had access to God. Through Jesus Christ everyone can now enjoy this access. Under the Old Law, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and he could so so only once a year, and even then he had a cord tied around his foot so that

he could be dragged out in case he died. Now we all may *boldly* approach the throne of grace. (Hebrews 4:16 and Hebrews 10:19–22)

In Exodus 25:8, God said, “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.” In many ways the entire Bible is a variation on this theme. It was (past tense) fulfilled perfectly in Jesus Christ. We all have access to God through Jesus. We are all priests.

The church of Christ is a kingdom of priests. Isaiah 61:6 told us about it long ago:

**But you shall be called the priests of the LORD**, men shall speak of you as the ministers of our God; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.

And 1 Peter 2:9 described the church in very similar terms:

But ye are a chosen generation, a **royal priesthood**, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Part of our challenge in this book will be to look at things through other’s eyes. To understand the book we need to look at it through the eyes of its first century readers, but we also need to try to see things through God’s eyes. We need to see the church as God sees the church — the beautiful bride of his son, the eternal kingdom, the royal priesthood.

We often make the point that Revelation is trying to describe what we cannot see (Heaven) in terms we can understand, but we may find that it is really describing something we *can* see (the church), but that we are not seeing properly.

7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see him, every one who  
pierced him; and all tribes of the earth

will wail on account of him. Even so.  
Amen.

Verse 7 is John's motto: Jesus is coming in order to set things right! No matter how hopeless things may seem at the moment, Jesus is coming and he will set things right. That's not a bad motto for us as well!

This language is from the Old Testament and carries with it a subtle reminder that the readers should keep in mind that God has never failed to deliver his faithful people from an oppressor. If they have studied the Old Testament, they should already know this!

And this is a subtle reminder to us as well: Many today seem to be waiting around with *closed* Bibles to receive a revelation from God! Although truth may be scarce, the supply has always exceeded the demand!

Does verse 7 refer to the coming of Christ at the end of the world, what we often call the *second* coming of Christ? Many say so or at least assume so, but let's be careful. If it does then it would seem to violate the time frame for the book given a few verses earlier. The book's stated focus concerns things that were about to happen soon. Further, recall that although Matthew 24:30 uses similar language, it cannot refer to the end of the world there due to the time frame given by Jesus in Matthew 24:34.

A better interpretation of verse 7 in view of John's time frame would have this verse apply to the figurative return of Christ to judge Rome just as the similar language in Matthew 24 referred to the figurative return of Christ to judge Jerusalem.

In the Old Testament, the idea of coming on clouds or on a cloud was used to describe God's judgment against Egypt (Isaiah 19:1; Ezekiel 30:3, 32:7) and against his own people (Ezekiel 34:12).

In Daniel 7, Daniel had a vision in which four kingdoms were depicted by four beasts that ruled the earth. The fourth beast was the Roman empire. After the days of that beast's power we read in Daniel 7:13–14 that Daniel “saw in the night visions, and, behold, with the

clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, ... and to him was given dominion, and glory, and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." In Revelation 22:7 Jesus said he would come without delay. Just as he had done before, Jesus was coming without delay to rescue his people and judge those were oppressing his people.

We are told here that not everyone would welcome that coming. The tribes of the earth would wail on account of him. In this book, we will find that the wicked are described as those who dwell on earth. To God's people, Christ's coming is a promise of hope, but to the enemies of Christ his coming is a threat.

Verse 7 says that "every eye will see him, every one who pierced him." Zechariah 12:10 says "they shall look upon me whom they have pierced," and only *John's* gospel makes reference to that prophecy (John 19:37). Again, we have a link back to John's gospel.

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says  
the Lord God, who is and who was and  
who is to come, the Almighty.

The phrase "alpha and omega" (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet) denotes completeness. It is similar to our phrase "A to Z." Nothing is left out. Christ is all sufficient. The phrase is used again at the end of the book in 22:13. Also, recall Isaiah 44:6.

Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and  
his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "**I am the  
first and I am the last**; besides me there is no  
god."

Verse 8 says that God is the Almighty—that is, the one who has dominion over all things. The word occurs 10 times in the New Testament — once in Second Corinthians 6:18 where the Old Testament is quoted and 9 times in Revelation. Even though no earthly empire had been able to withstand Rome, John is assuring the church ("the panting, huddled flock whose crime was Christ") that their God is the Almighty and that they will be victorious. Read Revelation 19:6.

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, "Hallelujah! **For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.**"

Is this book relevant today? Absolutely! We all need to be reminded that God is the Almighty! Not the nations of this world, not the political leaders, not the armies, not the terrorists, not science, not medicine — but God! If we place our trust in anyone or anything else, then we are fools. There is but one eternal kingdom and but one eternal king!

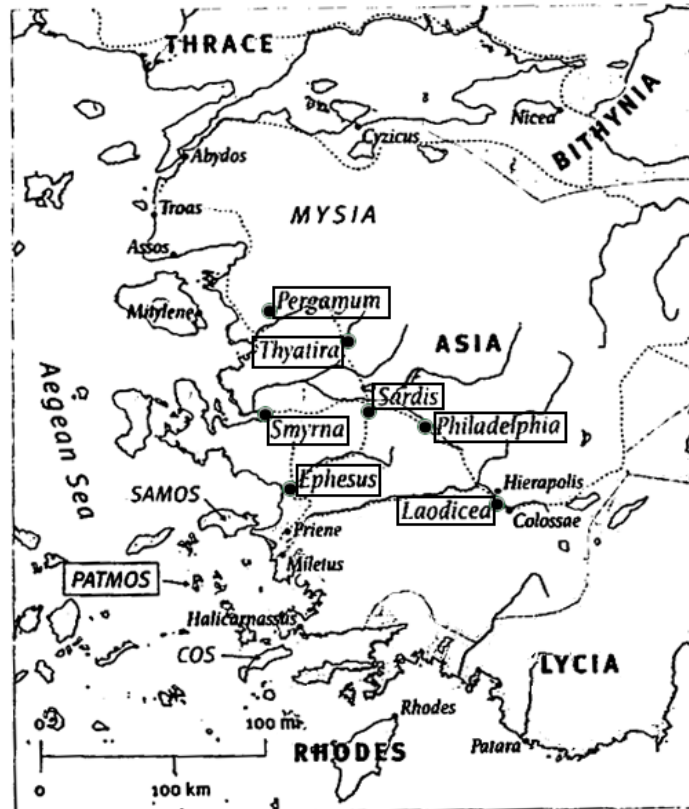
9 I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

The Greek word "tribulation" denotes a pressing together (as of grapes) or a squeezing or a pinching. In John 16:33, Jesus said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

**Hailey:** "Tribulation had been the lot of the church from its beginning, but it was now breaking upon the saints with an increasing intensity."

Governors of the various provinces could at their own discretion have a criminal executed, enslaved, or banished to an island. The most common places of Roman banishment were the rocky Aegean islands off the coast of Asia, which included Patmos. As we have discussed, John may have been banished there by Domitian himself while his father Vespasian and brother Titus were away from Rome.

Patmos is a rocky and uninviting island located about 70 miles southwest of Ephesus. The island is about 10 miles long and 6 miles across as its widest point. The sea almost pinches it off in one place, forming a harbor. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the word “sea” is used 22 times in Revelation.



Banishment to Patmos for John may have involved hard labor at the quarries. Sir William Ramsay says that John’s banishment would have been “preceded by scourging, marked by perpetual fetters, scanty clothing, insufficient food, sleep on the bare ground, a dark prison, work under the lash of the military overseer.”

John did not refer to himself as an apostle or as a close associate of Jesus, but as a brother of those being persecuted and as one who shares in their tribulation. As Barclay says, John did not preach endurance

from his easy chair. No one will ever listen to one who preaches heroic courage to others while he himself has sought a prudent safety.

“In the spirit” means under the influence of the Spirit. This book, as with all Scripture, is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. It is God breathed.

The reference to Sunday as the Lord’s day given here is the first such reference in literature now existing.

A trumpet often accompanies the voice or the appearance of God. Recall Exodus 19:16 when the Law was given, and recall the description of the final judgment found in 1 Corinthians 15:52.

What about the order of the churches? Many elaborate theories have been put forth to explain it. The simplest theory seems the most likely. The churches listed in verse 11 are arranged in the order that a traveler on foot would take if he started at Ephesus, the closest church to Patmos. There is about 30 to 45 miles between each of the listed congregations. (Although when we get to the *last* of the seven letters we may see yet another possible reason for this particular ordering.)

Notice in verse 9 that John was a partaker with them *in the kingdom*. **If the kingdom did not already exist at the time of this writing, then this claim by John makes no sense!** And yet how many commentaries on Revelation argue that the kingdom has not yet come?

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; 14 his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; 16 in his right hand he held seven stars, from his

mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword,  
and his face was like the sun shining in  
full strength.

The golden lampstand (or menorah) is a familiar Old Testament image. Exodus 25:31–37 tells us that such a lamp was in the tabernacle. Such a lamp is also mentioned in the vision of Zechariah 4:2 —

And he said to me, "What do you see?" I said,  
"I see, and behold, a **lampstand all of gold**,  
with a bowl on the top of it, and **seven lamps**  
on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps  
which are on the top of it.

Then and now, the menorah depicts Judaism, and yet verse 20 will tell us that these seven lampstands are the seven churches. Which is it? What we see here is something we commonly see in the New Testament — descriptions of God's people from the Old Testament used to describe God's people in the New Testament. God's people did not change from the Old to the New; **God's people have always been the faithful remnant**, and today that faithful remnant is the church.

And how do we know that these are the people of God? Because verse 13 tells us that Christ stands in their midst. Jesus loves his people; Jesus cares for his people; Jesus stands with his people. This is a beautiful opening to this book of comfort for the people of God. Jesus is not watching from afar; he is standing in their midst. Again, we are reminded of Exodus 25:8.

The title "Son of Man" in verse 13 is a Messianic title from Daniel 7:13, and is also frequently used in the New Testament as a title for Christ. There is no doubt about whom John is writing here.

The long robe and the golden girdle in verse 13 denotes the clothing worn by the High Priest when he was officiating on behalf of the people. And, of course, we again see a description of Christ. Hebrews 4:14 tells us that Jesus is our High Priest.

Verse 14 tells us that Jesus' head and hair were white as white wool and white as snow. This description also comes from Daniel 7, but there it is not used of the Son of Man (God the Son) but rather is used



in Daniel 7:9 to describe the Ancient of Days (God the Father). John uses Old Testament descriptions of God the Father to describe the risen Christ. The symbol of whiteness depicts the purity and sinlessness of Christ. (Compare Isaiah 1:18.)

The voice of Christ is described as the sound of many waters. God is described the same way in Ezekiel 43:2 —

And behold, the glory of the God of Israel  
came from the east; and the sound of his  
coming was like the sound of many waters;  
and the earth shone with his glory.

Remember that as John was writing this he could likely hear the roar of the Aegean Sea.

Verse 15 tells us that Christ had feet of bronze. What does that mean? To see what the feet of bronze depict, we should do what we will often be doing to understand the symbols in this book — we should see how the same symbol was used in the Old Testament.

In Micah 4:13, feet of bronze were used to depict the power to trample.

Arise and thresh, O daughter of Zion; For I  
will make your horn iron, **And I will make  
your hooves bronze; You shall beat in  
pieces many peoples.**

In Daniel 10:6 and Ezekiel 1:7, feet of bronze were used to denote the speed and the strength of those sent by God to do his will on the earth. The message is don't get in their way! The message to Rome is prepare to be trampled!

Verse 16 shows a sword coming from his mouth. This figure is a common symbol for judgment. In Isaiah 11:4, God smites the earth with the rod of his mouth. Also, recall the description of God's word from Hebrews 4:12–13 —

For the word of God is living and active,  
**sharper than any two-edged sword**, piercing  
to the division of soul and spirit, of joints

and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. **And before him no creature is hidden**, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

And recall from John 12:48 that we are judged by the words of Christ!

Verse 14 tell us that his eyes were like a flame of fire. We see a similar description in Daniel 10:6 of the messenger of God sent to Daniel. We also see those eyes in the verses we just looked at from Hebrews 14 — “all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do.” Perfect eyes are required for perfect judgment, and Christ’s eyes are perfect. He sees all. Nothing is hidden from him.

Verse 16 describes the face of Christ — like the sun shining at full strength! The description in verse 16 reminds us of the transfiguration of Jesus. In Matthew 17:2 we read that his face shone like the sun. There, as here, the description denotes the glory and the divinity and the power of Christ.

Verse 16 tells us that he held seven stars in his right hand. The symbol is explained in verse 20, which we will consider in just a moment.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. 19 Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. 20 As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

And how does John react to this vision of the risen Christ? Verse 17 tells us: “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.”

The Bible is full of similar accounts from those who come face to face with divinity.

- **Ezekiel 1:28** (Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. **And when I saw it, I fell upon my face.**)
- **Ezekiel 3:23** (So I arose and went forth into the plain; and, lo, the glory of the LORD stood there, like the glory which I had seen by the river Chebar; **and I fell on my face.**)
- **Ezekiel 43:3** (And the vision I saw was like the vision which I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and like the vision which I had seen by the river Chebar; **and I fell upon my face.**)
- **Luke 5:8** (But when Simon Peter saw it [the miracle of Jesus' filling their nets with fish], **he fell down at Jesus' knees**, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.")
- **John 18:5-6** (Jesus said to them, "I am he." Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When he said to them, "I am he," they drew back **and fell to the ground.**)
- **Isaiah 6:1-5** ("**Woe is me! For I am lost;** for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!")

Do you think maybe we have lost some of that awe when it comes to Christ? Is it possible that he has become too familiar to us? Remember who it is who is writing this. If anyone could have claimed a special familiarity with Jesus, it was John, his cousin and the apostle whom Jesus loved. (John 13:23) And yet, look at the relationship we see here. Is Jesus our friend? Absolutely. You will never have a better friend than Jesus. Is Jesus the eternal Almighty God, who created and upholds the entire universe, and who is the very image of the invisible God, whose face appears as the sun shining with full strength? Absolutely! And let's remember that the next time we are tempted to plaster His name on a t-shirt or a bumper sticker.

The command 'fear not' in verse 17 is generally the first thing heard after God appears to his own people! Recall, for example, Genesis 26:24.

And the LORD appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father; **fear not**, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your descendants for my servant Abraham's sake."

But we should note that the God is most definitely *not* telling the Romans to fear not. They should be terrified!

One of the most beautiful pictures in the entire book is here in verse 17. John has fainted dead away at the sight of Christ, and how does Jesus respond? He kneels down, places his right hand on John, and tells him not to fear. That was also a message to the seven churches, and it is also a message to all Christians. Jesus is on our side, and he is *not* a distant monarch. **Jesus upholds the entire universe, and yet he notices sparrows.** A wonderful savior is Jesus our Lord!

The next few verses describe the great power of Christ.

Verse 17 tell us that Jesus is the first and the last. Again, we have Old Testament descriptions of God applied here to the risen Christ.

- **Isaiah 44:6** (Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: "**I am the first and I am the last**; besides me there is no god.")
- **Isaiah 48:12** (Hearken to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! I am He, **I am the first, and I am the last.**)

Verse 18 tell us that Jesus is the living one. Again, many Old Testament passages come to mind.

- **Joshua 3:10** (And Joshua said, "Hereby you shall know that **the living God** is among you.")
- **Psalms 42:2** (My soul thirsts for God, for **the living God**. When shall I come and behold the face of God?)

- **Hosea 1:10** (Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” it shall be said to them, “Sons of **the living God.**”)
- **Jeremiah 10:10** (But the LORD is the true God; he is **the living God** and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.)

Jesus is God! Nowhere else in the Bible is the divinity of Christ any more clear than it is in these verses. Virtually every Old Testament description of God the Father is applied in this book to God the Son.

When you study modern commentaries about Revelation you often hear a lot about “the antichrist.” But 1 John 2:22 tells us that an antichrist is anyone who denies the divinity of Christ, which means there are *many* antichrists in the world today.

Verse 18 tells us that Jesus possesses the keys of death. Just as it still means today, to possess the key to something is to control that thing. I control the Honda out on the parking lot. I can make it open; I can make it start; I can make it stop. To have a key means to have authority. Recall Isaiah 22:22 —

And I will place on his shoulder the **key** of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

It is in that same way that Jesus possesses the key of death. Jesus conquered death—he controls it. Rome thought that it controlled death, but bloodthirsty Rome and its bloodthirsty emperors will soon learn otherwise! They will soon be swimming in blood!

Keys are often associated with locked gates, and death has gates.

- **Psalms 9:13** (O thou who liftest me up from the gates of death.)
- **Psalms 107:18** (They drew near to the gates of death.)

- **Isaiah 38:10** (I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years.)

Jesus has the key to that gate. When he says “Come forth!,” the dead come forth and no gate can hold them back.

2 Timothy 1:10 tells us that Jesus abolished (past tense) death. But 1 Corinthians 15:25-26 tells us that Jesus “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” **How can death remain as an enemy if it has been abolished?** Hebrews 2:14-15 provides the answer:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, **that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to life-long bondage.**

Death has been conquered (past tense) but it will remain until the last day when, as 1 Corinthians 15:54-56 tells us, death will be swallowed up in victory.

Rome and death are in a similar position, and when Jesus is coming in judgment the very last place you want to be is in the same position as death! By the time this book ends, Rome will also have been judged and conquered (past tense), and yet we may find that Rome like death will remain for a time after it has been conquered. But as with death, the final outcome for Rome will never be in any doubt.

In verse 19, John is told to write everything down. He is told to write down what is (that is, what he is now seeing in the first vision) and what is to come (that is, what he is about to see in the second vision, which starts in Chapter 4).

The mystery of the 7 stars and the 7 lampstands is explained in verse 20. As with other mysteries in the Bible, this mystery is something that was formerly not understood but that has now been revealed. Revelation is not the only book with such mysteries. We have:

- The mystery of godliness in 1 Timothy 3:16.
- the mystery of marriage and the Church in Ephesians 5:31–32.
- The mystery of the hardening of Israel in Romans 11:25.
- The mystery of the promise to the Gentiles in Ephesians 3:4.

Verse 20 gives us the explanation for the the mystery of the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands. The seven lampstands are the seven churches, and the seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches.

Before we look at what this explanation means, let's pause to note two important things we should take from verse 20.

First, verse 20 confirms that this book contains figures. Jesus refers to stars and lampstands, but he clearly tells us that these items are figures. So, for those who pride themselves in taking everything in this book literally, they need to study verse 20 very carefully.

Second, verse 20 tells us with absolute certainty what these particular figures represent, and we will see other explanations in this book. This is but one example of someone (in this case, Jesus himself) explaining a part of the vision to John during the vision itself. These explanations are signposts to let us know if we are on the right road with the other symbols in the vision.

## Revelation — Lesson 6

1:20 As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

What does the explanation in verse 20 mean? First, the lampstands depict churches. We have already noticed that a lampstand is used elsewhere in the Bible to denote God's people, but it is a particularly good symbol for the church. Recall Philippians 2:15 —

That you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, **among whom you shine as lights in the world.**

Although we are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14), we are *not* the source of that light. Jesus is the true light of the world “which lighteth every man that cometh into the world” (John 1:9, 8:12), and the church is an earthly container for that true light. Christian light is always borrowed light. The church is a lampstand.

Second, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. Who are these *angels* in verse 20? It seems here that perhaps the explanation in verse 20 needs its own explanation!

Some suggest that the angels are men sent to John to inquire about his condition on Patmos and report back to the churches. Others suggest that the angels are the elders or the ministers of the churches. I don't see much evidence for either of these views.

Others suggest that the angels are actual angels who are responsible for the churches. Note, however, that while the letters are addressed directly to the angels, the comments in the letters are addressed directly to the churches. For example, in 2:1-2, we read, “*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:* ‘The words of him who holds the seven



stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lamp-stands. “I know *your* works, ...” Thus, it appears that the angels *are* the churches, unless, we take the “works” here to be the works of the angels rather than the works of the churches, which would not make much sense. If this is an actual angel, then we would have to conclude that this angel is somehow responsible for what the church has done right or wrong. If the angel is responsible, then don’t we have to conclude that the angel exercises some control over the church? And how would that fit in with our own free will? In short, taking these angels to be literal angels does not fit well with the text and I think is a position that must be rejected.

I think Milligan may have the right explanation. He says that the *angel* of a given thing is that thing itself in its essential nature. When the angel of a thing is discussed, that thing is invested with angelic personality in order to act out its part in the scheme of the book. Later in Revelation we will find rivers, winds, bowls, trumpets, and books that also have angels. Thus, under this view, the angel of a church is the personification of that church so that it can act out its role in this book. This view fits very well with the context of Chapters 2 and 3.

One final question before we reach the letters in Chapters 2 and 3 is *why* the letters are included in this book?

These letters are not an afterthought. They are not separate and unrelated from the rest of the book as many commentators suggest or imply. These letters are an integral part of this book, and any view of Revelation that makes them anything less than integral is an incorrect view of this book. These letters tell us about the initial audience of this book, and these letters are crucial in understanding the rest of the book.

Revelation is primarily about a great threat to church from *without* by the Roman empire, but these letters show us that the church also faced a great threat from *within*. That threat will be different for each of the seven congregations, but taken together they provide a powerful lesson to every congregation of the Lord’s body, even to those today that no longer face great threats from without.

In the remainder of this book, we will see the church largely take on a *passive* role while Jesus takes care of the mighty Roman empire. But in these letters we see the church commanded to take an *active* role when it comes to battling the problems that faced the church from within.

## Chapter Two

### The Letter to Ephesus

1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 “‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

The city of Ephesus has been called the “first and greatest metropolis of Asia.” Ephesus had the greatest harbor in Asia, and it was the greatest and wealthiest city in Asia.

Ephesus was one of the few “free cities” in the Roman empire, which means that within its own limits it was self-governing. Ephesus could never have Roman troops garrisoned within it.

Ephesus was the center of worship of Artemis or Diana. The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Acts 19 tells us about Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis and who saw his livelihood threatened by the spread of Christianity. Ephesus also contained temples dedicated to Nero and Claudius. One commentator said that in Ephesus, pagan religion was at its strongest.

Ephesus was also a center for crime and immorality. The Temple of Artemis was filled with hundreds of priestesses who were sacred prostitutes. Heraclitus, the weeping philosopher, attributed his tears to the fact that no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at the immorality.

Although Ephesus seemed very unpromising soil for the word of God, some of the church’s greatest triumphs occurred there. Trench wrote: “Nowhere did the word of God find a kindlier soil, strike root more deeply or bear fairer fruits of faith and love.” There is a lesson here for us. Sometimes we are tempted to write off someone or some group because we are sure they will never listen to us or obey the gospel. And yet, as Ephesus shows us, God can reap a wonderful harvest from unpromising soil if we will but plant the seed. **We must never write off anyone for whom Jesus died!**

Of the cities Paul visited on his missionary journeys, Paul stayed longer in Ephesus than in any other. (Acts 20:31 says he was there for three years.) Aquila, Priscilla, and Apollos were in Ephesus (Acts 18). Paul’s great farewell address was delivered to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.

What had this congregation done that was right? They had worked hard, they had endured patiently, they did not bear evil men, they tested and exposed false teachers, and they had not grown weary.

With all of that going for them, what could possibly be wrong? Verse 4 tells us that the Ephesian congregation had a major problem. They had abandoned their first love.

It is interesting to note how Paul ended his letter to the Ephesians in Ephesians 6:24 — “Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.” That letter was written about 10 years before this second letter. At some point between the two letters the Ephesians had abandoned their first love. It can happen quickly!

They had lost their proper focus – perhaps their programs and their labors had become an end rather than a means to an end. Their actions were right, but their motivation was wrong.

Listen to what one denominational commentator had to say about this malady in the denominational world. I think his comments can serve as a warning to us as well.

It is one of the remarkable features of contemporary church life that so many are attempting to heal the church by tinkering with its structures, its services, its public face. This is clear evidence that modernity has successfully palmed off one of its greatest deceptions on us, convincing us that God himself is secondary to organization and image, that the church's health lies in its flow charts, its convenience, and its offerings rather than in its inner life, its spiritual authenticity, the toughness of its moral intentions, its understanding of what it means to have God's Word in this world.

The world's business and God's business are two different things. The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is not inadequate technique, insufficient organization, or antiquated music, and those who

want to squander the church's resources bandaging these scratches will do nothing to stanch the flow of blood that is spilling from its true wounds.

The fundamental problem in the evangelical world today is that God rests too inconsequentially upon the church. His truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common.

And what would happen to the Ephesian congregation if the situation were not remedied? Jesus says in verse 5 that he would come and remove their lampstand from its place.

What this tells us is that it is possible for an entire congregation of the Lord's church to be plunged into such darkness that it ceases to be a congregation of the Lord's church. They may not change the sign outside the building that says "Church of Christ" – but what you find inside is no longer a church of Christ, a church that belongs to Christ. Its lampstand has been removed from its place.

In verse 5, we see a *figurative* "coming of Christ" of the sort we have already talked about. Here the coming depicts a coming in judgment against this congregation if they do not repent.

Verse 6 is interesting. Jesus says that he *hates* the works of the Nicolaitans.

When Jesus says he *hates* something, it should really get our attention. If Jesus hates it, then we must hate it as well – and if we don't, then it tells us we have a problem. Jesus commended the Ephesians in verse 6 because they also hated the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans.

The Nicolaitans were a sect that some surmise (without much evidence) was started by Nicolas, one of the first deacons in Acts 6:5. Another theory is that the name is symbolic (as most likely is the name "Jezebel" that is used in a later letter). The Greek word "Nikolas" means "destroyer of the people."

This group was known for their “loose thinking and their loose living.” The wolves mentioned by Paul in Acts 20 in his address to the Ephesian elders had arrived. And perhaps it was because of Paul’s warning that the Ephesian congregation was not taken in by these false teachers. They recognized and hated their false teachings.

To love the truth, we must hate what is false. If we do not hate what is false, then we cannot say that we love the truth. Jesus hated this false doctrine, and he commended this congregation for also hating that false doctrine. (We will see a congregation with a different attitude when we get to Pergamum.)

What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Ephesus? Look at verse 4. This congregation had lost its focus. They were still doing the programs and the activities, but they had forgotten *why* they were doing the programs and the activities. They had left their first love.

The lesson for us today is that the church of Christ must always focus on Christ. He must always be our “first love.”

Remember Paul’s description of loveless works in 1 Corinthians 13:3 — “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”

And remember John 14:15, where Jesus told us what it means to love him: “If ye love me, keep my commandments.” There is no such thing as a disobedient love.

## The Letter to Smyrna

8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 9 “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil

is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.'

Smyrna was the loveliest city in Asia. It was called the ornament of Asia, the crown of Asia, and the flower of Asia. It stood at a cross-roads and was a great trading city, and its harbor was Asia's safest and most convenient.

Smyrna was a center of culture housing a large library and many famous temples. It claimed to be the birthplace of Homer.

In a sense, Smyrna had also "died and come to life" as Jesus says of himself in verse 8. Smyrna was founded in 1000 BC as a Greek colony, but it was destroyed in 600 BC by the Lydians. It was rebuilt as a planned city around 200 BC.

Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a free city. It was self-governing and had no Roman troops. The city had cast its lot with Rome long before Rome became the undisputed leader of the world. Smyrna had erected a temple to the goddess Roma as far back as 195 BC.

Having a temple to the emperor was a matter of great pride to the city of Smyrna, and a refusal by any citizen of the city to pay tribute in that temple was seen as a disgraceful lack of patriotism.

The Jews in Smyrna were very influential and numerous, and verse 9 tells us they were slandering the Christians there.

We are willing to suffer for those who we love, and the congregation at Smyrna was willing to suffer for Jesus Christ. As one commentator said: "It was a dangerous thing to be a Christian in Smyrna. There was no knowing what might happen to you." Indeed, Jesus tells them that they could expect poverty, slander, prison, and death.

It was in Smyrna that Polycarp was martyred. When he was commanded to “sacrifice to Caesar or be burned,” he responded, “86 years have I served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me?”

To receive a certificate to conduct business, you were required to burn incense on an altar to Caesar once a year. The Jews had received an exemption, but the Christians had not. The persecution against the Christians was apparently being fanned into flames by the local Jewish population, who would throw the Christians out of the synagogue and then inform on them to the local authorities.

Who are the Jews that are not really Jews in verse 9? We find similar descriptions elsewhere.

- In John 8:39 Jesus told some Jews that they were not truly Abraham’s children.
- In Romans 9 Paul explained that all Israel is not Israel.
- In Romans 2:28–29 Paul explained that to be a true Jew one must believe in Jesus Christ.

**The Jews of that day who called themselves Jews yet were not faithful to God were no more Jews than are the Christians of today who call themselves Christians and yet are not faithful to God really Christians.** God’s people are *faithful* people, or else they are not God’s people no matter what they may call themselves.

Very strong language is used in verse 9 to describe these slandering Jews who were not really Jews. “I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.”

Synagogue of Satan? Who was the mean-spirited, divisive, unloving, hater who came up with that phrase? Oh. What do you know? It was Jesus. And this was not the first time he had used this description. Listen to what he said to the Jewish leaders in John 8:44.

You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth



in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

It doesn't sound much like Jesus thought the Jewish leaders were just on another path to God. But that message does not go over very well in today's modern world. As an example, compare Jesus' description with the following quote from a modern religious scholar:

[Saying that] 'We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong,' ... is intolerable from merely human standards. It is doubly so from Christian ones. Any position that antagonizes and alienates rather than reconciles ... is unlovely, is un-Christian. ... I rather feel that the final doctrine on this matter may perhaps run along the lines of affirming that a Buddhist who is saved, or a Hindu or a Muslim or whoever, is saved because God is the kind of God whom Jesus Christ has revealed him to be.

According to this fellow, Christ himself is un-Christ-like!

This author believes that the Muslims and the Buddhists are saved because "God is the kind of God whom Jesus Christ has revealed him to be." But if I can be saved apart from the blood of Christ, then Christ died for no reason. If there is a path to God around Jesus Christ, then his death was not necessary. What would that tell us about the God revealed to us in scripture? What kind of God would he be if he sent his son to suffer and die for no reason?

There is one way to God, and only one way to God, and we do no one any favors when we teach or suggest otherwise.

- **1 John 2:22-23** — Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either.

- **1 Corinthians 3:11** — For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.
- **Acts 4:12** — Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.
- **John 14:6** — Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

And what does the world say in response to that? Rita Gross has written a book entitled “Buddhists Talk about Jesus.” She describes Jesus’ statement in John 14:6 as “dangerous, destructive, and degraded” and “one of the most immoral ideas that humans have ever created.”

And she’s not finished. Here is what her book says about Christ’s miracles: “Most, and perhaps all, of the extraordinary feats performed by Jesus would be classified by Buddhists as common accomplishments ... requiring a certain degree of meditative competence, but no real degree of permanent spiritual maturity.”

That’s a strong claim – particularly given the fact that Jesus is alive and Buddha is dead and buried!

I have news for these Buddhists. Buddha can meditate all he wants to, but he’s not coming out of that tomb until Jesus commands him to, and when he does come out of that tomb, Buddha will bend his knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That’s true for Buddha, that’s true for Mohammed, and that’s true for every other person who has ever walked on this earth.

The Bible proclaims peace between Jew and Gentile – but that peace exists in the church. It is in the church that the middle wall of partition has been broken down. For those outside of the church to come to the Father – whether they be Jew or Greek – they must find salvation in Jesus Christ. There is no other way. To say otherwise is to call Jesus Christ a liar. (John 14:6)

A few years ago, Mel Gibson produced a movie about the life of Christ. Some at the time expressed worry that the film might some-

how suggest that the Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. But, of course, if they weren't responsible, then who was? The Romans certainly did not wish to see Jesus dead, as Pilate himself stated at the time. That the Jews killed Jesus is a fact of history that cannot be changed by modern day denials.

Speaking to fellow Jews in Acts 2:23, Peter said: "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death."

And again, speaking to fellow Jews, Peter said in Acts 5:30, "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree."

Did the Jews murder Jesus? Yes. But here we need to be very careful that we do not judge someone while having a beam in our own eye.

We also had a hand in the death of Christ. How? Because of our sin. We crucified the Son of God by our sin. Hebrews 6:6 tells us that if some fall away and return to their former sins then they "crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame."

Since all men have sinned, all men had a hand in the murder of the Son of God. We should not deny our role in that event – and neither should the Jews deny their role.

The phrase "synagogue of Satan" is strong, but it was fitting. The Jews of that day stirred up a lot of trouble for the early Christians. But the history of anti-semitism shows us that people calling themselves Christians have over the years also stirred up a lot of trouble (and, indeed, a lot *more* trouble) for the Jews. Both sides are wrong.

When it comes to salvation and the great commission, the Gospel of Jesus Christ divides people into two groups and *only* two groups: those in Christ and those out of Christ. Galatians 3:28 could not be any clearer on this issue. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

God wanted peace between the Jew and the Gentile in the first century, and he still wants it today, but that peace is found only in Christ. No man cometh to the Father except by him.

Since there was a “synagogue of Satan” somewhere in the first century, might there be a “church of Satan” somewhere today?

What if there were a religious group somewhere that called themselves a Christian church, and assume that they not only approved of homosexual conduct, but they elected as one of their leaders a practicing homosexual who had left his wife and children to move in with his gay lover. Then assume that after he was elected, a fellow church leader was quoted in the newspaper as saying that this leader’s “consecration would bring in new, youthful members” and that “We have here a wonderful evangelistic tool to strengthen the life of the church.” And then, finally, assume that after he was elected, the homosexual leader himself was quoted as saying “God has once again brought an Easter out of Good Friday.” If that group is not a church of Satan, then I submit that there is no church of Satan.

Verse 9 tells us that these Christians were in poverty yet were rich. Without that certificate we talked about, it was very hard to find work. There are two Greek words for poverty, one that means destitution and another that means having nothing extra. The one used here means destitution. Their homes may have been plundered as well. Recall Hebrews 10:34 —

For you had compassion on the prisoners,  
and you joyfully accepted **the plundering of  
your property**, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.

And yet they were rich! Again, we are called upon to view the situation through God’s eyes rather than through our own. We have *all* spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus. Recall Ephesians 1:3 —

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord  
Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ

with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

What is the 10 day tribulation in verse 10? It may simply refer to a short period of trial. Recall Daniel 1:12 —

Test your servants for **ten days**; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink.

This period preceded Daniel's vision as this one precedes John's vision. Recall also Genesis 31:7 regarding Jacob and Laban —

Yet your father has cheated me and changed my wages **ten times**, but God did not permit him to harm me.

It could be a literal 10 days. The language in these letters is not all apocalyptic. The churches and all or most of the names are literal. The main vision does not begin until chapter 4. Interestingly, Walvoord says the 10 days here is figurative and yet the 1000 years in Chapter 20 is literal!

What about the second death in verse 11? Stay tuned! We will discuss that when we get to Chapter 20.

What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Smyrna? Look at verse 9. The lesson for the church today is that Christ is not just *a* way – Christ is *the* way. The modern world gnashes its teeth and recoils at the idea that there is one and only one path to the Father – but we must never cease to proclaim it, no matter the cost.

## The Letter to Pergamum

12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 13 “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan

dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality. 15 So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.'

Historically, Pergamum was the most famous city in Asia. It had been a capital city for 400 years. First, it was the capital of the Seleucid kingdom that appeared after Alexander the Great. Next, it was the capital of the province of Asia formed by the Romans. It was situated on a hilltop from which the Mediterranean Sea could be seen 15 miles away.

Pergamum was a center of culture surpassing even Ephesus and Smyrna. It had a library that was second only to that in Alexandria. (200,000 volumes copied by hand!)

The word "parchment" is derived from "Pergamum." In the third century BC, a Pergamene king attempted to lure away the librarian at Alexandria. The Egyptians imprisoned the librarian and banned the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Pergamum, in response, invented parchment (or vellum) from animal skins.

Pergamum was also a great religious center. The city contained a great altar to Zeus that was set 800 feet up on the side of a hill. The altar looked very much like a large throne. This altar is most likely

what is called “Satan’s throne” in verse 13. The city was also a center of Caesar worship.

Roman governors were divided into two groups – those with the right of the sword and those without. The governor of Pergamum had that right, which meant he could execute Christians for any reason. And yet Christ in verse 12 refers to himself as the one with the “sharp two-edged sword.”

The word “witness” in verse 13 in Greek is “martus” from which we get martyr. The Greek word did not mean “martyr” until New Testament times.

In verse 16, we have yet another figurative *coming* in judgment.

Jesus promises them a white stone in verse 17. What does that mean? Stones were given to indicate a verdict at a trial, with a white stone denoting an innocent vote and a black stone denoting a guilty vote. Stones were also given as a reward for heroism or victory, as passes to enter the games, and sometimes exchanged between friends. Here it seems to indicate a reward or an indication of innocence or acquittal.

Also, in verse 17, Jesus says that there will be “a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.” What does that mean? Later in 19:12, we will be told that Jesus has a name that no one knows, and yet that name is given in verses 13 and 16. Names in the Bible have a special significance. We know that names were often changed to indicate a change in status or circumstances, as for example with Abram and Jacob. To have a name that no one else knows means that you have a status or a relation that no one else can share. That is true of those who conquer.

Pergamum was locked in a battle between truth and error. As one commentator reminds us: “Christ is deeply concerned about the preservation and propagation of the truth. This whole letter is devoted to that theme. ... Jesus came into the world to bear witness to the truth. He loves the truth. He speaks the truth. He is the truth. How can we be indifferent to it?”

The Pergamum congregation had some within it who held to the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. **It is worthwhile noting that what was hated in Ephesus was being tolerated in Pergamum.**

Many commentators believe that the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans were one and the same. It is generally identified with the group mentioned in Jude 1:4, 11 and alluded to in Romans 6:1. (See our website for notes on Romans and on Jude.)

**Jude 1:4** For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. ... 11 Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core.

**Romans 6:1** What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

We have already discussed the Nicolaitans. But why also the reference here to Balaam? In Numbers 25, the Israelites played the harlot with the daughters of Moab, who then caused the Israelites to turn to false gods. Later in Numbers 31:16 we learn that these women along with the Moabite king Balak acted under the influence of Balaam.

One commentator wrote that “pagan women and pagan food were his weapons against the rigid Mosaic code.” Balaam is a prototype of all corrupt teachers who betray believers into a fatal compromise with the world. **Balaam worked from *within* to do what had not been possible to do from *without*.** (Recall our comments about Constantine.)

As we study the entire book of Revelation, we will discover that a major theme of this book is a warning against compromise with the world.

Listen to what Martin Luther said about compromise:



If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the Devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is merely flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Pergamum? Look at verse 15. The lesson for us today is that Jesus cares very deeply about the doctrine that is taught and proclaimed by his church.

Jesus tells us in verse 15 that he hates this false doctrine that was being tolerated in Pergamum. The servant is not greater than his master. (John 15:20) If Jesus hates this false doctrine, then so must his church. We must not tolerate that which our Master hates.

## The Letter to Thyatira

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. 20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality. 22 Behold, I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings; 23 and I will strike her children

dead. And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. 24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay upon you any other burden; 25 only hold fast what you have, until I come. 26 He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, 27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

The least important city got the longest letter. What little importance Thyatira had came from its location. It was on a road connecting Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. This location made Thyatira a great commercial town. It was also strategically important because it was a gateway to Pergamum, the capital of the province.

The city had no particular religious significance. It was not a center of persecution of the church.

Thyatira was a center of trade for dye and wool. Lydia, the seller of purple in Acts 16:14, came from Thyatira.

The city had a large number of trade guilds. These guilds held meals in the temples, where meat that had been offered to idols was served. Those at the meals often engaged in drunkenness and immorality. The Christians refused to participate and thus suffered commercially.

Here we have a very important lesson for modern business men and women. It is often tempting to follow a crowd to do evil when that

crowd offers a great deal of “client development.” We must remain true to our Lord, even if doing so causes us to suffer commercially.

Thyatira had what Ephesus lacked. Verse 19 tells us that Thyatira rivaled Ephesus in busy Christian service, but it also tells us that Thyatira had the love that the Ephesians were lacking. In fact, Jesus tells them that their latest works exceeded their first works, which means that while Ephesus was backsliding, Thyatira was growing and maturing.

And yet verse 20 tells us that they had a serious problem. There was a malignant cancer growing in the body and they were permitting it to continue unchecked. Verse 19 tells us that they had been patient. Verse 20 tells us that perhaps they had been too patient!

The Ephesians could not bear false prophets, and yet they lacked love. Thyatira had love, but they tolerated false prophets. We must seek both love and truth, or we will eventually end up having neither.

The threat against the church in Thyatira came from within. There was always a temptation to put business interests ahead of Christ’s interests, and apparently there was a group within the church led by a false prophetess referred to as Jezebel that wanted to compromise with the trade guilds by participating in their immorality and idolatry.

The confession that Caesar is lord was often required before one could buy or sell. Some, no doubt, would compromise and make this confession for business reasons. Historians tell us that the slogan of those who compromised was “A man must live.” You can imagine the rationalizations that must have gone on with some.

And yet the text implies that these compromisers saw themselves as deeply spiritual people. The “deep things of Satan” in verse 24 is thought by many to refer to those who felt they had a duty to experience every kind of sin. Their goal was to wallow in sin yet keep their soul unaffected. And they could accomplish this feat, no doubt, because of their deep, deep spirituality.

Jesus told them in verse 24 that were deep alright, but they were experiencing the deep things of Satan. Their spiritual *depth* was really spiritual *death*.

For a modern example, have you ever noticed the outward display of deep spirituality among those who promote the homosexual agenda in the denominational world? They are so much more enlightened, so much more mature, and so much more knowledgeable than the rest of us. That is the same attitude that Jesus is referring to in this letter. These people think they are spiritually *deep*, but in reality they are spiritually *dead*. **They have cast God behind their backs!**

**Ezekiel 23:35** "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Because you have forgotten Me and **cast Me behind your back**, Therefore you shall bear the penalty of your lewdness and your harlotry.'" (Compare Romans 1:27.)

**Luke 16:15** And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is **abomination** in the sight of God.

# Revelation — Lesson 7

## Revelation 2:18-29 (The Letter to Thyatira) Continued...

Jesus' judgment of this Jezebel is described in verses 22-23. The children in verse 23 are most likely her disciples. (Isaiah 57:3-8 uses the term in a similar way.)

In verse 20, Jesus says, "But I have this against you, that you tolerate..." The modern reader recoils at that sentence — how, they ask, can anyone be *too* tolerant? Tolerance, after all, has become the greatest virtue in our society. Leslie Armour, a philosophy professor at the University of Ottawa, has said that "a virtuous citizen is one who tolerates everything except intolerance." The United Nations Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance states that tolerance involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism. Thus, according to the UN, if you believe dogmatically in anything or if you believe anything is absolute, then you are by definition intolerant and worthy of rebuke.

The world may see tolerance as the greatest virtue, but God does not see it that way. We must never tolerate sin or those who teach others to sin. If we do, then we fall under the condemnation of verse 20. As Alexander Chase said, "the peak of tolerance is most readily achieved by those who are not burdened with convictions." Chesterton said something very similar — "Tolerance is a virtue of a man without convictions."

We see in these verses how Jesus views tolerance, and not surprisingly it is quite different from how tolerance is viewed by the world. The church of Christ must be intolerant whenever Christ is intolerant, and the Bible tells us what we must never tolerate.

Note that verse 23 says that Jesus' message is a warning to all the churches. The messages in these letters apply to *all* congregations.

Jesus says in verses 26-27 that at this time he possesses power and authority over the nations. Verse 26 says that we will share this pow-

er. When? When will we share in that power? We already do! 1st Corinthians 3:21–23 says that the world and all things are ours. Romans 5:17 tells us that we are now reigning in life through Jesus. This book is evidence that the early Christians already had power over nations because (as we will see later in the book) it was their prayers for vindication that caused God to topple the mountain of Rome.

Why then did Jesus promise them something they already had? Often a promise is simply an assurance that a present blessing will continue. Jesus' promise here means that the blessing will continue, be renewed, and be strengthened. This idea is also indicated by the promise of the morning star in verse 28, which symbolizes a fresh start, a renewal of peace, a resurrection. **Although they were reigning with Christ now, that reign with Christ would be clear to all after their victory over Rome.** They would soon experience new circumstances, something we will see beautifully unfolded as we progress toward the end of this book.

What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Thyatira? Look at verse 20. The lesson for the church today is that we must not be tolerant with regard to departures from the word of God. The world may see tolerance as the greatest virtue, but Jesus does not share the world's opinion. His first criticism of this congregation was that they tolerated a false prophetess.

We, of course, should be very tolerant on matters of opinion as discussed in Romans 14, but on matters of the faith, we must never be tolerant of departures. We must never tolerate sin. **Toleration is no virtue when we tolerate that which Jesus hates!**

## Chapter Three

### The Letter to Sardis

1 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the sev-

en spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. 2 Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. 3 Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. 4 Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. 6 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

Sardis was really two cities. The original city stood 1500 feet up on a hill in a position that was almost impregnable. Later, the city spread to the foot of the hill as well. Thus, Sardis was really two cities – one on the hill and one at the foot of the hill.

Sardis has been called the greatest example of the contrast between past splendor and present decay. Sardis was now a city of degeneration, but 700 years before John, Sardis was one of the greatest cities in the world. The city, as had the church within, had by the time of Revelation lost its life and its spirit. The city had been destroyed by an earthquake in AD 17, but was rebuilt by Tiberius.

The congregation in Sardis had a reputation. It had a reputation among men of being alive. No doubt it was considered very progressive and contemporary. It was most likely very well regarded in the community. It may have been very fashionable to be a member of the congregation in Sardis.

**But where men saw a thriving church, God saw an empty shell.** In verse 2, Jesus told them that their works were not right in the sight of God. And if your works are not right in the sight of God, it does not matter how your works look in the sight of man. In fact, when the world has nothing but good things to say about you, it should be a warning that you have become too much like the world.

**Luke 6:26** Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.

Jesus had a message for Sardis. He told them in verse 2 to “Wake up and watch!” and in verse 3 he said he would come as a thief. This message had some historical significance to the city of Sardis. Cyrus of Persia has once besieged the city and had offered a reward to anyone who could find a way to enter the city. A soldier, who had seen a Sardinian soldier climb partially down the hill to retrieve a lost helmet, led a group up the hill following the same fault line at night. They discovered the battlements completely unguarded, and they took the city.

The city slipped into obscurity under Persian rule and later surrendered to Alexander, under whom it became a center of Greek culture. But history repeated itself, when Antiochus besieged the city after Alexander’s death and took the city using the same trick that had been used by Cyrus. Again, Sardis fell because there was no one there to watch. It is to these people that Jesus says “Wake up and watch!”

The church in Smyrna was at peace and that peace had allowed them to drift into a coma and nearly die. They were resting in peace! And that is a danger we must avoid today as well. Christ brought us peace with God — not peace with the world. We are never told to be at peace with worldliness. 1 Peter 2:11 says that a Christian is always at war. In Ephesians 6:14–17 we find that a Christian is always dressed for battle. Too many Christians have made peace with the world!

In verse 1, Jesus says, “I know your works.” Jesus is not only interested in our works, he *knows* our works. We are not saved by our good works (Ephesians 2:8-9), but neither will we be saved if we have no



good works (Ephesians 2:10). “Every good tree bears good fruit” (Matthew 7:17), which means that if we are not bearing good fruit, then we are not a good tree.

In verse 5 we find that one’s name can be blotted out of the book of life. What does that say about the doctrine of “once saved—always saved”? It tells us it is a false doctrine. If my name can be in the book of life and then be blotted out of that book, then I can be saved and later lost if I fail to be faithful to Christ.

What is the lesson to the church from Christ’s letter to Sardis? Look at verse 2. The lesson for the church today is that we must remain watchful. As soon as we say that such and such would never happen to us, Satan sees his opportunity. We have just announced to him a part of our defenses where we have no guards, and he will seek to take advantage of that weakness.

**1 Corinthians 10:12** Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

Satan will always attack us at our weakest point, and our weakest point is usually the point where we have no defenses, such as the unguarded battlements of Sardis. Watch!

## The Letter to Philadelphia

7 “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens. 8 “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I

have loved you. 10 Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. 11 I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. 12 He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. 13 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities. The city was founded by colonists from Pergamum sometime between 159 and 138 BC to be a missionary city of Greek culture to the Lydia. And it worked! By AD 19, the Lydians had forgotten their own language and were all but Greek.

For a time, the city was constantly beset by earthquakes and tremors, and most of the people lived outside the city in huts. Jesus tells them in verse 12 that they would go out no more.

The name of the city was changed to Neocaesarea and later to Flavia, but neither name lasted and the name Philadelphia was eventually restored. Jesus tells them in verse 12 that they would receive a new name.

In verse 8, Jesus says that an open door had been set before them. In the Bible, an "open door" is an opportunity for service and evangelism.

**1 Corinthians 16:9** For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

**Colossians 4:3** Meanwhile praying also for us, that God would **open to us a door** for the word.

**2 Corinthians 2:12** Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a **door was opened** to me by the Lord.

Jesus' promise in verse 10 to *keep* these Christians did not necessarily mean they would be spared from suffering. In Ezekiel 9:1–8 God promised to keep his people, yet in Ezekiel 21:3–4 they experienced suffering and death. God provides spiritual deliverance. Once again we need to see things the way God sees things — we need spiritual eyes and a spiritual perspective.

In 2 Chronicles 7:16 God said he would put his name on the literal Jerusalem *forever* yet here in verse 12 he puts his name on the new Jerusalem. The words “forever” and “everlasting” must be read in context and carefully studied to determine their proper subject. Many “everlasting” promises are conditioned on faith, and thus will be everlasting only so long as the condition is satisfied. Other eternal promises are directed to the *faithful* whether it be the faithful people of God in the Old Testament or the faithful people of God in the New Testament, the new Jerusalem.

Consider for example Genesis 17:8 —

And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an **everlasting** possession; and I will be their God.

Yet in Matthew 21:43 Jesus said that the unbelieving Jews no longer had an inheritance.

Consider also Genesis 17:13 —

Both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an **everlasting** covenant.

Yes in Philippians 3:3 we find that true circumcision is not of the flesh.

Consider Exodus 40:15 —

And their anointing shall admit them to a **perpetual** priesthood throughout their generations.

Yet in Hebrews we find that Jesus is our perfect high priest.

Finally, consider Leviticus 16:34 —

And this shall be an **everlasting** statute for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins.

Yet Hebrews tells us that Christ is now our once for all time, perfect atonement.

What does it mean in verse 12 to write these *three* names on a Christian (the name of God, the name of the city of God, and the name of Christ)? Christians belong to God. Christians are citizens of the church (the new Jerusalem). Christians belong to Christ. They have a special relation with Christ. God claims us as his own special people when he writes his name on us. Later in this book we will see people with someone else's name written on them. We will also find that Christians are pictured as having the name of the Lamb and of the Father written on them to distinguish them from those opposed to Christ.

I have made the point before that the “church of Christ” is our description, not our name. That is why we write “church” with a lower case “c” (despite the ridicule and the scorn that often accompany it). We are the church that belongs to Christ – the church of Christ. He has written his name on us!

The story was told of a large, prominent denomination in town that was raising money from community businesses to build a new building. They approached a business man who was a Christian, and he made them an offer. “I will give you \$1000 if you put up a sign in front

saying “This is a church of Christ.” “We can’t do that,” they said, “this is a \_\_\_\_ church” (where the blank was filled in with the name of a local denomination). “Well,” the Christian business man responded, “I’ll still give you a \$1000 if you will put up a sign saying ‘This is NOT a church of Christ.’” **When you understand that story, you understand the non-denominational nature of the church!** It’s really not that hard. We *belong* to Christ Jesus, and Christ Jesus has written his name on us!

Verse 8 tells us that they were very weak, and verse 9 tells us they faced fierce opposition – and yet Jesus himself had opened a door for them – and he expected them to go through it! Woe to us when Jesus opens a door and we fail to go through it – and we are surrounded by open doors!

The church was weak in influence compared to its Jewish opposition. The synagogue of Satan is mentioned again in verse 9. We need to understand that Satan is real and he is actively working against us.

Satan is mentioned six times in these two chapters. That alone should tell us something important. Jesus knows that Satan is real and that Satan is active. Jesus recognizes that his church is facing a vicious adversary, and he is giving us a warning.

**2 Corinthians 2:11** Lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.

**1 Peter 5:8** Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.

The New Jerusalem in verse 12 is the church. In place of the old city of Jerusalem where the people of God once dwelled, there is now a new Jerusalem where the people of God now dwell – and that New Jerusalem is the church.

Notice that the New Jerusalem comes down out of Heaven from God. As Daniel told us in Daniel 2, Jesus tells us here that the church is not

a product of man. It is the eternal kingdom not made with human hands. It was created and established by God.

What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Philadelphia? Look at verse 8. The lesson for the church today is that we need to look for open doors for service and evangelism. We need to pray for such opportunities, and then we need to take advantage of those opportunities when our prayers are answered.

John will find himself standing before an open door in 4:1!

## The Letter to Laodicea

14 "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. 15 "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. 21 He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my

Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Laodicea was the only congregation about which Jesus had nothing good to say about their present condition (although he did say in 1:19 that he loves them and he suggested in 1:21 that they could still conquer if they repented).

Doesn't it tell us a lot about our Savior that he saved this letter for last? He had nothing good to say, and so he was not in any hurry to get to them. He wanted to have something good to say about them! Some teachers love to give failing grades, and others hate to do so. Jesus is in the second category.

**Ezekiel 33:11** Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, **I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked**; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

The city was founded in 250 BC by Antiochus and named after his wife. It was positioned on the most important road in Asia, which connected Ephesus to Syria. This road made the city a great commercial and strategic center. The peace provided by Rome allowed Laodicea to flourish.

Laodicea was proud and felt that it had need of nothing. When the city was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 61, the people refused Roman help and rebuilt the city on their own.

It was one of the wealthiest cities in the world and was a center of banking and finance – yet Jesus told them they were poor.

The city was a center of clothing manufacture and was famous for its soft, violet-black, glossy wool – yet Jesus told them they were naked.

The city was a medical center and housed a medical school that was famous for its ointment for the eyes and ears – and yet Jesus told them they were blind.

This congregation was proud and contented – and Jesus did not have a single good thing to say about them.

Those in Smyrna were destitute, and Jesus told them in 2:9 that they were rich. These people in Laodicea were rich, and yet Jesus tells them that they are destitute. How often is the truth just the opposite of what men believe?

**Proverbs 13:7** There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.

Once again we see a familiar theme of this book. **We must see things as God sees them, and to him sometimes the poor are rich and the rich are poor!**

One commentator writes: “Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the 20th century church than this. It describes vividly the respectable, sentimental, nominal, skin-deep religiosity that is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.”

The beginning of the creation in verse 14 is the source of the creation. Jesus is God. He was not created. Nowhere in the Bible are we ever told to worship any part of God’s creation, yet we are told to worship Christ. Jesus is the source of all creation. See Hebrews 1:2, John 1:1 – 3, and Colossians 1:16.

In verse 16, Jesus says he will spew these lukewarm Christians out of his mouth! They deeply offended Christ!

Some suggest that this metaphor comes from the water supply of the city, which was lukewarm, in contrast to the hot springs at nearby Hierapolis and the pure water of Colossae. The archaeology shows Laodicea had an aqueduct that probably carried water from hot mineral springs some five miles south, which would have become lukewarm before entering the city. Other suggest that the imagery of the Laodicean aqueduct suggests not that “hot” is good and “cold” is bad, but that both hot and cold water are useful, whereas lukewarm water is useless. Perhaps (even though I can think of some uses for luke-



warm water), but the Greek word used for “hot” (which occurs only here) is *zestos*, which has the same root (*zeo*) as the Greek word for “fervent.” We are told elsewhere of those who were *fervent* in spirit (Acts 18:25, Romans 12:11), which suggests to some (and to me) that the word “hot” is used here to denote a spiritual condition. Similarly, the use of “cold” reminds of Matthew 24:12 — “And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold,” although the Greek word used here is different and appears elsewhere only in Matthew 10:42 where it describes a cup of *cold* water. In short, if “hot” denotes a spiritual condition, then it would seem that “cold” must also denote a spiritual condition, and a *cold* spirit would seem to be the opposite of a *fervent* spirit.

Verses 15-16 tell us that Jesus prefers hot or cold to lukewarm! We might be tempted to think that a cold Christian would be worse than a lukewarm Christian, but not according to Jesus. At least the cold Christian has made a decision – it was the wrong decision, but at least he has acted. The cold Christian has left the church. But not so with the lukewarm Christian. They hang around and cause all sorts of trouble.

The lukewarm Christian was then and is now the curse of the church. How often has the “hypocrites in the church” argument been used as an excuse against the gospel call. A lukewarm Christian is not actively against Christ — instead, his carefree attitude shows no concern for Christ, and he does great damage to the Lord’s body.

Were these people without hope? Not at all. Verse 19 tells us that Jesus wanted them to repent. Verse 20 pictures Jesus as standing at the door of his own church and knocking. He wanted to be let back in to his own church!

We can look to the denominational world for an example of hot, cold, and lukewarm. In the recent vote to ordain a gay bishop in the Episcopalian religious group, some voted yes and some voted no. But did you notice that there were also two abstentions? I have more respect for those that voted yes!

Listen to what the Scottish theologian George MacDonald (1824-1905) had to say about the Laodiceans. (George MacDonald was a Scottish preacher, and C.S. Lewis said he never wrote a book in which he did not quote MacDonald.) The following quote is from the book *Proving the Unseen*, Chapter 7:

You must note that in this last message to the Laodiceans, he has not a word of praise for them—not a word of praise. Almost all the rest have some praise given them, but there is not a word of praise for these halfhearted Laodiceans. They want to go comfortably on, and not to be troubled much, and they will get into heaven as they please, in some sleepy way or other. They won't find themselves comfortable there. It is not the halfhearted, simmering kind of hearts that the kingdom of God and His Christ is for. Had God been halfhearted you would never have had a chance of life eternal. It is because God is true-hearted, unselfish, out and out devoted to His creatures that there is any world at all.

And He won't have you as you are! If you correspond at all to this description of those that made up the church of the Laodiceans, God won't have you—you won't do! What a word of indignation this is!

Oh! you are quite wrong if you have the fancy that Jesus Christ is one who is always speaking soft words. He is indignant sometimes, He is angry sometimes, but there is not one atom in that indignation, in that anger that is not love. But His love will not make His blow lighter, and you are afraid of that kind of love because it demands so much. It demands that you shall be fit to come into His very arms, to His very heart, and less than that will not do. It cannot be that He shall embrace evil things; He will have us free, cost what it may; if it takes an eternity to clean us, we must be clean.

Neither cold nor hot: What a word almost of contempt! Only there is no contempt in Him. Using our language it sounds like it, but I call it "indignation," and the strong effort of His heart of love to make them feel what a low condition they are in. "Neither cold nor hot—I won't have you; I will spew you out of my mouth." That Christ should speak like that to us and we deserve it—who will endure it? But, oh! it is of the mercy of God that He speaks to us like that.

He speaks very plainly what He thinks of them, and **He shows very clearly how His thought about them ran counter altogether to their own judgment of themselves.** "Oh, we are all right! We accept this and that doctrine; we believe so-and-so; we are all right." Or, on the other hand: "We have broken free from the traditions of the elders; we have got a better way, and so we are all right." Are you doing the things that Jesus Christ tells you? If not, you are all wrong. Your ideas, your opinions, your systems, let them be as correct as astronomy, and you are no better, but probably much the worse for them.

Does the Lord say this for the sake of abuse? No; He wants to rouse us—"I counsel thee"—He wants to rouse us up, to open our treasure houses that He may fill them, to open doors and windows that the breath of God may blow through our souls. That is why He says the hard words, but hard words in the right places are the kindest thing.

What is the lesson to the church from Christ's letter to Laodicea? Look at verse 15. The lesson for the church today is that Christ will not have us if we care nothing for him or for his church. He would rather us be actively opposed to him than for us to say we are on his side and yet live a life of total indifference to his will.

His message to this congregation was to get off the fence! Make a decision one way or the other! Don't just sit there! Act!

## Conclusion to Chapters 2-3

So where are we at the end of Chapter 3? What is next for John?

The letters to the seven churches are complete. Each was challenged to overcome. The situation looks bleak at this point in history. The church seems unable to resist the hostile worldly powers that surround it. But, history is not determined by political powers. As we are about to see, history is determined by God.

The question now is, what will be the fate of God's enemies and what will be the fate of God's people?

Satan, as usual, will try to thwart God's will, and Satan's goal as always is to extinguish the church. But with regard to Rome his time is short!

**Revelation 12:12** Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!

The book of Revelation is a book of judgment. In the first part of the book, Christ pronounces judgments against the church's enemies from within. In the second part of the book, Christ will pronounce judgments against the church's enemies from without. What comparisons can we see between these two judgments?

In each case, Jesus tells his listeners that the way they see themselves is really the opposite of the way they really are! One church thought it was rich, Jesus said they were poor. One church thought it was poor, Jesus said they were rich. Rome thought it had all the power, Jesus will tell them that they are powerless. Rome thought the church was of no consequence, Jesus will tell them that the church is infinitely more important than Rome.

There is a message in here for us as well. To see ourselves correctly, we must see ourselves as God sees us, and the best way to do that is to see ourselves through the word of God.

As scarce as truth is, the supply has always exceeded the demand. Jesus likely gave some of these people more truth than they wanted! They no doubt did not enjoy seeing themselves through God's eyes. They would much rather have heard pleasant things from Christ, but Christ told them the truth, which is what they desperately needed to hear.

This situation is not new. Consider:

- **Jeremiah 5:30–31** An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?
- **Isaiah 5:20** Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!
- **Isaiah 30:9–11** For they are a rebellious people, lying sons, sons who will not hear the instruction of the LORD; who say to the seers, "See not"; and to the prophets, "Prophecy not to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel."

How do we find out today what we *need* to hear? We quit listening to man and the world, and we start reading God's word. He has told us all that we need to hear. Our job is to listen to that message and then to heed that message.

One final comment about the seven letters — each of them begins with the same phrase: "I know." We understand that Jesus is the head of the church, but sometimes we act like he is a distant monarch. These letters paint a very different portrait of our king.

Jesus is intimately concerned about his church. Indeed, the Bible describes the church as the body of Christ and as the bride of Christ. Je-

sus knows what is going on in his church, and he cares very deeply about what is going on in his church – and that should be a great source of comfort for us today when the church seems to be in such turmoil all around the world. Does Jesus care? Yes, he cares. I know he cares. Jesus knows what is happening in his church.

## Chapter Four

1 After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

We should all pause for just a moment to thank God that Heaven has a door and that Heaven’s door is an open door! Jesus Christ opened that door for us!

In this chapter, God draws aside the curtain of Heaven and gives to John a vision of the majestic throne of the Ruler of the Universe.

This voice in verse 1 is the same voice that John heard in the first vision, which means that this is possibly the voice of Christ (which John heard in 1:17-20), although others say it is the voice of the angel that they contend was the one speaking in 1:11.

John is invited not just to look in through the door but to enter through the door. John was not the last person to be presented by Christ with an open door. We are given open doors of opportunity every day, and we need to follow John’s example.

We have already been told that the things that “must take place” would occur *soon* (see 1:1 and 1:3). So once again, at the very beginning of this second vision, we are reminded of the all important time frame for this book.

The phrase “after this” is similar to what we saw in 1:19 where John was told to “write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.” “This” refers to what John had just seen, and “after this” refers to what he was about to see.

What we are about to see is that these events on earth have their origin in Heaven! The true view of history is the view from the throne of God, and that is the view that John is about to see. (For those keeping track, here again is a reminder of a major theme in this book — we must try to see things from God’s perspective.)

2 At once I was in the Spirit, and lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! 3 And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald.

In John 1:18, the apostle wrote: “No one has seen God at any time.” In Exodus 33:20, God said to Moses: “You cannot see My face; for no man can see Me and live.” In 1 Timothy 6:16 we read of the one “who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see.”

How then could John have seen God? The answer is given in the opening part of verse 2 – John “was in the Spirit.” He was experiencing a spiritual vision just as had been experienced by Isaiah and Ezekiel, just to name two other examples. John was not seeing God with his physical eyes but rather with his spiritual eyes.

John not only sees the throne, but he sees the one seated upon the throne. Ezekiel described the occupant of the throne in Ezekiel 1:26 as having “a likeness as the appearance of man,” but John portrays no form.

The throne of God is mentioned 40 times in this book (17 times in Chapters 4 and 5), and the message is clear — the throne that rules the world is *not* in Rome. This vision begins with a clear depiction of

the absolute sovereignty of God. All things must be viewed with regard to their relation to the throne of God.

What about the stones mentioned in verse 3? Jasper is a translucent rock crystal. Carnelian is a blood red stone that is also called sardius after the city of Sardis where it is found. In Exodus 28:17, these stones are in the breastplate of the high priest. Perhaps the white jasper represents God's holiness and righteousness, while the red sardius denotes his judgments. This view would fit nicely with Psalm 89:14, where we read that righteousness and judgment are the foundation of God's throne.

Many commentators get bogged down trying to find elaborate meanings in details of this book such as the choice of stones. And, without denying there may very well be an elaborate meaning to some or all of these details, we need to remember that this book is an oil painting from God. Revelation is intended to have an emotional impact on the reader. That impact is obscured when we focus unduly on the brush strokes. Listen to what Hailey says on this point:

To the literalistic mind, lacking the power of imagination, Revelation will forever be a sealed book; to the speculative and visionary mind the book will provide fuel to inflame far-fetched assumptions and conjectures which totally miss the truth. But to the mind prepared by the rest of the Bible for reality in picture and action, impressions of truth will be made that give strength for victory in every conflict of life.

As in the parables, many of the minor details are likely merely descriptive and are not intended to carry a special significance of their own. Here the details serve to paint a picture of beauty and majesty. Later we will find pictures of horror and death.

Remember that John was standing before the throne of God! Do we really think he was puzzling over why the stones were white?



The rainbow reminds us of God's mercy and that he keeps his covenants. A similar description is used in Ezekiel 1:28.

Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

We are also reminded of Psalm 104:2 — “who coverest thyself with light as with a garment, who hast stretched out the heavens like a tent.”

## Revelation — Lesson 8

4:4 Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads.

These 24 elders appear in a number of places in Revelation. Here in chapter 4 and later in chapter 14 they sit around the throne of God. In chapters 4, 5, 7, 11, 14, and 19, they worship and praise God. Who are they? Let's consider the clues.

The 24 elders wearing golden crowns and sitting on 24 thrones before the Great Throne represent royalty in the presence of supreme royalty. They sit on thrones surrounding God's throne, which indicates that their power is given them by God. Their white garments may represent the righteous deeds of the Saints as it does later in 19:8. The crowns remind us of the victory crowns we saw in 2:10.

These 24 elders also represent a priesthood. Recall from 1st Chronicles 24:1–19 that there were 24 orders in the Levitical priesthood. Each of these orders had an elder who was sometimes called a prince or a governor (1 Chronicles 24:5). The Levites sometimes praised God with harps (1 Chronicles 25:6), and we will see harps later in 5:8, where we will see the 24 elders performing priestly duties.

Thus, what we have in these 24 elders is a royal priesthood. Where have we seen that before? 1 Peter 2:9 describes the church as a royal priesthood. What we are seeing here is the church. Their white robes are the white robes promised to the faithful in 3:4. Their crowns are the crowns promised in 2:10. Their thrones are the thrones promised in Matthew 19:27–29. These elders are the faithful people of God!

The church of Christ is a royal priesthood, just as Christ himself is both our King and our High Priest. Zechariah 6:9–15 depicts the High Priest being crowned with a crown, which could only happen after the Old Law had passed away since under the Old Law the priests

were from the tribe of Levi and the kings were from the tribe of Judah. Psalm 110 also tells us that Jesus is both king and priest.

Why 24? One reason we have already mentioned is that 24 points us to the priesthood in 1 Chronicles. Others see 24 as combining the Old Testament (12 patriarchs) with the New Testament (12 apostles), which would thus depict *all* of God's people from every age.

The *crowns* remind us of:

- **1 Peter 5:4** "And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away."
- **James 1:12** "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."

Jesus crowns us — not vice versa! Let's remember that the next time we are asked to sing a song (such as #577) that pictures us as placing a crown on Jesus' head! The only crown that man ever placed on Jesus' head was a crown of thorns. The idea that *we* make Jesus Lord and *we* crown Jesus king is a denominational idea and is foreign to the Bible. (As for who made Jesus Lord, read Acts 2:36.)

5 From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God; 6a and before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

Thunder and lightning are commonly used to depict God's wrath and power to judge. Recall, for example:

- **Exodus 19:16** On the morning of the third day there were **thunders and lightnings**, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled.
- **Psalm 18:12-14** Out of the brightness before him there broke through his clouds hailstones and coals of fire. The

LORD also **thundered** in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. And he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; he flashed forth **lightnings**, and routed them.

- **Psalm 77:18** The crash of thy **thunder** was in the whirlwind; thy **lightnings** lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook.

In this book, thunder and lightning always precede something of unusual importance. For example, thunder and lightning precede:

- The breaking of seventh seal in 8:5.
- The blowing of seventh trumpet in 11:19.
- The pouring of seventh bowl of wrath in 16:18.

The seven torches of fire are the seven spirits of God, which, as we saw before, most likely represent the Holy Spirit, with “seven” being used to denote the perfection of the Spirit.

A torch of fire is a particularly good symbol for the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit appeared as “cloven tongues like as of fire” in Acts 2:3. Like a torch of fire, the Holy Spirit is a revealer; he makes all things clear.

This sea stresses separation. (We will see this symbol again later in this book.) In Solomon’s temple a sea stood between the priest and the holy place where God dwelt (2 Chronicles 4:2-6). God is transcendent. He is separate from his creation, and his creation is called upon to remember that! Swete wrote of “the vast distance which, even in the case of one who stood in the door of heaven, intervened between himself and the throne of God.” And yet, with Jesus as our Savior, we can *boldly* approach that throne! (Hebrews 4:16)

John in particular knew what a separating sea meant! He was in exile on an island. In 21:1, we will find that the sea is no more!

**6b And round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: 7 the first**

living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. 8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

As with the 24 elders, the four living creatures that we meet here will also reappear later in the book. We will see them again in chapters 5, 6, 7, 14, 15, and 19.

Who are the four living creatures? They may be the *cherubim*. In the Old Testament, God was pictured as sitting enthroned above the cherubim that sat atop the ark of the covenant, and he was often addressed that way in prayer. (2 Kings 19:15, Psalm 80:1, Psalm 99:1, Isaiah 37:16)

We are also told that the cherubim are God's chariot on which he rides swiftly to judgment.

- **Ezekiel 10:16** And when the cherubim went, the wheels went beside them; and when the cherubim lifted up their wings to mount up from the earth, the wheels did not turn from beside them.
- **Psalm 18:10** He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.

We are also reminded of the *seraphim* from Isaiah 6:2-3.

Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

The seraphim are mentioned only by Isaiah. They may be the same as the cherubim, with the name “seraphim” being used by Isaiah to describe their dazzling appearance.

There are differences among the descriptions of the seraphim in Isaiah, the cherubim in Ezekiel, and the creatures in Revelation, but they may nevertheless be different symbolic descriptions of the same beings. (Remember one of our interpretive principles: Dissimilarity of symbols does not necessarily imply distinctness of subjects.) Isaiah’s seraphim have six wings; Ezekiel’s cherubim have four; John’s living creatures have six. Ezekiel’s cherubim have four faces each; John’s living creatures have one face each.

The purpose of the cherubim is to defend God’s holiness. They kept Adam from the tree of life. They were woven into the veil that stood between man and the presence of God in the temple. They stood over the ark of the covenant looking down upon the law of God. They would have demanded immediate justice were it not for the mercy seat that covered the transgressions because of the blood that was sprinkled there.

These creatures are the judge of all who enter the presence of God. They are endlessly concerned with God’s reputation and the vindication of his character. They never cease to say, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.” Think of these creatures the next time you hear someone use the name of God in vain. They are watching!

What about the lion, the ox, the man, and the eagle? Some suggest they depict nobility (the lion), swiftness (the eagle), strength (the ox), and wisdom (the man). Barclay says, “the four living creatures stand for everything that is noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in nature. Each has the pre-eminence in his own particular sphere.”

These creatures likely depict *all* of nature, including man. That is, they depict all of God’s creation worshiping God. “The ceaseless activity of nature under the hand of God is a ceaseless tribute of praise.” Recall Psalm 19:1-2:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the  
sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to

day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.

We are also reminded of Psalm 148, which has been called a magnificent summons for the entire creation to join together in worship of God:

Praise the LORD from the earth, ye dragons, and all deeps: Fire, and hail; snow, and vapour; stormy wind fulfilling his word: Mountains, and all hills; fruitful trees, and all cedars: Beasts, and all cattle; creeping things, and flying fowl: Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all judges of the earth: Both young men, and maidens; old men, and children: Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven.

**Barclay:** “There is a tremendous truth here. The basic idea behind this is that anything which is fulfilling the function for which it was created is praising God. ... Cannot an earthworm serve God? Do you suppose that it is only a general who is a good soldier? Cannot the lowest private fight his best? Happy are you, if you are serving God and carrying out his purpose as faithfully as an earthworm.”

Why are there *four* creatures? The number four confirms our understanding that we see here all of God’s creation worshipping him. The number four denotes the created world — the four elements (earth, air, fire, water), the four seasons, the four directions. Compare Mark 13:27 — “And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.” Some say that 4 being 3+1 denotes the creative works (1) that come from God (3).

If you have seen many stained glass windows or other religious artwork, then you have seen these four living creatures representing the four gospel writers. The first such identification dates all the way back to A.D. 170 with Irenaeus. Augustine identified Matthew with the lion because he depicted Jesus as the Lion of Judah, Mark with the man because he showed the humanity of Christ, Luke with the ox because he showed Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for all, and John with

the eagle because the eagle is the only creature that can look straight into the sun. Others identify Matthew with the man and Mark with the lion. (See, for example, the painting of the four gospel writers by Rubens below.)



These four living creatures are full of eyes: They miss nothing. They proclaim God's holiness, his separateness, his transcendence, and his unlimited might and power.

Here is the message of these verses in a nutshell: You think Rome is powerful and impressive? Just look at who we have on our side! Rome does not stand a chance!

9 And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, 11 "Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things,



and by thy will they existed and were created.”

The elders fall down before God and cast their crowns before the throne and worship God. This shows that their authority is a delegated authority. They owe their existence and present status to God’s power and will.

Twice we see the phrase “who lives for ever and ever.” This description emphasizes the eternal nature of God, which stands in stark contrast to the supposed Roman deities who had been created and who had an appointment with death. It reminds me of Psalm 22:29 — “All those who go down to the dust shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive.”

The word translated “worship” is a Greek word meaning to prostrate oneself before deity and to kiss the feet or hem of the garment. Verse 10, in fact, explicitly tells us that the elders fell down before God and worshipped him. If we had more time, there is a great deal we could say here about the proper worship of God and the improper worship of God. (For more on that topic, see the materials and sermons on [www.ThyWordIsTruth.com](http://www.ThyWordIsTruth.com).)

Notice that verse 10 in the Revised Standard Version tells us that these 24 elders were *singing* while worshipping before the throne of God. Other translations tell us that these elders were simply *saying* these words. Which is correct? The Greek word used here denotes speaking, and particularly denotes the *content* of the speech. Ephesians 5:19 does say, “*Speaking* to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,” but the Greek word for “speaking” used there is different and denotes the *sound* of the speech. Thus, it’s not clear at all why the RSV used “singing” in this verse, and it appears to be incorrect. In any event, we will hear the elders *singing* later in 5:9, and we will have more to say about music at that time.

The phrases “worthy art thou” and “our Lord and God” were also used in the worship of the emperor. The emperor Domitian took “Lord and God” as his official title and required all government announcements

and proclamations to begin with the phrase “Our Lord and God Domitian commands.”

The phrase “they existed and were created” in verse 11 is interesting. Some suggest that this verse indicates we somehow existed before we were created, perhaps, as one puts it, “we existed in the will of god and were then created at the appointed time.”

All of creation is the product of God’s will. Before anything was created, it had its existence in the mind of God. As Psalm 148:5 reminds us, “For he commanded and they were created.” When we study God’s creation we are thinking God’s thoughts after him.

The scene of this chapter is one of unending worship of God by the cherubim and by the church. The creatures worship their Creator. By contrast, Romans 1:25 depicts sinful men worshipping the creature rather than the Creator — and that verse from *Romans* described *Rome* perfectly!

## Chapter Five

1 And I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals;

The contents of this scroll will be revealed in the chapters that follow, but here we get a description of the scroll. It is written within and on the back, and it is sealed with seven seals.

What we sometimes call a “book” was really a scroll. Scrolls of that day were typically made of single papyrus sheets about ten by eight inches. The sheets were joined together horizontally when a long scroll was needed. The writing was in narrow columns about three inches long. The roll commonly had a wooden roller at each end. It was held in the left hand, unrolled with the right, and, as the reading went on, the part in the left hand was rolled up again. The book of

Revelation, for example, would have required a scroll that was about 15 feet long.

This scroll was written on the front and on the back. In making papyrus paper, a row of papyrus strips was laid vertically with another row of strips laid horizontally on top of them. The whole thing was then moistened with water and glued and pressed together. The side that ran horizontally was known as the recto, and on that side the writing was done because the lines of the writing ran with the lines of the fibers. The other side was called the verso and it was not commonly used for writing.

But papyrus was expensive. So, if you had a lot to write, you would write both on the front and on the back. A sheet written on the back, the verso, was called an opisthograph.

That the scroll in God's hand was an opisthograph (written within and on the back) tells us that it contained the extensive and comprehensive decrees of God. It contained the full will of God for his people and for the enemies of his people. That it is written tells us that God's will in this matter has been determined, and it will happen. It has been decided. There will be no deliberation and no delay.

We see similar language in the description of Ezekiel's book of lamentations in Ezekiel 2:10 — "It had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe." And Rome will soon find that for them the comparison with Ezekiel's scroll goes beyond how it was written. For them, this scroll will also contain words of lamentation and mourning and woe.

The seven seals on the scroll indicate that the scroll was perfectly and completely sealed. At this point, God's plan had not yet been put into effect and had not yet been revealed. The judgments within the scroll had not yet been executed. But that is all about to change as the seals are removed.

The use of a seal reminds us of Daniel 8:26, where Daniel was told to "seal up the vision, for it pertains to many days hence." The period called "many days hence" in Daniel 8:26 was in fact about 400 years.

By contrast, the seals are about to come off of this scroll, and in 22:10, John will be told *not* to seal up his book for the time is near! Again, we must ask on what basis some people argue that the events in this scroll have not happened even to this very day — 2000 years after the seals were removed!

2 and I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” 3 And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, 4 and I wept much that no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 5 Then one of the elders said to me, “Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

The question is not who is *able* to open the scroll and breaks its seals, but rather who is *worthy* to do those things. Whoever opens the scroll will be responsible for what follows. The word “worthy” (*axios*) literally means “of sufficient weight.” The word occurs 7 times in Revelation.

We will see this (or perhaps another) strong angel again in 10:1 and 18:21. In Chapter 10, the strong angel will lift his right to Heaven and swear there will be no more delay, so when we see this strong angel we should remember the time frame of this book.

Even this “strong angel” was not worthy to open the scroll. In fact, no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was worthy. The phrase “under the earth” likely denotes the grave or the place of the dead. (See Ephesians 4:9 and Romans 10:7.)

Taken together, the phrase “in heaven or on earth or under the earth” denotes the entire universe of created beings. Recall, for example, Philippians 2:10 — “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, **in heaven and on earth and under the earth.**” We also see similar language in the command of Exodus 20:4 — “You shall not make for

yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything **that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.**"

No one in all of God's creation was worthy to open the scroll and loosen the seals. And John wept. Why? If the scrolls were not opened then there would be no protection for God's people, there would be no judgments against the enemies of God's people, there would be no ultimate triumph for believers, and there would be no new heaven and new earth. **John wept at the delay!** And how would John have reacted had he been forced to read a modern commentary that says nothing in the book has yet been fulfilled even to this very day? How would he have reacted to that delay?

And what was John told to do? He was told to quit crying and look at Jesus, and that is good advice in any circumstances! Swete, reminding us of the recurring theme that we must view things from God's perspective, said: "Higher natures see that human grief is often needless, springing from insufficient knowledge." Barclay: "If we had patience to wait and trust, we would see that God has his own solutions for the situations that bring us tears."

We see here three descriptions of Jesus: (1) the Lion of the tribe of Judah, (2) the Root of David, (3) and we are told that he *has* conquered.

The lion of the tribe of Judah is a Messianic title. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:14). Recall Genesis 49:9–10 —

**Judah is a lion's whelp;** from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as a lioness; who dares rouse him up? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

The Root of David is also a Messianic title. We know that Jesus descended from David according to the flesh (Romans 1:3). Recall Isaiah 11:1, 10 speaking of David's father, Jesse —

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ... In that day **the root of Jesse** shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious.

Finally, Jesus is described as the one who *has* (past tense) conquered. Not that he is about to conquer, but that he has already conquered. Jesus conquered Rome at the cross! In fact, Jesus was conquering Rome at the very point that Rome thought it was conquering Jesus. Once again, things are not always what they seem!

What is the purpose of this beautiful picture of Christ? This picture emphasizes how great a thing it is to which Christ is here called. He will sustain the kingdom he died to create — and he will sustain us today. Jesus loves his church!

Finally, it is self evident that God did not need to search for someone to open the scroll. God did not need to search for Christ. The searching, the waiting, and the weeping are presented for dramatic effect. The angel in verse 2 knew the answer to his question before he asked it!

6 And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; 7 and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. 8 And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints;

John looks over expecting to see a lion, but what does he see? He sees a lamb. In fact, he sees a lamb standing as though it had been slain.

Where is the power in that? Again, things are not always as they seem.

What is meant by the phrase “as though it had been slain”? It means that the Lamb had the marks of slaughter upon it. It does *not* mean that the Lamb merely looked like it had been slain; it means that the Lamb had been slain. And the marks of that event were still evident upon it. And this *slain* lamb is *standing* — a vision of victory through sacrifice and suffering.

Three words in the New Testament are translated lamb: *aren*, *amnos*, and *arnion*. The first occurs only in Luke 10:3, the second occurs four times in John, Acts, and 1 Peter. The third word for lamb occurs once in John’s gospel (21:15) and 29 times in Revelation, 28 of which in reference to Jesus. (The other use is in 13:11.)

This Lamb, of course, is Jesus who overcame the world through his perfect sacrifice. He had overcome the world (John 16:33) and defeated his foes not as a lion but as a lamb, and by this his subjects must also now conquer. Recall:

- **John 1:29** The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
- **1 Corinthians 5:7** Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.
- **1 Peter 1:18–19** Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.
- **Isaiah 53:7** He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.

We tend to see a lamb as a docile and helpless creature, but we will find that this Lamb is very different. Later, we will read about the “wrath of the Lamb,” which is one of the most remarkable and striking phrases in all of the Bible.

One of the songs we sing quite often is “Lamb of God.” And while the song has some worthy sentiments, it includes the following line that has always bothered me: “Your gift of love they crucified, They laughed and scorned Him as He died, The humble King they named a fraud And *sacrificed* the Lamb of God.” **Neither the Romans nor the angry mob sacrificed the Son of God; they murdered the son of God!** (Acts 5:30 “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you *murdered* by hanging on a tree.”) Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice on our behalf. (Hebrews 9:26 “but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”) See also John 10:18; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 5:2; Titus 2:14; and 1 Corinthians 5:7. Sacrifice is an act of worship, and neither the Jews nor the Romans were worshiping God on that day! (I suppose it is just poetic license, but some poets need to have their licenses revoked!)

Why does this lamb have seven horns? Horns were used by the Hebrews to depict power. (Deuteronomy 33:17; 1 Samuel 2:10) The seven horns here represent Jesus’ complete and perfect power and wisdom. Later in Revelation (and also in Daniel) we will see that horns are used to depict kings. Thus, these seven horns likely depict the royalty of Christ and his complete sovereignty over all things.

The Lamb also has seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God. Recall our earlier discussion on the seven spirits where we identified them with the Holy Spirit. (2 Chronicles 16:9; Zechariah 3:9, 4:10)

The bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints. We will see later that everything in this book came about as a result of the prayers of the saints. While despised on earth, these prayers are brought to God in golden bowls. The picture reminds us of Psalm 141:2 — “Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.”



A major theme of this book is the power of prayer. We will soon see that this judgment against Rome is happening because of the prayers by God's people. Yes, we are to love our enemies and pray for them, but sometimes that prayer can be that God will judge them, and perhaps in that judgment they will finally see the errors of their ways.

Notice that each of the elders is holding a harp. So, I guess that means harps can be used in our worship service, right? Wrong! We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that God's chosen instrument for worship in the new kingdom is the human voice and the use of anything else is contrary to the pattern he left for us to follow. (See much more on this subject at [www.ThyWordIsTruth.com](http://www.ThyWordIsTruth.com).)

Why then do we see harps in these verses? Remember that what we are seeing here are *symbols*. This language is figurative. For example, only in a vision could a lamb with 7 horns and 7 eyes take a book from someone's hand. These harps are symbols for praise, just as the incense is a symbol for prayer. We will see a similar symbol in 14:2 — “the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps.”

The Lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of God. Jesus is worthy to open to the scroll and do what is contained therein. What follows next has been called “one of the greatest scenes of universal adoration anywhere recorded.”

9 and they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth.”

In these verses, “Heaven is revealed to earth as the homeland of music.” We find here the greatest chorus of praise the universe can ever hear. This new song is a song of redemption. It is a song about Jesus and about his church, the ransomed from the earth.

Think for a moment about the songs we sing. Which ones would we choose were we to find ourselves worshipping before the throne of God? (Certainly “Worthy Art Thou” should be on the list!) Are there any of those songs we would *not* sing on such a grand occasion? **If so, then why would we ever sing them at all? Aren’t we worshipping before the throne of God when we gather each week in our worship assembly?** Aren’t we the royal priesthood right here and right now? Just because we, unlike John, cannot *see* the throne of God doesn’t mean it’s not here. We know it’s here! God is (present tense!) dwelling with his people! Christ opened the door! Hebrews 4:16 — “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace!” (I could go further and ask not only what we would be singing in such a situation but also what we would be *wearing* and how we would be *acting* in such a situation, but I’ve probably said too much already.)

One more comment about singing: Do angels sing? Most of us would likely answer yes. But interestingly there is not a single example anywhere in the Bible of an angel singing. The closest we get is in Job 38:7 — “The morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy.” (Hark the Herald Angels *Say*? It just doesn’t have the same ring to it!) Also, did you know that God sings? See Zephaniah 3:17. And, in my opinion, angels also sing. How could they not?

# Revelation — Lesson 9

## Revelation 5:9-10, Continued...

In 4:11, God was worthy of glory, honor, and power because of his creation. Here in 5:9-10, Christ is worthy because of his *new* creation, the church.

In 15:3, we will see the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb. The song of Moses is also found in Exodus 15, where we find another song about deliverance and about the goodness of God.

Why do we need a *new* song? Because a greater deliverance required a new and greater song. Also, this new song depicts a new expression of God's love. Recall, for example, Psalm 98:1 —

O sing to the LORD a **new song**, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

And recall Isaiah 42:10 —

Sing to the LORD a **new song**, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.

Who are the ransomed in verse 9? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2:6 that Jesus “gave Himself a ransom for all.” And yet not all are ransomed because those outside of Christ remain under a yoke of bondage (Galatians 5:1). The ransomed in verse 9 are the church. We belong to Christ.

- **1 Corinthians 6:20** You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.
- **1 Corinthians 7:23** You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

- **Mark 10:45** For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
- **1 Peter 1:18-19** You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

And who are the kingdom and priests in verse 10? Once again, we see the church. We are a kingdom and priests to our God.

- **Exodus 19:6** You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.
- **1 Peter 2:9** But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

The kingdom and the priesthood were taken from Israel and given to the church. Recall Matthew 21:43 —

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it.

The RSV in verse 10 says that they *shall reign* on earth. The KJV has the same translation. The ASV says that they *reign* on earth. Neither translation contradicts the fact that we are reigning now (Romans 5:17, Revelation 3:11, Ephesians 2:5-7), although the use of the future “shall” would indicate that the church’s reign would be renewed and strengthened by Jesus’ judgment against Rome. For example, in Revelation 20:6 we read that we “*shall* be priests,” yet in Revelation 1:6 we find that we already are priests. The promise is that these Christians would continue to reign with Christ and would continue to be priests. If they were faithful, that relation would not end regardless of what Rome did.

11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to re-

ceive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" 13 And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" 14 And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Jesus is worshipped here by angels and by every living creature. The purpose of this scene is to emphasize Christ's worthiness and Christ's power. He is *worthy* to do what must be done, and he is *able* to do what must be done.

The phrase "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" is sometimes translated "ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands." This phrase simply denotes an indefinitely great number. Compare Hebrews 12:22 — "But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an *innumerable* company of angels." We are also reminded of Daniel 7:10 — "A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened." (See also Psalm 68:17.)

Verse 12 tells us that Jesus is worthy to receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing. (Notice that the list consists of 7 items.) These are not attributes he is about to receive having not already had, but rather these are attributes he already possesses. These attributes tell us further *why* he is worthy.

Jesus is already powerful! Jesus already reigns! He is reigning now!

- **1 Corinthians 1:24** But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

- **Hebrews 1:3** He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.
- **1 Timothy 6:15** Who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords.

But what about verse 13? Did literally *every* creature worship the Lamb at this time? No. We know they did not because if they did then this book of judgment would not have been needed. Indeed, the reason for this book is that Rome was *not* worshipping or honoring Christ, and in fact were setting themselves up *against* Christ and his church. The universal language here stresses the worthiness of Christ to receive worship from every creature. All of creation owes its existence to Christ. Verse 13 is the beautiful climax of the scene. Christ receives the adoration of the entire created world.

The entire scene reminds us of Psalm 148 — “Praise ye the LORD. Praise ye the LORD from the heavens: praise him in the heights. Praise ye him, all his angels: praise ye him, all his hosts. Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light. Praise him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters that be above the heavens.”

The throne of God is also the throne of the Lamb. Note, for example, Revelation 22:1 — “Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.”

Before we move into Chapter 6, let's pause to consider the structure of this book. The vision of Christ in Chapter 1 led to the letters to the seven churches. The throne room vision in Chapters 4 and 5 sets the stage for the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls in Chapters 6–16.

## Chapter Six

1 Now I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say, as with a voice of thunder, “Come!” 2 And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer.

As Chapter 6 opens and the first seal is removed from the scroll, we see the first part of what is one of the most well known images from this book — the four horsemen of the apocalypse.



We were told earlier that only Christ was worthy to remove the seals from this scroll, and here we see him begin to do just that. Tearing off a seal uncovers and reveals what is to come. The one who opens the scroll will carry out what is written inside, which means that Christ is about to execute the judgments of God found in this scroll.

In some translations, the living creature says, “Come and see,” as if inviting John to come and see what is about to happen. The best Greek manuscripts simply have “Come!” (as in the translation above), which is not an invitation but rather a summons for the four horses and their riders to come out onto the stage.

This vision is modeled after the vision found in Zechariah 1:8–17 and Zechariah 6:1–8. Let’s read the latter of those two references, and, as we do, note the similarities with John’s vision:

I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding upon a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, ‘What are these, my lord?’ The angel who talked with me said to me, ‘I will show you what they are.’ So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, ‘These are they whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.’

The riders in Zechariah’s vision were brought forth to bring judgment upon Babylon and Egypt. These riders do the same, but for Rome.

The creature in verse 1 speaks “with a voice of thunder.” Once again, the thunder reminds us that we are about to see judgments from God.

As we begin Chapter 6, we are faced at once with a difficult and widely debated question: Who is the rider on the white horse? Opinions range from Christ to the antichrist!

First, let’s consider (and reject) the notion that we are seeing “The Antichrist” here. Hundreds of books and even movies have appeared telling us all about “The Antichrist” in the book of Revelation. And how many times does “The Antichrist” make an appearance in this



book? Precisely zero! The word “Antichrist” never occurs. In fact, the phrase “The Antichrist” with the definite article never occurs anywhere at all in the Bible! John does talk about “antichrist,” but he does so in his letters rather than in Revelation:

- **1 John 2:18** Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that **antichrist** shall come, even now are there **many antichrists**; whereby we know that it is the last time.
- **1 John 2:22** Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is **antichrist**, that denieth the Father and the Son.
- **1 John 4:3** And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of **antichrist**, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.
- **2 John 7** For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an **antichrist**.

An antichrist is anyone who “confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh,” which means there are *many* antichrists in the world today, just as John said there were many in his day. Yes, Domitian was an antichrist, but he had a lot of company then and he has a lot of company now. Anyone who denies the divinity of Christ is an antichrist. Antichrists are not hard to find. Just look at the faculty of almost any university theology department!

The term “antichrist” is never used in the Bible to denote a particular individual. We do have the son of perdition in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and we have those with the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18, but nowhere are they called “The Antichrist.”

Also, these riders are sent out by God *against* Satan and his minions. As in Zechariah, “these are they whom the LORD has sent to patrol the earth.” This rider is *not* the Antichrist.

Others say the rider is Jesus himself, and while this view does have some appeal, it is not without its problems. First, let’s look at the evi-

dence in support of this view: This rider opens the entire affair. This rider is a conqueror. This rider wears a crown. This rider rides a white horse, and Jesus rides a white horse in 19:11.

But this rider is about to unleash a very violent scene. Could that be true of Christ? Yes. Recall Matthew 10:34 — “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” This is a book of judgment against the enemies of God. We are about to see the wrath of the Lamb!

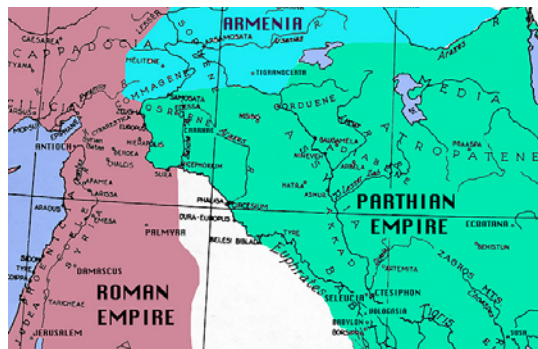
But there are some problems with the view that this rider is Christ. First, Christ appears in verse 1 as the Lamb, which to some suggest he would not also be the rider in the very next verse. Also, there are *four* riders in this part of the vision, and it is unlikely that Christ would be portrayed as co-equal alongside three other riders. Further, although Christ is shown on a white horse in 19:11-12, he does not have three companions, and the crown he is wearing in Chapter 19 is a royal crown (*diadema*), while the crown here in Chapter 6 is a different Greek word that denotes a victor’s crown (*stephanos*).

Who then is this rider? Let’s look at the clues. The rider of this horse has a bow in his hand, which in the Old Testament is a sign of military power. (Jeremiah 51:56; Hosea 1:5; Psalm 46:9) Thus, we have horse and rider that represent military might.

In my opinion, this rider is *not* Jesus. Instead, what we have here is an image that would have struck cold fear into the heart of any Roman citizen of that day — this image most likely depicts a Parthian warrior.



Who were the Parthians? At this time, the one enemy that mighty Rome feared most was Parthia, which was located on the far eastern edge of the empire. In A.D. 62, shortly before this book was written, something unprecedented had happened — a Roman army had actually surrendered to the king of the Parthians. This event occurred during a war between the two powers that lasted from A.D. 54 to 63. The Romans were unnerved by all of this and feared an invasion from the east. And as for the vision, the Parthians rode white horses and were the most famous bowmen in the world. (See statue above.)



The message to Rome in a nutshell? Be afraid! Be *very* afraid! You think the Parthians are scary? They are just the very first thing out of the scroll I have prepared for you! There is much, much more to come!

3 When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” 4 And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword.

The second seal is removed in verse 3, and its removal unleashes a red horse that depicts war. As with any war, this horse was going to cause great suffering. And as with any war, that suffering would not discriminate between the guilty and the innocent.

We should pause here to note that God’s people were suffering when this book was written, and they would continue to suffer during these

judgments. But, and this is the key point, their suffering was *not* a punishment. We may see all suffering alike, but God does not see things the way that we see them!

This rider would take peace from the world. Rome had created a time of peace, and as we discussed in our introductory lessons, the church had used that peace for its own advantage. Paul, for example, had used the Roman peace to travel all over the Roman empire preaching the gospel. God is telling Rome that the peace will end, and the end of Roman peace would be a hardship to both the godly and the godless.

History tells us that the Roman peace was already beginning to show signs of stress. The forced suicide of emperor Nero, in AD 68, was followed by a brief period of civil war, the first Roman civil war since Mark Antony's death in 30 BC. Between June of AD 68 and December of AD 69, Rome witnessed the successive rise and fall of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius until the final accession of Vespasian, the first ruler of the Flavian Dynasty. The military and political anarchy created by this civil war had serious repercussions, such as the outbreak of the Batavian rebellion — an uprising against Roman rule by the Batavi and other tribes in the province and in Gaul. They managed to destroy two legions and inflict humiliating defeats on the Roman army, but was eventually defeated by a massive Roman army. This conflict with Gaul was a taste of things to come for Rome.

In the Old Testament, God often depicted his judgment as a loss of peace.

- **Zechariah 14:3** Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle.
- **Isaiah 19:2** And I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, every man against his brother and every man against his neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom.

In Matthew 24, Jesus said that at the time of his judgment against Jerusalem, there would be wars and rumors of wars. While the judgments in Matthew 24 and Revelation are not the same, the time frame

is close to the same, with the events in Revelation unfolding shortly after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Thus, the wars and rumors of wars in Matthew 24 could also apply to the warfare shown here.

5 When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I saw, and behold, a black horse, and its rider had a balance in his hand; 6 and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; but do not harm oil and wine!"

When the third seal is removed, a black horse is released. This horse represents famine and economic hardship.

The balance in the rider's hand was for weighing food. It's presence here reminds us of Ezekiel 4:16, which prophesied famine by saying the people would eat bread by weight and with fearfulness.

Moreover he said to me, "Son of man, behold, I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem; they shall eat bread by weight and with fearfulness; and they shall drink water by measure and in dismay.

And in Leviticus 26:26, God told the people that if they were disobedient, then "they shall deliver your bread again by weight."

A denarius was a day's wages. (Recall Matthew 20:2.) Normally it would buy ten times as much as it buys in these verses.

And yet the command not to harm the oil and wine in verse 6 indicates that this famine was not too extreme. Food was still available to be weighed.

It was not abnormal for there to be wine and oil but no grain. The olive tree and the grape vine are more deeply rooted than grain and would endure a drought that would wipe out the other. Remember that when Jacob sent his sons to Egypt for corn, he was still able to

send with them “the choice fruits of the land.” (Genesis 43:11) What we see here is a situation in which luxuries are plentiful and necessities are scarce.

Once again we can find a historical comparison with Rome. During the time of Nero there had been a famine that left the luxuries untouched. During that famine when a ship arrived from Alexandria, the starving populace rioted when they discovered it contained not corn as they expected but sand to cover the ground for the gladiatorial games. Later, during the reign of Domitian, there was such a shortage of grain and an overabundance of wine that Domitian ordered half the vineyards to be cut down. The violent reaction that followed caused the order to be rescinded.

Why is this rider told not to do too much? These judgments are still at an early stage. We are only in Chapter 6! Things will get much worse later when the bowls are poured out.

Even here, we are seeing the patience and longsuffering of God. John 3:16 tells us that God loved the world, and that includes even the Roman persecutors. And yes, it even includes Nero and Domitian. But, as Rome will soon learn, the love of God and the wrath of the Lamb are inextricably linked. God is patient and longsuffering, but God is not mocked. Judgment is coming. But for now, there is still time to repent. Later there will be no time for repentance.

7 When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” 8 And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him; and they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

With the removal of the fourth seal, the pale horse takes the stage. Its rider is named Death, and Hades follows along behind. If this judgment is not yet too extreme, I shudder to think of what is coming!

The Greek word translated “pale” is *chloros*, which means yellow-green or livid. Perhaps most frightening of all is this final pale horse of pestilence. Even today we are not immune to the fear of a pandemic. The following excerpt from a recent book on the pandemic of 1918 captures the fear that such an event can cause:

They called the plague of 1918 influenza, but it was like no influenza ever seen before. It was more like a biblical prophecy come true, something from Revelation that predicted that first the world was to be struck by war, then famine, and then, with the breaking of the fourth seal of the scroll foretelling the future, the appearance of a horse, “deathly pale, and its rider was called Plague, and Hades followed at its heels.”

The plague took off in September of that year, and when it was over, half a million Americans would lie dead. ... Children were orphaned, families destroyed. Some who lived through it said it was so horrible that they would not even talk about it. Others tried to put it behind them as another wartime nightmare, somehow conflating it with the horrors of trench warfare and mustard gas. It came when the world was weary of war. It swept the globe in months, ending when the war did. It went away as mysteriously as it appeared. And when it was over, humanity had been struck by a disease that killed more people in a few months' time than any other illness in the history of the world.

“And I saw, and behold, a pale horse, and its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed him.” That fearful image has not been dulled at all by the passage of time.

Notice in these verses that death and Hades are being sent forth and commanded by God. Revelation regards both death and Hades as defeated enemies who must do what the Lamb bids.

Why do only a quarter perish? Once again, we see that this judgment is neither final nor complete. The survivors will live to experience much worse. This is just the warm up act!

These first four seals remind us of Ezekiel 14:12–23, which in describing a judgment against Jerusalem refers to sword, famine, pestilence, and wild beasts as God's four deadly acts of judgment. They also remind us of Leviticus 26:21–26 where God tells his people the penalties for their disobedience — wild beasts, sword, pestilence, and famine. John is seeing traditional images describing what happens when God focuses his wrath upon a disobedient people.

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” 11 Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

With the fifth seal, the focus moves from the enemies of God back to the people of God. We see an altar, and under the altar we see the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. God is keeping them safe from the judgments unleashed below.

What is the identity of the altar in verse 9? The theme of sacrifice suggests it may be the altar of burnt offering. But the prayers that rise like incense suggest it might depict the altar of incense. Most likely it is intended to be a blending of those two altars. This altar in heaven reminds us of Hebrews 8–9, where we learn that the earthly tabernacle of the Old Testament was constructed according to a heavenly pat-



tern. It should be a reminder to us that we still live and worship according to a heavenly pattern.

The witness or testimony for which these souls had been martyred was the testimony of Jesus. This same testimony was mentioned in 1:2, and we will see it again in 12:17, 14:12, and 19:10. Jesus had told his disciples what to expect in John 16:2 — “whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” And in Matthew 24:9, he told them that they would be “hated of all nations for my name’s sake.”

Notice that these martyrs are beneath the altar. We are reminded at once of Leviticus 4:7 — “And the priest ... shall pour all the blood of the bullock at the bottom of the altar of the burnt offering.” The life blood of these Christians has been poured out as a sacrifice to God. We see the same image from the pen of Paul:

- **Philippians 2:17** Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.
- **2 Timothy 4:6** For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand.

**Barclay:** “There is a great and uplifting truth here. When a good man dies for the sake of goodness, it may look like tragedy, like the waste of a fine life; like the work of evil men; and, indeed, it may be all these things. But every life laid down for right and truth and God is ultimately more than any of these things—it is an offering made to God.”

The question in verse 10 is one of the central passages in the book. It could be considered the theme of this book. It is the eternal cry of the suffering righteous — how long? “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” The book of Revelation is an answer to that plea for divine retribution. And what is the answer?

- **Revelation 1:1** The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what **must soon take place**; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.

- **Revelation 1:3** Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; **for the time is near.**
- **Revelation 22:6** And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants **what must soon take place.**
- **Revelation 22:10** And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, **for the time is near.**
- **Revelation 10:5-6** And the angel whom I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that **there should be no more delay.**

What support is there for stating that nothing in the book has been fulfilled yet? Is that what an initial reader would have thought? Is that the answer they would have expected to the question in verse 10? No, and it is not the answer they got! They were told over and over again that the time was near!

The question in verse 10 reminds us of Psalm 79:5-10 — “How long, LORD? wilt thou be angry for ever? shall thy jealousy burn like fire? Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name. ... 10 Wherefore should the heathen say, Where is their God? let him be known among the heathen in our sight by the revenging of the blood of thy servants which is shed.”

And yet, in verse 11 they are told to rest a little longer. God had a plan and they needed to wait until the time was right for their vindication, but that time would be soon! They would have to wait only a little longer. God’s judgment was at the doorstep.

Meanwhile, though, Rome was to have a position of power over God’s people for a short time. But during that time, Rome was only digging its own grave. Recall Isaiah 33:1 where God told Assyria, “When you

have finished destroying, I will destroy you.” God has that same message for Rome.

Daniel had told us the same thing 600 years earlier. In Daniel 11:36, 45 Daniel wrote that the king of the North (which was Rome) would prosper then be destroyed.

Who are those that dwell upon the earth in verse 10? This is the standard description in Revelation for those who are hostile to God. Those on God’s side are, by contrast, often pictured as already dwelling in heaven even though they are still on earth. And there is a great lesson here. We are pilgrims! This world is not our home! We are just passing through! Isn’t that what Paul told us?

- **Colossians 3:2-4** Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. **For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.** When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.
- **Philippians 3:18-20** For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. **But our commonwealth is in heaven,** and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is the “complete number” in verse 11? First, this is not the complete number of the Gentiles that Paul writes about in Romans 11:25. The context is completely different. (See our website for an explanation of Romans 9-11.)

What then is it? Rome was filling out its own death warrant with each Christian it killed. When the warrant was completed, the judgment would follow. God controls the time schedule here, not Rome.

This passage brings to mind the *restraint* on the man of perdition that Paul spoke of in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-6 —

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed,

the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know **what is restraining him now** so that he may be revealed in his time.

In my opinion, that man of lawlessness is none other than Domitian, who shortly will be a key character in this book. God had a time schedule for these events, and Domitian would play out his role in due time.

Notice that the cry for vindication from these martyrs rises from their own blood. Compare Genesis 4:10 — “Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.” The blood of the martyrs could not go unanswered. There was a moral necessity for judgment and for retribution — and judgment and retribution were coming soon.

Some suggest that such a cry should never be voiced by a Christian. How can we love our enemies while asking God to judge them? First, we see such a cry in verse 10, and we see God’s response in this book. He answers that cry and judges the enemies of his people. Second, we see God’s longsuffering patience even in those judgments, and so we too can pray that God will judge our enemies, and yet while doing so give them a final opportunity to repent. Third, the Bible is filled with pleas from his people for divine vindication:

- **Psalm 79:10** Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of thy servants be known among the nations before our eyes!
- **Psalm 94:3** O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?
- **Habakkuk 1:2** O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and thou wilt not hear? Or cry to thee “Violence!” and thou wilt not save?

It is not wrong for a Christian to pray for vindication from evil men. God’s response in this book, if nothing else, should convince us of

that! And perhaps, sadly, this lesson is one we all may soon need to heed. “John’s words are a reminder that throughout history there has been a persistent hostility towards deeply committed Christians on the part of those wielding power.” And those wielding power include more than just politicians. The media swings a tremendous club, and that club is often aimed at Christians.

When President Clinton, as his first official action, moved to lift the ban against homosexuals in the military, the White House received a flood of calls from concerned Christians. In reporting on the calls, the *Washington Post* characterized the callers as largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command.

Cal Thomas had the following to say about that article:

The caricature of evangelical Christians as inherently stupid because they believe in an authority higher than journalism, the government or the culture (the unholy trinity of rampant secularism) would be repugnant to all if it had been applied to blacks or women or homosexuals. But it seems Christian-bashing is always in season.

And that bashing does not come only from journalists. Hollywood consistently portrays Christians as dangerous, bigoted, hypocritical fools. School textbooks omit most or all traces of religion from American history and social studies. Christians are at war with earthly powers! It was true in John’s day, and it is true today. And yet, today as then, our weapons are *not* carnal. Recall 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 —

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.

**[www.ThyWordIsTruth.com](http://www.ThyWordIsTruth.com)**

Can we pray for the judgment of God's enemies today? Can we pray for the pulling down of earthly strongholds and every high thing that sets itself against the knowledge of God? Absolutely! Not only *can* we pray for such things, we *must* pray for such things!

# Revelation — Lesson 10

## Questions & Answers

Now that we have gotten our feet wet with the dramatic language of judgment in this book, it is time to consider some questions that generally arise at this point: How is this book relevant for us? Are there other ways to interpret these images? How well do the images fit with the history of Rome? How could Rome be the villain when Rome did not fall until 476 A.D.?

We addressed each of those questions in the introduction, and you should look there as well, but we will address them again briefly at this point, and add some additional information to what we said earlier.

### **(1) Does Revelation have any relevance for us today?**

As you know, I have made the point several times that Revelation includes a time frame, and that time frame is that the events in the book were to come to pass shortly. That raises the question whether the book has any relevance to us today. We considered that question in our introductory lessons, but it's probably a good idea to discuss it again now.

At one level, we know the answer is yes without regard to how we interpret this book. Revelation is God's word, and that alone makes it relevant. When the creator of the universe hands you something to read, you don't ask him whether it will be relevant to your "day-to-day" life! The Bible is our spiritual food, and few people question the relevance of food!

At another level, we have frequently compared God's judgment of Rome in Revelation with God's judgments in the Old Testament against Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, Edom, and others. In those judg-

ments we learn valuable and very relevant lessons about the nature of God and his judgments.

Finally, we must agree that however much we compare Revelation to Old Testament judgments, this book is different in that it involves the church. Is this book relevant on that level? Absolutely! Have you ever wondered how Jesus views his church? Read Revelation. Have you ever wondered just how much Jesus loves his church? Read Revelation. Have you ever looked at the evil all around us and asked, How long, O Lord! Read Revelation. Revelation is relevant on any level!

## **(2) Don't those seals fit the fall of Jerusalem pretty well?**

The answer is yes, this language of judgment does fit well with the fall of Jerusalem. Indeed, we find very similar language in Matthew 24, which describes the judgment against Jerusalem. But it also fits well with judgments throughout the Old Testament against Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, and others. Similarity of language does not prove identity of subject.

In my opinion, the villain in this book is Rome and the judgments in this book are against Rome. Others have different opinions. Many take Jerusalem to be the villain in the book with the judgments being against Jerusalem, while others take Rome to be the villain but have the judgments being against both Jerusalem and against Rome. In my opinion, the best fit is to have Rome as the villain and have the judgments be against that same villain, Rome.

If we had more time, I would step through the arguments for and against the various theories as we came to each passage. But with the time we have, my plan is to tell you what I believe this book is about and then through citations to the Bible tell you *why* I believe that. But, as I'm sure you all know, there are *many* in the church who believe otherwise! All I can do is lay out my case from the Bible.

Do I think my view is the only possible view and that all other views are without merit? Absolutely not. In fact, if you compare the notes I wrote in 1993 (which are available on our website) with the notes you are reading now, you will see that I have changed my own views on



some issues. There certainly are *some* views different from mine that are totally without merit (premillennialism, for example), but there are other views different from mine that do not ignore the timeframe (or at least do not totally ignore it) and that fit portions of the book quite well. But the view I am proposing in these notes, in my opinion, best explains the entire text and best makes sense of the book from a theological and a historical perspective.

One final comment on this point. In our introductory classes, we mentioned that some Old Testament had dual fulfillments — one immediate and another future. We know that because the New Testament reveals the secondary fulfillment. Absent being told, however, it is difficult to determine when a prophecy has a second, sometimes much later fulfillment. Our class is focused on the immediate fulfillment, but we could, if we had the time or the inclination, *speculate* as to a dual fulfillment that either occurred or is yet to occur.

### **(3) How do the images we have seen fit with the fall of Rome?**

This is a question we will have more to say about as we proceed through the book, but a few points can be made now.

The images we have seen were intended to frighten, and I think we can all agree they succeeded. Even today, the pale horse of pestilence is the stuff of nightmares. Are we then to look for an actual pestilence that came upon Rome? I think the answer is not necessarily. Instead, we should look for *why* that image was so frightening to Rome, and to do that we can look to the history of that time.

The famines of Nero's day preceded the writing of this book, while the famines of Domitian's day followed it. The former was likely the source of the frightening image, while the latter reinforced it and reminded people of it. These historical events tell us why this symbol was so powerful and so vivid.

The first horse with the conquering rider is another a good example. I identified it with a Parthian warrior because of Rome's fear of an invasion from the east. Did Parthia conquer Rome? No. Were the Romans scared to death of Parthian warriors? Yes. God is looking into

their minds, pulling out the things that scare them the most, and telling them that and much more is on its way! Rome feared invasion from the east. Rome feared a loss of the Roman peace. Rome feared famine and disease. Why did they fear these things? Because they were actual threats— they had happened and would happen again. The church saw Rome as invincible, as did Rome itself. God is reminding *both* Rome and the church that Rome is not invincible!

But *how* and *when* did these judgments come to pass against Rome? As we will see and have already seen, Rome, and particularly the Roman emperors, suffered *literal* punishments in this life, but before we conclude that is all there is, let's pause to ask a question: The reward of the martyrs under the altar, was it in heaven or on earth? It was a heavenly reward. The punishment of Rome — was it on earth or in Hell? I think that what we are seeing in these descriptions is a vivid portrait of what Paul told us in Hebrews 10:31 — “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” You take everything that scared Rome, and it was nothing compared to the eternal punishment that awaited. I think we are sometimes too quick to put the reward in Heaven while putting the punishment on earth. Remember that a theme in this book is that things are not always as they seem. This book invites us to view things through God's eyes — and in God's eyes there is not *any* earthly punishment that compares in *any* way to an eternity in Hell. Some of these events would happen on earth, but the real punishment would happen in the next life, just as would the real reward for those who remained faithful to death.

Think about some of the figures we have seen and are about to see — the sun blackened, the stars falling to earth, the sky rolled up like a scroll, every mountain and island moved out of its place, hail and fire with blood, the sea becoming blood, a great mountain cast into the sea, the stars darkened, horses with serpent tails, and unclean spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of a dragon. Figurative? Then what about the famine, the war, and the pestilence? Literal? If so, *why*? Remember our general rule with apocalyptic language is to take images figuratively unless forced to do otherwise.

Our plan is *not* to try and match each of these images with some particular historical event that happened to Rome. Instead, these images

are all describing the *same* judgment, just with different pictures and with an ever building intensity leading finally to the bowls of wrath. But these seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls are figurative.

We see similar language used in the Old Testament. God told the Babylonians in Isaiah 13 that he would leave their land in such a wasted condition that no Arab would ever pitch his tent there again. Is that literally what happened to them? No. Was that a frightening image intended to convey the horror of what God had in store for them? Absolutely. Hosea told Israel that it would go into Egyptian bondage again. Did that literally happen to them? No. Was that a frightening image from their past that God used to depict the judgments to come? Absolutely.

**(4) How can this book be about the fall of Rome when that event did not occur until AD 476?**

I think we can all agree that if Rome had been sacked in 110 instead of 410 then no one would doubt that Rome is the villain in this book and that the judgments in the book are directed toward Rome. But with the actual end occurring when it did, we have reason to wonder how well such a fall really fits with the timeframe of Revelation. To answer that question, let's first review what we mean by the "fall of Rome," and then let's look to the Old Testament for a comparison.

First, although a key event in Rome's fall happened in A.D. 476, the fall of Rome was a gradual process that started much earlier. Here is a brief account of the process from *The Fall of Rome: A Reference Guide* by Alden M. Rollins:

By the fall of Rome I mean primarily the events of the fifth century when the military and political integrity of the Roman power was smashed in the western provinces and on the Mediterranean Sea, a disaster soon to be followed, though in a more subtle way, by a cultural and economic regression so profound that later generations called the centuries from about 600 to 1000 the Dark Ages. Mediterranean civilization had not been without its strains before, but the polit-

ical disintegration of the fifth century, the monstrous plagues and earthquakes and wars of the sixth and subsequent centuries, and the economic and further political dislocations of the seventh and eighth centuries guaranteed the trend towards localization and deprivation. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse fared well in these times.

Symbolically the signal dates are 410 when the city of Rome itself was sacked by barbarian hordes for the first time since 390 B.C., and 476 when the last western emperor to reside at Rome was retired by a barbarian general who already held political and military supremacy in Italy, which was now completely detached from its ancient provincial territories in Gaul, Spain, Africa, and Britain, and was harassed from the sea by a Vandal fleet. Other events on both sides of the fifth century either inclined the empire towards, or guaranteed the results of, the disasters of the fifth century; and these come within the scope of the fall of Rome. Examples are the political instability of the third century, the Battle of Adrianople in 378 A.D., and the Gothic wars in sixth century Italy.

During and after the disasters in the west, the remaining eastern provinces, administered from Constantinople, were more fortunate in the short term; but between 500 and 750 these too were transformed by war, pestilence, earthquakes, famines, religious fanaticism, and economic and political upheavals from a plausible continuation of the Roman empire and Roman culture into a small, compact, narrow minded, Greek maritime state completely dominated by its last remaining city of Constantinople, whose population was reduced at one point to under 50,000 and where a formerly high and varied culture was reduced to religious platitudes.

Note that even a secular author sees parallels between what we are reading in Revelation and what happened to Rome. But, as we discussed before, we need to be careful before we match the famines and plagues in this book with specific famines and plagues from Rome's history. These images were intended to frighten, and one reason they were so frightening is that they had happened to Rome before and would happen again.

As for the "fall of Rome" happening hundreds of years after Revelation was written, it may be that in Revelation we are seeing the judgment and then later in history we are seeing the sentence resulting from that judgment carried out. This was the case with Jerusalem, for example. Jesus judged them in Matthew 24. The sentence was carried out about 40 years later in A.D. 70.

Not every judgment happens like Sodom and Gomorrah. In that case, there were very few of God's people inside the city, and so he went in, got them out, and then dropped a bomb. With the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus gave a warning so that the Christians could leave on their own when the time was right. Perhaps with Rome, God also delayed the sentence for the sake of the righteous. But, and this is the key point, that judgment was certain. In fact, that judgment had been written about by Daniel 600 years before Revelation was written and 1000 years before the events in the fifth century. (Some may object that the delay could not have been for the sake of the righteous because the righteous were being persecuted during the delay, and that's a fair point. But continued persecution during the delay was also true with Babylon and Jerusalem. We need to see the situation from God's *eternal* perspective. Also, we should note that the fierce persecutions under Nero and Domitian did result in a swift punishment for Nero and Domitian.)

Who was given the harsher penalty? Sodom and Gomorrah, which were taken out in a spectacular, but very quick, manner? Or Rome, which died a slow death of a 1000 cuts? Perhaps that is another reason the sentence was delayed — or should we perhaps say *prolonged*?

The city of Rome, for example, experienced a steep decline from its heights at the time this book was being written. Diocletian, for exam-

ple, who ruled from 284 to 305, established four capital cities of the Roman empire — not one of which was Rome! In fact, as one author described it, he reduced the status of the Roman senate to that of a municipal council.

Also, we should keep in mind (as we will discuss at length later), the two central villains of the first century as far as Christians were concerned were Nero and Domitian. Revelation was written in between their two reigns, and each met his fate during that first century. Domitian, for example, was murdered by his own servants in A.D. 96, his body then being unceremoniously cremated. So much for “Our Lord and God Domitian”!

Rome’s judgment was certain and its punishment began soon after the book was written, just as the book said it would, but that punishment did not end soon after the book was written. Rome was not built in a day —and Rome did not end in a day!

Finally, we can yet again look to the Old Testament for a similar judgment and a similar punishment. Isaiah 13-14 contains a prophecy about the destruction of Babylon by the Medes and Persians. The imagery and language used suggest a destruction that would happen swiftly and dramatically, and yet, as Wayne Jackson tells us in his commentary on Isaiah, “the fulfillment of this remarkable prophecy was *progressive*.” He writes:

After Cyrus invaded Babylon (539 B.C.), he substantially left the city standing, making it one of his capital centers for awhile. Eventually, though, the city revolted against its captor; hence, in about 516 B.C., Darius, the Persian king, invaded the city and dismantled the walls. In 482 B.C., the Babylonian settlement again revolted, which rebellion was put down by Xerxes with much damage being visited upon the city. Alexander the Great sought to restore the place to its former glory. He employed 10,000 men for two months clearing away rubbish in preparation for construction, but he abandoned the project shortly thereafter. In 20 B.C., Stra-

bo, the Greek geographer, described Babylon as a "vast desolation."... The famous archaeologist Henry Layard, who excavated the area between 1845-51, described it as a "naked and hideous waste."

Hailey's commentary on Isaiah addresses the same point with regard to Isaiah's comparison of Babylon's fall with that of Sodom and Gomorrah:

One might infer from this that the destruction would be immediate, but this was not the case. Delitzsch says that Cyrus left the city still standing with its double ring of walls. "Darius Hystaspis, who had to conquer Babylon a second time in 518 B.C., had the walls entirely destroyed, with the exception of fifty cubits. Xerxes gave the last thrust to the glory of the temple of Belus. ... At the time of Strabo (born 60 B.C.) Babylon was a perfect desert."

And how is this judgment described by Isaiah? Read Isaiah 13:21-22 — "But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces: and **her time is near to come**, and her days shall not be prolonged."

Isaiah 13 was written after the death of King Ahaz in 715 B.C., which places it comparatively late in the prophet's ministry. (See 14:28.) If we take 715 B.C. as the date of this prophecy, then it began to be fulfilled about 175 years later in 539 B.C., when Cyrus invaded the city. If we take the destruction by Xerxes in 482 as the death blow, then that blow came about 235 years after the prophecy was penned. Jumping ahead to Rome, the invasion of the city in 410 occurred about 340 years after the prophecy was penned. In short, not only are the prophecies similar, but the time tables are also similar. We will explore these similarities further as we work our way through this book.

**(5) Are we kings or are we a kingdom?**

Last week, we noted that Revelation 5:10 in the KJV says that “we **shall** reign” while the ASV says “we reign.” Both have good textual support in the Greek manuscripts and so we cannot tell for certain which was in the original. But, as we noted last week, they are both accurate descriptions. Christians reign in life with Christ, but with the judgment of Rome that reign would continue and be reaffirmed.

That same verse is the source of yet another textual disagreement. In the KJV, we read, “And hast made us unto our God **kings** and priests,” while in the ESV, we read, “and you have made them a **kingdom** and priests to our God.” Which is correct? Again, each has textual support and so we cannot say for certain which was in the original. However, as before, each is accurate. Recall that the 24 elders in Revelation 4:4 represent the church and are wearing crowns. God made us kings in the sense that we reign in life with Christ (Romans 5:17, Revelation 3:11, Ephesians 2:5-7), and God made us a kingdom by establishing his church, the eternal kingdom, in Acts 2. We are a kingdom of priests, and we are also a kingdom of kings — with Jesus as our High Priest and the King of all kings!

**Chapter 6, Continued...**

6:12 When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; 14 the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and



hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"

The removal of the sixth seal reveals the wrath of the Lamb and the judgment of the ungodly.

Does this seal describe the final judgment and the end of time? Most commentators say it does, but in studying Revelation I am always reminded of something Mark Twain once said — when you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is probably time to change sides!

This language is language of judgment, and as language of judgment it could be used to describe many different judgments, including the great and final judgment yet to come. But what is the context here? What is the time frame of this book? Is there another judgment under consideration here?

Remember one of our key interpretive principles — similarity of language does not prove identity of subject. There are many judgments in the Bible, and many are described with the same symbols and the same images.

As one commentator reminds us:

We must take the trouble to learn as much as possible concerning the historical situation to which the book of Revelation belongs. It is only when this historical situation is reconstructed that Revelation comes alive and we are able to enter sympathetically into the mind and heart of the author and his readers. Perhaps no other book of the Bible has suffered more from being wrenched from its historical context than has Revelation.

The language used to describe the opening of the sixth seal is a mosaic of phrases used in the Old Testament to describe past judgments against Assyria, Egypt, Edom, and other enemies of God.

What about burning fire and brimstone? See Isaiah 34:9 regarding a judgment against Edom — “Its streams shall be turned into pitch, And its dust into brimstone; Its land shall become burning pitch.”

What about the darkening of the sun and moon? See Joel 2:31, which Acts 2 tells us was fulfilled in the first century — “The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.” See also Amos 8:9, Isaiah 13:10, Isaiah 50:3, Ezekiel 32:7, Matthew 24:29, Mark 13:24, and Luke 23:45.

What about the falling of the stars and the removing of the heavens? See Isaiah 34:4 — “All the host of heaven shall be dissolved, And the heavens shall be rolled up like a scroll; All their host shall fall down As the leaf falls from the vine, And as fruit falling from a fig tree.” See also Isaiah 13:13 and Psalm 102:25-26.

Also, recall Matthew 24:29, which we *know* from Matthew 24:34 describes something that happened in the first century (the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70) — “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

Let’s look more closely at Isaiah 13:4-22, which describes a judgment against Babylon carried out by God through the Medes —

Hark, a tumult on the mountains as of a great multitude! Hark, an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The LORD of hosts is mustering a host for battle. They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the LORD and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole earth. Wail, for the day of the LORD is near; as destruction from the Almighty it will come! Therefore all hands will be feeble, and every man’s heart will melt, and they will be dismayed. Pangs and agony will seize them; they will be in anguish like a woman in travail. They will look aghast at one another; their

faces will be aflame. Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising and the moon will not shed its light. I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant, and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless. I will make men more rare than fine gold, and mankind than the gold of Ophir. Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. ... And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomor'rah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or dwelt in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. But wild beasts will lie down there, and its houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there satyrs will dance. Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged.

That description of Babylon's judgment looks familiar, doesn't it? The same language is used here to describe the judgment of Rome, which was the Babylon of John's day. Was the language in Isaiah 13 a *literal* description of events? No, we know it was not. Isaiah 13 says that no Arab will pitch his tent there ever again, and yet we know that quite a few Arabs have pitched their tent today in the location of ancient Babylon (which is modern day Iraq).

Does this passage from Revelation apply to the end of the world? Many would say, "well, yes, the context seems to imply it was going to happen soon. But this vivid language could only apply to the end of

the world.” Tell that to Babylon! God applied the same language to its end, and yet the world continues on to this very day.

Our investigation of this language provides an important reminder — we cannot study Revelation apart from the Old Testament. No other book in the New Testament refers to the Old Testament more often than does the book of Revelation.

**Barclay:** “Strange as John’s pictures may seem to us, there is not a single detail which is not ... in the Old Testament ... We must not think that these pictures are to be taken literally. Their point is that John is taking every terrifying thing that can be imagined and piling them all together to give a picture of the terrors” to come.

What about the staggering of earth and mountains in verse 14? The manifestation of God at Mount Sinai caused a *literal* trembling of a mountain. This trembling then became a symbol for the manifestation of God’s holiness. When God comes in judgment, the earth shakes and the mountains tremble! Recall the original event in Exodus 19:18 —

And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly.

And then recall its many subsequent symbolic uses:

- **Haggai 2:6** For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.
- **Nahum 1:5** The mountains quake before him, the hills melt; the earth is laid waste before him, the world and all that dwell therein.
- **Jeremiah 4:23-25** I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking, and all the

hills moved to and fro. I looked, and lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had fled.

- **Micah 1:4** And the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will be cleft, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.
- **Isaiah 13:13** Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

The mountains *literally* quaked at Sinai. Afterward, that literal quaking was used as an image to depict other divine visitations.

Symbols are often based on previous *literal* events. Their purpose is then to remind one of that earlier event. Israel, for example, depicts God's people. The new Jerusalem depicts the church. Egypt depicts slavery and bondage. Babylon depicts Rome. The ten plagues depict God's judgments.

But here the sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, and the whole earth is affected. Why do we see such global terms used in reference to Rome? First, of course, the immediate answer is that to the people of this day, Rome was global! It ruled almost the entire known world! But, also, whenever the ungodly are dominant and oppressive, the world is said to be theirs. Isaiah 13:11 says, "I will punish the world for its evil." And 2 Peter 2:5 tells us that God brought the flood upon "the world of the ungodly." Thus, the picture is one of God dismantling and attacking his own created world, and it symbolizes God's judgment upon the ungodly, who seemed to be in charge of that world. God is letting them know who is really in charge!

Generally we should try to see things from God's point of view or the early church's point of view, but here it helps to see things from Rome's point of view. The picture here is one of a total and unexpected breakdown of order. Rome thought it had covered every base, but it had forgotten to include God in its plans. And men always find themselves in trouble when they forget to factor God into their equations!

Christians can look forward to the day of the Lord, but that is not the case for the ungodly. See Isaiah 13:6-8; Zephaniah 1:14; Joel 2:1;

Micah 1:1-4; Malachi 3:1-3; Joel 2:11; Hosea 10:8; and Luke 23:30. Notice from verse 15 that this fear touches all levels of society from the least to the greatest.

Is this language of judgment literal? Literal darkness? Literal stars falling? Literal dismantling of the earth? In the Old Testament, God used the same language against the Babylonians. Was it literal then? No. The Babylonians are gone and yet the earth remains. We should not take it literally here either. God is judging Rome here just as he judged Babylon, Edom, Egypt, Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Old Testament.

Just as symbols can be based on literal past events, they can also be based on literal *future* events. Some day the earth will literally be destroyed by fire and the heavens will literally be rolled up like a scroll — and God sometimes uses those literal future events associated with the final judgment as symbols to depict these earlier judgments.

The search for a hiding place in verse 16 is also seen in Isaiah 2. There is no place to hide from God. It is interesting to watch the ungodly try to *hide* in a book entitled *Revelation*! God reveals! The ungodly hide! Swete: “What sinners fear most is not death, but the revealed presence of God.”

The “Wrath of the Lamb” in verse 16 is one of the most remarkable and fearful expressions anywhere in the Bible. The word “wrath” is applied to Jesus only one time in the gospels —

**Mark 3:5** And he looked around at them with **anger**, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

We all know what makes God happy. But it is just as important that we all know what makes God angry!

**C.S. Lewis** — “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 confer-

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ring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame  
that can never be cured or disguised.”

# Revelation — Lesson 11

## Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 is an interlude between the sixth seal and the seventh seal. This chapter is intended to provide comfort and to reinforce the message of this book, which is victory in Jesus! In doing so, Chapter 7 answers the question that appeared at the end of Chapter 6: Who can stand before the wrath of God? We will find that Chapter 7 is modeled after Ezekiel 9, which describes a judgment that was to come against Judah from Babylon.

We should pause here to note that in the Bible, as in life, the innocent often suffer with the guilty. And when the innocent suffer due to a punishment of the guilty, it does not mean that the innocent are likewise being punished. While it may look the same from a human perspective, it does not look the same at all from God's perspective. For example, children suffered and died in the flood but those children were not being punished by the flood. Ezekiel 18:20 forbids the idea that God punishes one person for another person's guilt, but it does not forbid the idea that one person suffers due to another person's guilt, and in fact, that happens all the time.

Similarly, one may be exempt from a judgment yet still suffer during that judgment. Again, while it may look the same from a human perspective, it does not look the same from God's perspective. In Ezekiel 9, God's people are marked so that they would be untouched when judgment came, yet in Ezekiel 21:3–4 we see that the righteous died as well as the guilty when that judgment came. Their exemption was not a promise that they would be spared suffering but rather a promise that they would not be among the ones for whom that suffering was a judgment and a punishment.

There is a vast difference between suffering *with* the guilty and suffering *because* you are guilty even though admittedly at the time there



may not appear to be much of a difference. But the difference is real, and the difference is clear from God's perspective, which is the perspective revealed to us in this book.

Each time I read, study, and teach this book I discover new things. (Psalm 119:162 — "I rejoice at your word as one who finds great treasure.") As I prepared these notes, I was struck by the parallels between Revelation and Job. In each, Satan plays a key role as an accuser of God's people. In each, God's people suffer at the hands of Satan, but that suffering is not punishment and is not permanent. In each, God allows that suffering to continue for a little time. In each, a key theme is the sovereignty of God. In each, a key theme is that things are not always what they seem. In each, there is a happy ending for the people of God.

7:1 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel ascend from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads."

The number four is mentioned four times in these verses, and as we have seen, the number four often denotes the created world — the four elements, the four directions, the four seasons. In 5:12 when *heaven* praises Christ, it is with a *seven*-fold blessing. Later in 5:13, when the *earth* praises Christ, it is with a *four*-fold blessing. Thus, the focus here is on the created world.

What does it mean in verse 1 to hold back the four winds? A wind, being both powerful and invisible, is often used to denote the activity of God. By holding back the four winds they were holding back God's judgments against his creation for a moment. Compare —

- **Isaiah 57:13** When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The **wind** will carry them off, a breath will take them away.
- **Jeremiah 18:17** Like the east **wind** I will scatter them before the enemy. I will show them my back, not my face, in the day of their calamity.
- **Psalms 104:4** Who makest the **winds** thy messengers, fire and flame thy ministers.
- **Hebrews 1:7** Of the angels he says, “Who makes his angels **winds**, and his servants flames of fire.”
- **Psalms 18:10** He rode on a cherub, and flew; he came swiftly upon the wings of the **wind**.

This wind depicts a judgment that is about to come from God, and this judgment will come when the angels let loose the wind. How soon will it occur? Well, how long can the wind be held back? The image denotes something that will occur soon.

Another angel appears in verse 2 on an errand of mercy, and this angel comes from the rising of the sun. The sun is sometimes used to represent the goodness of God. Compare —

- **Psalms 84:11** For the LORD God is a **sun** and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.
- **Malachi 4:2** But unto you that fear my name shall the **Sun** of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.

This is a book of revelation, and nothing reveals like the sun. Evil hides in darkness, whereas sunlight dispels darkness and dread. This angel arriving from the rising sun is bringing good news from God!

In verse 3, a call for delay is given until the righteous are marked or sealed. Compare Ezekiel 9:4–6 —

And the LORD said to him, “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon

the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.” 5 And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and smite; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity; 6 slay old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one upon whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were before the house.

We have already seen several key themes in this book — (1) We must see things as God sees them. (2) The power of prayer. (3) Victory in Jesus. Here we see a fourth: (4) God knows!

God knows those who remain faithful, and he is assuring them of that. Some of those suffering persecution were wondering if God had forgotten about them, and Revelation was written to reassure them that he had not. This interlude is intended to provide comfort and assurance to the church.

What is the seal in verses 2-3? Is it the Holy Spirit? Some say yes, and point to Ephesians 1:13 —

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.

But I don't think that seal is the one we see here in Revelation. These people were sealed *because* they were righteous and hence they already had the gift of the Holy Spirit that was promised in Acts 2:38 and Acts 5:32. They had already received the seal of Ephesians 1:13.

What then is the seal here in verses 2-3? This seal is simply God's way of marking his possessions just like he did in Ezekiel 9. You put your name or your seal on something when that thing is yours and you want others to know that it is yours. God is marking his people to reassure them that he knows who they are and that they belong to him. Not one will be misplaced or stolen.

But note that this seal, as in Ezekiel 9, does not assure physical protection from persecution. God provides the deliverance that matters — spiritual deliverance. We must view things as God does, and God is concerned most of all about our *spiritual* welfare. He sent his Son, not for our physical deliverance, but for our spiritual deliverance.

And our focus must be the same. Remember Romans 8:5-6 — “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”

4 And I heard the number of the sealed, a hundred and forty-four thousand sealed, out of every tribe of the sons of Israel, 5 twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand of the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand of the tribe of Gad, 6 twelve thousand of the tribe of Asher, twelve thousand of the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand of the tribe of Manasseh, 7 twelve thousand of the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand of the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand of the tribe of Issachar, 8 twelve thousand of the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand of the tribe of Joseph, twelve thousand sealed out of the tribe of Benjamin.

Are numbers use figuratively in this book? 12000! 12000! 12000!  
12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000! 12000!  
What do you think?

Who are the 144,000 in verse 4? Don't panic (and the exits are clearly marked!), but square roots and cube roots are needed here! The number 12 often denotes God's people (12 patriarchs, 12 tribes, 12 apostles), and 12 times 12 is 144. 1000 takes 10, the number of completeness (10 fingers, 10 toes), and raises it to the power of 3, the number of divinity. Thus, many symbols are wrapped up in the number 144,000.

How many of God's people were sealed? Before we answer that question, what would we *expect* the answer to be? What would the initial readers, seeking comfort, expect the answer to be?

How much comfort would there be if we take 144,000 literally, as many do today? Can we really imagine God turning to the poor, persecuted Christian wearing the number 144,001 on his chest and saying "Sorry, but you are out of luck. You're a day late, and a dollar short! Better luck next time ... if there were going to be a next time!" How ridiculous!

We would expect the answer to be that *all* of God's people would be sealed. We would expect to hear that not one of God's children would be left out. We would expect to hear that he was marking *all* of his possessions. And that is exactly what we are told here! The number 144,000 is a beautiful symbol for *all* of God's people.

The number  $144,000 = 12 \times 12 \times 10 \times 10 \times 10$  is God's way of emphasizing that *all* of his people are under his care and protection — which is just what we would expect him to say!

The 144,000 are mentioned again in 14:1–5, where they are described as virgins and said to be those redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb. Does this description from Chapter 14 help us here with the 144,000 in Chapter 7? Yes. In 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul said he wanted to present the Corinthian church as a chaste virgin to Christ. James 1:18 says that we are "a kind of first fruits of his creatures." The church is comprised of those who have been redeemed from mankind. The church is sealed with the name of God and the Lamb. (Recall Revelation 3:12.)

The descriptions of the 144,000 in Chapter 7 and Chapter 14 confirm that the number 144,000 denotes the church.

But why are they called Israelites? Israel is an established name for God's people. The name literally means "he who prevailed with God." Could there be a better description for these Christians. As we discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, the church is the true Israel. The church is the new Jerusalem.

Although Jacob had 12 sons, only 11 sons received a tribal inheritance. The tribe of Levi received 48 cities that were scattered among the other tribes. The tribe of Joseph was split into two tribes named for his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Thus, when the tribes are listed in the Bible the list generally omits Levi and Joseph and includes Ephraim and Manasseh instead. But this is *not* the case here.

In fact, the list is unusual in several respects. First, Judah rather than Reuben (the oldest son) heads the list. Why? Because Christ belonged to the tribe of Judah.

Second, Manasseh and Joseph are both included even though Manasseh was Joseph's son. And Levi is included on the list, while Joseph's other son, Ephraim, and Dan are not included.

Why was Dan left out? Dan was very early connected with idolatry —

- **Judges 18:30** And the Danites set up the graven image for themselves.
- **1 Kings 12:28-29** So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.
- **Genesis 49:17** Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward.

Rome was full of idolatry and so was Dan. Hence Dan was not used in the description of the church. Dan was the classic example of a tribe that compromised with the world! The theme of the letters to the seven churches was a warning not to compromise with the world!

And why was Ephraim left out? For the same reason —

- **Hosea 4:17** E'phraim is joined to idols, let him alone.
- **Hosea 12:1** E'phraim herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply falsehood and violence;

they make a bargain with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt.

Ephraim had forsaken God and was busy trying to make deals with the world. They made a covenant with Assyria, but at the same time were making deals with Egypt. Again, Ephraim was guilty of compromise!

Why are the tribes listed by name? The names are listed so that God can give us a lesson about compromise with the world by the omission of Dan and Ephraim.

Note here the careful use of symbolism in the omission of Dan and Ephraim because of their compromise with the world and in the inclusion of Manasseh and Joseph to keep the total number at 12. This book is truly a work of art! The painting itself is beautiful beyond compare, as are the individual brushstrokes.

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 And all the angels stood round the throne and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."

These verses are modeled after the Jewish Feast of the Tabernacles or Booths. We read about that feast in Leviticus 23:39-43 —

On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. 40 And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. 41 You shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. 42 You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, 43 that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

In John 7:37 this feast is simply referred to as “The Feast.” The Rabbis said that “he who has not seen Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles does not know what rejoicing means.”

The Feast of Tabernacles commemorated the exodus from Egypt when the Israelites dwelt in tents and tabernacles. The people would build booths or tabernacles with walls made of branches and thatched roofs and then dwell in them for seven days. The Feast of Tabernacles occurred four days after the Great Day of Atonement in which the national guilt was removed by innocent blood.

One of the most important rituals during the feast was the pouring of water in the temple. A specially appointed priest was sent to the Pool of Siloam with a golden pitcher to bring water from the pool. This water was then poured by the High Priest into a basin at the foot of the altar amidst the blasting of trumpets and the singing of the Hallel (Psalm 113–118). It reminds us of Isaiah 12:3 — “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.”



It was at the end of such a celebration that Jesus announced that he was the real source of living water. Recall John 7:37-38 —

In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.

Jesus stood up and said that *he* was the answer to their prayers! His Messianic claim was so clear in making that statement that it caused a division among the people.

Revelation 7:9-12 is modeled after this feast. The group pictured here is also full of joy. The original feast looked forward to the Messiah. Here in Revelation we see the joy of those who are looking *at* the Messiah!

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "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. 15 Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. 16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

In verse 13, one of the elders asks, "Who are these?" He then tells us that they are survivors of and victors of the great tribulation. They

have come out of it. And how do they feel? Are they depressed and in despair? No, they are rejoicing!

What is the great tribulation in verse 14? Let's first determine what it is *not*. There are some misconceptions about the great tribulation.

First, it is a misconception to believe that there is only one great tribulation in the Bible. God's enemies always undergo a great tribulation at one time or another, and the Bible is filled with enemies of God. Accordingly, the Bible is also filled with great tribulations experienced by the enemies of God's people.

The Old Testament tells us about many great tribulations against the enemies of God's people. Here is a list of some of the foreign nations and cities that are judged by God in the Old Testament: Sodom, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Tyre, Media, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Damascus, Ethiopia, Phoenicia, and Arabia.

Jerusalem underwent a great tribulation in A.D. 70 when it was judged by God using the hands of the Romans. That great tribulation was prophesied in Matthew 24:21 —

For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.

That great tribulation was fulfilled in A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem, as Matthew 24:34 makes clear.

Some people read Matthew 24:21 and conclude that it must be speaking about the end of the world. After all, it says that there has never been and will never be another tribulation like that one. First, we *know* from verse 34 that the events in verse 21 happened in the first century. (Remember one of interpretive principles — we should use easy to understand verses to help us understand the difficult verses.) Second, the language in Matthew 24 is apocalyptic, and thus we should expect vivid, frightening images, which is what we find in verse 21. Third, we have seen similar hyperbolic language from the Old Testament, where it was also *not* describing the end of the world.

Another great tribulation will happen on the last day, when the ungodly are judged and the world is destroyed. Recall Romans 2:5-10 —

But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on **the day of wrath** when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: 7 to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be **tribulation** and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

If we are correct that the villain in this book is Rome rather than Jerusalem, then this judgment against Rome must be yet another great tribulation. And, if you started reading the Bible in Genesis and read all the way to Revelation, wouldn't you *expect* there to be a great tribulation in Rome's future? Hasn't that always been God's way of dealing with the enemies of his people?

Chapter 6 told us that a great tribulation was coming for Rome. Recall Revelation 6:12-17 —

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, 13 and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale; 14 the sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. 15 Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, 16 calling to the mountains and

rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; 17 for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?"

The saints were sealed earlier in Chapter 7 in anticipation of this great tribulation or this great day of wrath. Thus, Chapter 7 has already told us they were about to go through it, and now we see them after they have come out of it!

Here is the image that God is painting: Rome is persecuting the church. The church cries out for vindication. God says that Rome will experience his wrath. The church is sealed by God before the tribulation. After the tribulation, the church is pictured rejoicing in heaven.

Does the past tense in verse 14 mean that the judgment had already happened by the time the book was written? No. What it means is that the outcome of God's battle with Rome is never in doubt. The outcome is so certain that God can speak of it in past tense before it even happens.

Was the church literally in heaven at this time? No, but as we have previously discussed, God depicts them in this book as already being there. By contrast, the phrase "those that dwell upon the earth" always refers to the ungodly in this book.

Who are "those before the throne" in verse 15? Those before the throne are the 144,000 (*all* of God's people) looked at from a different perspective. These are the people who were marked.

Many things in Revelation are symbolized by different symbols at different points in the book. Jesus is seen as a Lamb and as a rider on a white horse. Rome is seen as a beast from the earth, as a beast from the sea, and as a harlot. It all depends on the throne's perspective. Remember that dissimilarity of speech does not imply distinctness of subjects. Different images can be used to depict the same object.

But how do we know that these two groups are the same? The 144,000 were sealed to preserve them through the great tribulation, and this group consists of those who came out of the great tribulation.

Both groups are before the throne (7:15 and 14:3). Both groups are led by the Lamb and redeemed from the earth (7:17 and 14:3).

We have already determined that 144,000 depicts the church. Is there any evidence that the group pictured here also depicts the church? As always, let's begin by looking at the evidence. Here is what we are told about his group: "They before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

After reading that description, I think we would all agree that this group can be none other than the church. Who else can stand before the throne of God? Who else serves God as priests? Who else does God shelter? Who else has the Lamb in their midst? Who else receives springs of living water (as we also saw earlier in John 7:37-38).

The real question for us is not *who* is this group, but rather is *when* is this group. Is this the church at the time of Rome, or is this the church after the end of all time?

We see some symbols here that we very commonly apply to our future home in heaven — no hunger, no thirst, no tears. And yet, once again we have symbols that are used elsewhere in the Bible to refer, not to the end of the world, but to the state of God's people under his care and protection.

Think about Psalm 23, for example. We generally do not think of that Psalm as something reserved for only the future, and yet what do we find there? "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." No hunger? No thirst? The picture is that of a well cared for and well guided flock. Recall Psalm 121:5-6 —

The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.

In short, although these blessings will be enjoyed in the future, they can also be enjoyed here and now! We are a flock with Jesus as our shepherd! "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

The promise of no hunger and no thirst is a promise to those saved by Jesus Christ. Recall Isaiah 49:8-10 —

Thus says the LORD: "**In a time of favor I have answered you, in a day of salvation I have helped you;** I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, 'Come forth,' to those who are in darkness, 'Appear.' They shall feed along the ways, on all bare heights shall be their pasture; **they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them,** for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them."

When was that promise fulfilled? Paul tells us in Second Corinthians 6:1-2 —

Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "**At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.**" Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.

Paul tells us that the prophecy from Isaiah 49 pointed to the salvation that came through Jesus. That is a promise for the here and the now!

Did Jesus' followers in the first century *literally* cease to feel hunger and thirst. No, but they did experience an end to spiritual hunger and thirst. Recall John 7:37 —

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink."

We see similar symbols used elsewhere to describe God's victorious people. Israel, which was being persecuted by Assyria at the time, was told in Isaiah 25 and Isaiah 30 that a time would come when they would weep no more.

- **Isaiah 25:8** He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will **wipe away tears from all faces**, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken.
- **Isaiah 30:19** Yea, O people in Zion who dwell at Jerusalem; **you shall weep no more**. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you.

The church here is told the same thing while they are being persecuted, not by Assyria, but by Rome. What does this language mean in the Old Testament? It meant that God would deliver them. What does it mean in the New Testament? It means the same thing!

What is the message to the church in a nutshell? Rome is going to be judged, but good things are going to happen to you! You are going to be victorious! Rome will weep, but you will not. Rome will be burned by fire, but you will not. Rome will face hunger and thirst, but not you. Jesus loves and cares for his church!

Was this a physical deliverance? No. All those who profess the name of Christ will face persecution, and that was especially true for these Christians. Our deliverance is a spiritual deliverance. We must see things as God sees them, and his view is from all eternity. By his view, our lives on this earth are just vapors that appear for a short while and then vanish away.

The church overcame mighty Rome? How? By following the example of Christ who overcame the world through his perfect sacrifice. Listen as John tells us in 12:10 how the church overcame Rome: "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death." We are not

looking at a *physical* deliverance here — but we are looking at a deliverance.

But does this group depict the entire church, or does it just depict those Christians who have already been killed by Rome? I believe we are seeing *all* the church, as emphasized by the symbolic meaning of 144,000. No one is left out.

In this book, God's people are pictured as being in Heaven even while they still live on earth. In fact, the phrase "those that dwell on the earth" is used in Revelation to depict the ungodly. John paints a beautiful picture here. God has taken his church out of harm's way. He has marked them so that they will not face the judgment against Rome. These Christians are those who have come out of the great tribulation without compromising with the world.

So far we have seen Jesus' power and worthiness to judge, we have heard a demand for judgment from the martyrs, we have had a taste of the terror of an approaching judgment, and we have seen that God's people will be exempt from this judgment.

The next scenes will be ones of tremendous action, but Chapter 8 begins with a short period of awed and breathless silence and anticipation.

## Chapter Eight

1 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2 Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

After much anticipation, we finally reach the opening of the seventh seal. The removal of this final seal reveals seven trumpets that warn of impending judgment. But, as we saw with the first six seals, these



trumpets are not yet final judgments. They strike fractions rather than the whole of their targets.

The trumpets serve the same purpose that the plagues did against Egypt. The ungodly may yet be able to heed the trumpets' warnings and repent. But Rome will almost certainly not repent. Instead, Rome will harden its heart against God just as Pharaoh did.

Verse 1 tells us that when this final seal is opened there is silence in Heaven for one half hour. This period of silence dramatically heightens the anticipation of what is about to happen. The time for talking is over; the time for judgment has begun. The scene reminds us of Habakkuk 2:20 — "But the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him."

Our modern world hates silence. We do everything we can to fill the silence with blaring TV's, blasting iPods, or unending chatter. Modern man hates silence because with silence comes reflection, and that is something modern man cannot tolerate. Remember what C.S. Lewis' Screwtape told the demon Wormwood in *The Screwtape Letters* — "Your business is to fix [man's] attention on the stream [of immediate sense experiences]. Teach him to call it 'real life' and don't let him ask what he means by 'real.' ... Keep everything hazy in his mind now, and you will have all eternity wherein to amuse yourself by producing in him the peculiar kind of clarity which Hell affords." Satan *loves* a noisy, confusing world!

Why half an hour? An "hour" is often used to indicate a time of critical importance or activity.

- **John 12:23** The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified.
- **John 12:27** And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.
- **I John 2:18** It is the last hour.

Many thus surmise that a half hour indicates a delay just before a period of critical importance. The crisis is near but has not yet come.

Finally, in verse 2, we meet seven angels with seven trumpets. Each of these trumpets will soon sound, just as each of the seven seals we saw earlier was uncovered, and just as each of the seven bowls we will see later will be poured out. This book comes in waves of seven!

## Revelation — Lesson 12

8:3 And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer; and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; 4 and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God. 5 Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, voices, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. 6 Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.

As we saw with an earlier altar, the altar in these verses again is likely intended to depict a combination of altars from the Old Testament.

The altar in verse 3 looks like the golden altar of incense that stood before the curtain leading to the holy of holies in the temple. In a sense that altar also stood before the throne of God since God was often pictured as sitting enthroned upon the cherubim that were on the ark in the holy of holies. (See Exodus 25:17–22.)

The altar in verse 5 looks like the brazen altar of burnt offering from which the coals were taken for the incense offering. The judges of Israel marched from this altar in Ezekiel 9:1–2.

Incense is often used to represent prayers, and we have already seen that same image earlier in this book. (See 5:8.) We are again reminded of Psalm 141:2 — “Let my prayer be counted as incense before thee.” But here we see incense that is *mingled* with prayers. What does that mean? One commentary suggests the incense in this context denotes the intercession of Christ on our behalf as we pray to God in his name. Recall Romans 8:34 — “Who is he that condemneth? It

is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.” Also, here we see the prayers of *all* the saints, as opposed to the prayers of the martyrs that we saw earlier.

These verses reveal the heavenly response to the prayers of these suffering Christians coming up from the earth to God. We are reminded of the concluding comments to Jesus’ parable about prayer in Luke 18:7-8 — “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily.” Everywhere we turn we are reminded of our timeframe!

Why does the angel throw the contents of the censer on the earth? It is the heavenly response to the prayers of all the saints. Their prayers will be answered, and judgment is coming for the enemies of God who dwell on the earth. We see a similar image in Ezekiel 10:2, where it precedes an approaching judgment by God against Jerusalem —

And he said to the man clothed in linen, “Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim; fill your hands with burning coals from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city.”

Here we have the same picture: God’s people are safe in heaven. God’s enemies are on the earth. The judgment on earth is about to begin. And, as before, thunder, lightning, and earthquakes are used to depict the impending judgment of God.

7 The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up, and all green grass was burnt up.

Trumpets are used in the Bible to depict an intervention by God into the affairs of men. The events on Mount Sinai were accompanied by a very loud trumpet blast. (Exodus 19:16, 19) Trumpets also sound in Isaiah 27:13, Joel 2:1, Zephaniah 1:16, and Zechariah 9:14. The in-

tervention by God against Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was described in Matthew 24:31 as being accompanied by the great sound of a trumpet.

The final great intervention by God into the affairs of men at the end of all time will also involve a trumpet. Recall 1 Corinthians 15:52 —

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: **for the trumpet shall sound**, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

And see, also, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 —

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and **with the trump of God**: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

Likewise, the trumpet in verse 7 also heralds the coming of God onto the stage of mankind, but here the target is Rome.

Trumpets serve three primary purposes: Trumpets sound a warning alarm; Trumpets play a fanfare to announce the arrival of royalty; Trumpets summon people to battle. Each of those purposes is likely involved with the use of trumpets here, but the main purpose appears to be for sounding a warning alarm.

The hail and fire remind us of the plagues against Egypt, which are the origin of many of the symbols used in these verses. In Exodus 9:24 we read: “So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.”

Why are only a third affected? As we discussed before, these trumpets are intended to warn. This trumpet is not a bowl. Bowls, as we will see, pour out God’s final judgments against Rome. As with the earlier seals, these trumpets depict partial judgments that warn of the impending doom to come.

Why a third and not a half or a fourth? There may be no particular reason why a third was chosen over some other fraction. It may sim-

ply be that a third represents a large portion but a portion that is still less than half. We may also be seeing *thirds* because we have *three* waves of sevens — seals, trumpets, and bowls — each of which takes away a third until nothing is left.

It is also possible that the use of a third here comes from its use in Zechariah 13:8–9 —

In the whole land, says the LORD, **two thirds** shall be cut off and perish, and **one third** shall be left alive. And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"

Also compare Ezekiel 5:12 —

A **third part** of thee shall die with the pestilence, and with famine shall they be consumed in the midst of thee: and a **third part** shall fall by the sword round about thee; and I will scatter a **third part** into all the winds, and I will draw out a sword after them.

As with the seals, we should not try to attach a specific chronology to the trumpets. They are part of the overall picture. We have already discussed how Revelation is in some ways like a painting from God. You do not look at a painting as you would a timeline. A painting is spatial rather than temporal. Remember that we have already seen the saints emerge victorious from the events that are now being described.

8 The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea; 9 and a third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

With the second trumpet, we see a great burning mountain thrown into the sea. Once again, this trumpet affects only a third of what it touches. We have not yet reached the bowls of God's wrath.

God's power is often described with images involving mountains:

- **Zechariah 4:7** Who art thou, O great **mountain**? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain.
- **Amos 4:13** For, lo, he that formeth the **mountains**, and createth the wind, and declareth unto man what is his thought, that maketh the morning darkness, and treadeth upon the **high places** of the earth, The LORD, The God of hosts, is his name.
- **Micah 1:4** And the **mountains** shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place.

Mountains are also sometimes used to depict kingdoms. Jeremiah 51, for example, describes Babylon as a destroying mountain that will become a burnt mountain, and Isaiah 2 describes the Lord's kingdom as the highest of the mountains.

- **Jeremiah 51:25** Behold, I am against thee, O destroying **mountain**, saith the LORD, which destroyest all the earth: and I will stretch out mine hand upon thee, and roll thee down from the rocks, and will make thee a **burnt mountain**.
- **Isaiah 2:2** It shall come to pass in the latter days that the **mountain** of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the **mountains**.

The mountain in verse 8 also represents a kingdom, but rather than Babylon, this mountain represents Rome. As with the mountain in Jeremiah 51, this one also becomes a burnt mountain, but this mountain is cast into the sea.

Where else do we find a mountain being thrown into the sea? Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 21:21– “Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to

the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done.”

We often speak of faith that is able to move mountains. The early Christians had that faith! They prayed to God that the mountain of Rome would be cast into the sea, and it was. One of the recurring themes in this book is the power of prayer, and perhaps nowhere is that power better illustrated than here in verse 8.

Verse 9 tells us what happened to the sea after that great burning mountain was cast into it. What does the sea represent? If the mountain is Rome, then the sea likely denotes the mass of humanity that made up Rome. Rome’s judgment would affect not only Rome, but would affect all who depended on Rome. It’s ultimate fall was followed by what we now call the dark ages.

Finally, we once again have an interesting historical comparison with Rome. (Recall our earlier comments about the uses of such historical comparisons.) Some commentators see a similarity between the flaming mountain cast into the sea and the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in August of A.D. 79, which was shortly after Revelation was written.

10 The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the fountains of water. 11 The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died of the water, because it was made bitter.

With the third trumpet, a great star falls and strikes the drinking water. Again, we are reminded of the Egyptian plagues and the water of the Nile becoming blood.

A star is often used in the Bible to indicate a divine visitation. The greatest visitation in Matthew 2:2 was accompanied by a “star in the east.” In Matthew 24:29, God’s coming in judgment against Jerusalem was described with the phrase “the stars will fall from heaven.” We



have also seen this image before in Revelation. The sixth seal in 6:13 was described as stars falling to earth. A falling star often depicts the judgment of God upon the earth.

But falling stars don't just remind us of divine visitations and divine judgments. They also remind us of Satan, about whom Jesus said in Luke 10:18, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." We are also reminded of Isaiah 14:12 — "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!"

We will soon see that although Satan plays a role in these events, he plays a role that has been scripted by God. Satan is a defeated enemy, and God will use Satan in the judgments against Rome. Also, we should recall that Satan's fall appears to have been due to his pride, and Rome was also guilty of great arrogance and pride.

Why is the star named Wormwood? Better yet, what is wormwood? Wormwood is a plant whose juice is very bitter. It was offered to the false prophets in Jeremiah 23:15 —

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets: "Behold, I will feed them with **wormwood**, and give them poisoned water to drink; for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone forth into all the land."

Barclay tells us that "wormwood always stood for the bitterness of the judgment of God on the disobedient." Hailey: "When men prefer the bitter waters of idolatry to the fountains of the living water, they will receive these bitter waters with the fatal consequences that follow."

12 The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

The fourth trumpet, as did the sixth seal, affects the sun, the moon, and the stars. As we have already discussed, such language is often used to depict impending judgments. In Isaiah 34:4-5 it is used to describe a judgment against Edom. In Isaiah 13:10, 13 it is used to describe the fall of Babylon. In Joel 2:10 it is used to describe a judgment against Judah.

What is the source of this imagery? The heavenly bodies testify to the greatness and power of God and to the comparative insignificance of man.

- **Psalm 19:1** The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.
- **Psalm 8:3-4** When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
- **Psalm 148:3** Praise ye him, sun and moon: praise him, all ye stars of light.
- **Romans 1:20** For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

Why then are they darkened? Because these symbols of joy are ashamed at the wickedness of men, and they refuse to shine their light on those who are rebelling against God. Their darkening is a symbolic picture of the total darkness that engulfs any society that turns its back on God and casts the word of God behind its back. And history tells us that before total darkness descends, there will always be the sound of warning trumpets. Can you hear them today?

13 Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice, as it flew in mid-heaven, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets which the three angels are about to blow!"

Where the KJV has “angel,” most translations have “eagle,” which appears to have better textual support. The expression “mid-heaven” means the zenith of the sky, that part where the sun is at midday. As Barclay says, “here we have a dramatic and eerie picture of an empty sky and a solitary eagle winging its way across its zenith, forewarning of the doom to come.” Phillips says that “a solitary eagle flying in midheaven, crying out in pity for the inhabitants of the earth, is out of its context bizarre but set as it is it is almost unbearably poignant.”

But the Greek word translated “eagle” can also mean “vulture.” For example, the same Greek word is found in Matthew 24:28, where in the KJV we read, “For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the **eagles** be gathered together,” and in the ESV we read, “Wherever the corpse is, there the **vultures** will gather.” Why do most translations use “eagle” here but use “vulture” in Matthew 24 for the same Greek word? Because it is not the same Greek word — one is singular and the other is plural. Eagles typically fly alone, while vultures typically do not. One rarely hears of a lone vulture, but if that was what was intended here then the image moves from being eerie to being incredibly eerie!

This imagery of trumpets and eagles may be pointing back to Hosea 8:1 — “Set the trumpet to thy mouth. He shall come as an eagle against the house of the LORD, because they have transgressed my covenant, and trespassed against my law.”

The seven seals we saw earlier contained warnings. The seven trumpets likewise contain warnings. Why? So no one can ever say to God, “I didn’t know.” And that is a message for us as well. We also have been given many warnings about the judgment to come. With so many people in this world starving for the word of God, I shudder to think what is in store for those who sit in worship assemblies of the Lord’s church week after week and yet refuse to obey the gospel. How many warnings have they failed to heed?

Recall our earlier discussion about “those who dwell upon the earth.” That phrase is used in this book to depict the ungodly. It is used in contrast to the saints who are pictured as “dwelling in heaven.” When

used in this manner, heaven and earth depict states rather than locations. We are reminded of Colossians 3:1-2 —

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

In a sense, God's people "dwell in heaven" even while still on the earth! Our minds and hearts are set on things above. Some day we will dwell there literally. For now, we dwell there spiritually.

## Chapter Nine

1 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit; 2 he opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft.

With the fifth trumpet, we see the first of the three woes proclaimed by the eagle in 8:13. The previous trumpets included terrors from nature, but we now begin to see terrors from *beyond* nature. This is also the first trumpet that *directly* affects man. The first four affected man only indirectly through his environment.

The star fallen from heaven is spoken of as "he" who has been given a key of the shaft of the bottomless pit; that is, he has been given authority over the pit. He opens the shaft of the bottomless pit and causes darkness to cover the sun. This fallen star most likely represents Satan. In Luke 10:18, Jesus said, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Lenski dissents from this view, arguing instead that the

star is simply the personification of the judgment that is coming from God. In my opinion, however, this fallen star is Satan.

The bottomless pit or the abyss is where the demons and the ungodly are consigned. We see a similar image in Isaiah 24:21-22 —

And it shall come to pass in that day, that the LORD shall punish the host of the high ones that are on high, and the kings of the earth upon the earth. And they shall be gathered together, as **prisoners are gathered in the pit**, and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall they be visited.

We are also reminded of Luke 8:30-31 —

Jesus asked him, saying, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion," because many demons had entered him. And they begged Him that He would not command them to go out into the **abyss**.

We know that Satan has been judged and cast out. (John 12:31, 16:11) And yet, Satan is called the ruler of this world. (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11) He is called the prince of the power of the air. (Ephesians 2:2) And we are told that Satan has the power of death. (Hebrews 2:14) Where did Satan get this power?

Just as God used Babylon to judge Judah, Assyria to judge Israel, Babylon to judge Assyria, Cyrus to judge Babylon, and Rome to judge Jerusalem, God is using Satan here in his judgment of Rome. Satan is a defeated enemy! Satan is doing what God commands! If Satan has any power, it is power granted him by God. Satan is on a leash!

Look at verse 1. It says that Satan "was *given* the key of the shaft of the bottomless pit." Satan was permitted to open that pit, but he could not have done so absent that permission from God. Satan does not even have the key to his own house unless God gives it to him!

A dark cloud of smoke is seen rising from the pit to darken the sky. This image reminds us of 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 —

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God.

Satan blinds people's minds to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel. The smoke from the pit most likely depicts the spiritual and moral blindness that Satan causes. Note that this is a punishment from God. Moral and spiritual blindness is a disease that destroys the heart of a person or a nation. The Bible often depicts such a condition as a punishment from God:

- **Romans 1:24–28** Wherefore **God also gave them up** to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. For this cause **God gave them up** unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, **God gave them over** to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.
- **2 Thessalonians 2:11-12** And for this cause **God shall send them strong delusion**, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

What we see here is a vivid picture of moral and spiritual decay. Does this fit with what happened to Rome? According to Gibbon one of the four primary reasons behind the eventual collapse of the Roman empire was inner decadence.

Francis Schaeffer wrote the following in this regard:

As the Empire ground down, the decadent Romans were given to a thirst for violence and a gratification of the senses... . . . Apathy was the chief mark of the late Empire... . As the Roman economy slumped lower and lower, burdened with an aggravated inflation and a costly government, authoritarianism increased to counter the apathy. Since work was no longer done voluntarily, it was brought increasingly under the authority of the state, and freedoms were lost. For example, laws were passed binding small farmers to their land. So, because of the general apathy and its results, and because of oppressive control, few thought the old civilization worth saving. Rome did not fall because of external forces such as the invasion by the barbarians. Rome had no sufficient inward base; the barbarians only completed the breakdown—and Rome gradually became a ruin.

The lowering of moral standards contributed directly to the decline and fall of the Roman empire. Schaeffer says that Rome fell because it did not have a sufficient inner base. Daniel told us the same thing 600 years earlier in Daniel 2:41-42 when he described the inner weakness of the yet future Roman empire —

And as you saw the feet and toes partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the firmness of iron shall be in it, just as you saw iron mixed with the miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were partly iron and partly clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle.

Also, recall Proverbs 14:34 — “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.” What does this all say to us today? Is the moral base of our country growing stronger or is it weakening? Are we being exalted by righteousness? Or are we suffering under the reproach of sin? As we study the judgment of Rome, we should pause to notice the growing similarities between Rome and our own country,

from the sexual promiscuity to the glorification of violence and greed. Rome began as an instrument for God to use in the proclamation of the gospel, as did our own country. We had a similar beginning in the plan of God. Will we face a similar end? Perhaps our study of warning trumpets is more relevant than we would care to think.

3 Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth; 4 they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads; 5 they were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man. 6 And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them. 7 In appearance the locusts were like horses arrayed for battle; on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, 8 their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; 9 they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. 10 They have tails like scorpions, and stings, and their power of hurting men for five months lies in their tails. 11 They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit; his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon. 12 The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

From the abyss comes a terrible invasion of locusts. Barclay writes: "The devastation locusts can inflict and the terror they can cause is



well-nigh incredible. All through the Old Testament the locust is the symbol of destruction; and the most vivid and terrible description of them and of their destructiveness is in the first two chapters of Joel. ... [Those] two chapters of Joel should be read in full and set beside the description in Revelation."

Barclay, referring to Driver's commentary on Joel, sets out the following facts about locusts and locust invasions:

The locusts breed in desert places and invade the cultivated lands for food. They may be about two inches in length, with a wing span of four to five inches. ... They will travel in a column a hundred feet deep and as much as four miles long. When such a cloud of locusts appears, it is as if there had been an eclipse of the sun and even great buildings less than two hundred feet away cannot be seen.

The destruction they cause is beyond belief. When they have left an area, not a blade of grass is to be seen; the trees are stripped of their bark. Land where the locusts have settled looks as if it had been scorched with a bush fire; not one single living thing is left...

When they move, they move inexorably on like an army with leaders. People have dug trenches, lit fires, and even fired cannon in an attempt to stop them but without success; they come on in a steady column which climbs hills, enters houses and leaves scorched earth behind.

But these locusts are not ordinary locusts. Ordinary locusts attack vegetation, but these locusts are specifically told to attack men instead. In fact, in verse 4 they are instructed *not* to attack vegetation, but rather to attack only those men who have not received the seal on their foreheads.

Who is behind this terrible judgment? Verses 2-3 tell us that the locusts come up out of the pit, and verse 11 tells us that their king is the

angel of the pit. His name in verse 11 means destroyer in both Greek and Hebrew. That sounds like Satan.

And yet in verse 1 we see that a trumpet from *heaven* starts everything. So who is behind this? God or Satan? The answer is that God is behind it because it is a judgment against Rome. Satan is involved, however. God is using Satan to punish Rome, just as he will one day use Satan to punish everyone who is ungodly. Satan is seen here as God's instrument of punishment and judgment.

A common misconception today is that God and Satan are somehow locked in a battle of good versus evil, the outcome of which is uncertain. That is not the case at all. Satan is a created being, and Satan is used by God when and how God sees fit. Satan is just one more tool that God uses in his judgment of the Roman empire.

Jesus told us in John 12:31-32 that Satan was defeated at the cross.

Now is the judgment of this world, now shall  
the ruler of this world be cast out; and I,  
when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw  
all men to myself.

Jesus' death judged the world, not Jesus. Jesus' death defeated Satan, not Jesus. Jesus' death draws, not repels, all men. Satan was defeated by an event that he probably, at least for a moment, thought was going to be his greatest triumph. Jesus was not what the Jews expected. I don't think Jesus was what Satan expected either!

There is much confusion about Satan in the world today. Satan is not omnipotent. Satan is not omnipresent. Satan has limitations. In fact, verse 5 tells us that Satan and his agents do not have unlimited power even over evil men! That day may come, but it has not yet come — and is there any better description of Hell than the place where God at last turns his back on the ungodly and allows Satan free reign to do whatsoever he wills? As bad as this situation now is for Rome, it is not that bad yet.

This fifth trumpet brings torment but not death. The torment it brings, however, is so extreme that those afflicted seek death. Gallus

said, “Worse than any wound is to wish to die and yet not be able to do so.” And recall Job 3:20-22 —

Wherefore is light given to him that is in misery, and life unto the bitter in soul; Which long for death, but it cometh not; and dig for it more than for hid treasures; Which rejoice exceedingly, and are glad, when they can find the grave?

The reference to scorpions in this context reminds us of Luke 10:19 — “Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you.” And so once again, as we saw with faith to move mountains, Revelation sheds some interesting light on a difficult passage from the gospels.

What do the 5 months in verse 5 depict? Some commentators say that this is the usual duration of a locust plague or the length of the dry season when the locusts generally came. Others tell us that 5 months is the average lifespan of a locust so that what we have here is one generation of locusts. Bullinger says that the number 5 depicts the grace of God in the Bible, in which case it may symbolize those who are marked during this time and are not the target of this judgment. (His case for the link between grace and the number 5 is not very good, however.) Swete thinks the number is used simply to give definiteness to the picture.

The locusts are described in terms that are both beautiful and terrifying. Can something from Satan’s bottomless pit be beautiful? Decadence often hides its destructive power with a thin veneer of beauty. Its looks attractive to the outer man while it devours the inner man with its “teeth of a lion” as in verse 8. Recall 1 Peter 5:8 —

Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour.

And remember 2 Corinthians 11:14 —

For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

Sin is most dangerous when we don't recognize it as such. Recall Hebrews 3:12-13 — “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the **deceitfulness** of sin.”

Verse 4 gives us more evidence that God is in control of this judgment. It says that those sealed with the mark of God in Chapter 7 in anticipation of the tribulation were not harmed. Recall our earlier comments about the vast difference between suffering with the guilty and suffering because you are guilty. The decadence and moral decay of Rome was not a punishment against God's people but it did affect God's people. Many lost their lives because of it. They were harmed physically, but not spiritually.

## Revelation — Lesson 13

### Revelation 9:3-12 Continued...

The crowns on the locusts in verse 7 are from the same Greek word (*stephanos*) that was used to describe the crown of victory worn by the rider on the white horse in Chapter 6. As before, this victory crown denotes the defeat of Rome by a conquering invader.

The hair like a woman's in verse 8 is an intriguing addition to the picture that has led to much speculation in the commentaries. Some say having both male and female features means that the judgments would affect both genders. Others say that the long hair indicates that they are in subjection to their master, Satan. (See 1 Corinthians 11:14-15.)

John reminds us often in these descriptions that what we are reading is symbolic and figurative. They have tails *like unto* scorpions. He uses "as" six times — *as* it were crowns of gold, *as* men's faces, *as* the hair of women, *as* the teeth of lions, *as* it were breastplates of iron, and *as* the sound of chariots.

The king of the locusts is called in Hebrew Abaddon and in Greek Apollyon. Abaddon is the Hebrew word for destruction, and Apollyon in Greek means "the destroyer." This is the only place in the New Testament where either name is found. Some commentators have noted the similarity between the Greek name Apollyon and the name of the Greek god Apollo. Domitian claimed that he was divine by virtue of being an incarnation of Apollo.

13 Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, 14 saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." 15 So the four angels were released, who had been held

ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of mankind. 16 The number of the troops of cavalry was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. 17 And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire and of sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur issued from their mouths. 18 By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur issuing from their mouths. 19 For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, with heads, and by means of them they wound.

The sixth trumpet depicts warfare as an instrument of God's judgment. Barclay: "This is a passage whose imagery is mysterious and whose details no one has ever been able fully to explain."

The four angels appear to represent the armies that God would use against Rome. That the angels are released by a voice from the altar tells us that they are under God's control and direction. It has been said that war made Rome. God is saying here that war will also unmake Rome. Gibbon reminds us that two of the primary reasons for the fall of Rome were external invasion and inner strife, which included civil war.

Why *four* angels? As we know, four is the number of creation, but I think something more particular is in mind here. One reason that four is the number of creation is that there are four primary compass directions. The use of four angels here likely is intended to show that God will come at Rome from every direction. They feared an invasion from the east; they should fear invasions from every direction!

Why are they pictured as being allowed to cross the Euphrates river? The Euphrates was the ideal boundary for the territory of Israel.

(Genesis 15:18) Crossing the Euphrates was a vivid picture from the Old Testament that depicted the threat of military power. The Assyrians and Babylonians crossed the Euphrates river to attack the Jews. In Isaiah 7:20 and Isaiah 8:7–8, the river is used to depict military might. As for Rome, the warriors they most dreaded at this time were the Parthian cavalry that came from beyond the Euphrates.

The threat is also enforced by the huge number of invading horsemen that are seen. “Twice ten thousand times ten thousand” is 200 million. This vast number increases the atmosphere of terror and emphasizes the great power that God has at his disposal. Similar imagery is used in Ezekiel 38 and 39 with regard to Gog and Magog. (We will discuss those chapters later in our study.)

As before, only a third is killed; that is, this judgment at first is only partial and allows for repentance. We will be told in verse 21 whether anyone heeds the warning and repents.

Why are the horses described in this vivid and frightening way? It increases the level of terror. The intent is to frighten. Joel 2:4–11 uses similar language in depicting the Babylonians invading Judah. Also, Habakkuk 1:8 uses similar language with regard to Chaldean horsemen (fiercer than evening wolves). In the Old Testament such pictures were intended to frighten and did not literally occur. We have the same situation here.

Is this language to be taken literally? No, even though many argue otherwise and have developed elaborate theories to explain it. But such theories are always inconsistent, taking some things literally and others things figuratively. One writer estimates that in regular formation 200 million soldiers would make a column one mile wide and 85 miles long! Those who pride themselves on taking each number in Revelation literally have a lot of trouble doing so with this number! Even so, Hal Lindsey, says this army depicts a *literal* army of 200,000,000 Chinese invaders, yet he says that the horses represent mobilized ballistic missile launchers. No one, not even him, takes everything in this book literally!

20 The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot either see or hear or walk; 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts.

These early judgments have been partial and have allowed for repentance. Those remaining alive, however, do not repent but instead continue with their idolatry and murder. Like the Sodomites they continued, even after being blinded by God, to look for a door to commit iniquity. The trumpets had not been able to convince them to repent. Later judgments will not give them any opportunity to repent.

As these judgments become increasingly severe, it would be natural to think that at some point the remainder of mankind would wake up and heed the warning, but that did not happen then, and it does not happen now. Without expressing an opinion as to whether the events of 9-11 were a divine trumpet call for us, I am sure you recall how the media in the aftermath of those events announced that we had been changed forever and would never again be as superficial and shallow as we were before those events. That great change was not very long lasting! Never underestimate the depth of our shallowness!

Rome did not repent, but rather continued to worship demons and idols, and it continued to commit murder, sorcery, immorality, and theft. As for murder, we know from Numbers 35:33 that “blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.” When I read that I wonder about our own country and its abortion industry, with the current administration (while simultaneously trumpeting our “values” at every opportunity!) even leaving the door open to someday create disposable embryos for medical spare parts! I am also reminded of Isaiah 59:7 — “Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to



shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths.”

The word translated “sorceries” occurs only here and in Galatians 5:20, where it is translated “witchcraft” in the KJV. It indicates the use of drugs and incantations during an appeal to occult powers.

The question at this point is how will this unrelenting, powerful enemy ever be stopped? These judgments had an effect on Rome that was similar to the effect the plagues had on Pharaoh — he hardened his heart and increased his persecutions of God’s people.

God’s people need assurance and comfort, and the interlude that follows will provide just that.

## Chapter Ten

Between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals, John was shown two visions intended to give comfort and assurance to the saints: the sealing of the saints prior to the judgment, and the rejoicing of the victorious saints following the judgment.

Now at the conclusion of the second woe and between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets, there is again an interlude intended to provide comfort and assurance to the saints. This interlude continues from 10:1 through 11:14. The seventh trumpet will sound in 11:15.

1 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. 2 He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, 3 and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring;

when he called out, the seven thunders  
sounded.

This angel is a very high ranking representative of God. Some commentators think that this angel may even depict Christ, and they point for support to the similar description of Christ in 1:12-16. Of course, we know that Christ is not an angel since angels are created beings and Christ is not a created being, but rather is the one who created all things. (Colossians 1:16)

But could Christ ever properly be called an angel? There is some evidence that “the Angel of the Lord” frequently mentioned in the Old Testament was really Jesus preincarnate — what is often called a “Christophany” or preincarnate appearance of Christ. For example, the Angel of the Lord told Hagar in Genesis 16:10, “I will so greatly multiply your descendents that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” Later in verse 13, Hagar remarked, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” Who appeared to Moses in the burning bush? The Angel of the Lord (Exodus 3:2) and God (Exodus 3:4). See also Judges 6:11-14 and Judges 13:21-22.

The ministry of this Angel in the Old Testament is similar to that of Christ’s: The Angel of the Lord reveals God’s word in Exodus 3. He calls leaders in Judges 13. He is a deliverer in Exodus 14 and Judges 6. He is a protector in Psalm 34. He is an intercessor in Zechariah 1. He is an advocate in Zechariah 3. He confirms God’s covenant in Genesis 22. He is a comforter in Genesis 16. (Compare Matthew 11:28.)

Thus, although Jesus is not an angel, the term “angel” (which simply means messenger) may be used here to describe Jesus. However, the angel here is said to be “another” angel, which would seem to identify it with the other angels we have seen in this book. I also think it unlikely that this book, which is so opposed to the idolatrous worship of created beings would use the word “angel” to describe Christ. See, also, Revelation 19:10 — “And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testi-

mony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." In my opinion, this angel is not Christ; this angel is an angel.

That this angel stands on both sea and land indicates that he has or that he represents one who has total authority and great power. The entire description indicates he has a very special mission of unusual importance. For example, verse 1 tells us he is wrapped in a cloud. Of the 25 times the word "cloud" occurs in the New Testament, in all but three it is used in relation to deity or a divine appearance, often in judgment. This angel is clothed with a divine mission.

Only here and in 4:3 does the word "rainbow" (Greek *iris*) occur in the Bible. The word "bow" occurs in the Old Testament in Genesis 9 with the establishment of the covenant following the flood, and in Ezekiel 1:28 when the prophet saw the throne of God. Again, we see that this angel is on a divine mission of special importance.

What is the little scroll or little book? In Greek, the phrase "little book" is just one word (*biblaridion*) and could be translated "booklet." Verse 2 tells us two important things about this book — it is small, and it is open. That it is small most likely indicates that it contains only one aspect of God's plan, and that it is open means that John can read it and understand it and that what it contains has already been put into action. The booklet has not been sealed.

This little scroll is the commission to John. It represents both the message John is to relate and his responsibility to relate that message. By eating the book later in verse 9, John accepts that responsibility. Ezekiel is also pictured as eating a book in Ezekiel 2:8 and Ezekiel 3:3.

The angel calls out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When God warned the wicked in Jeremiah 25:30, he did so with a great roar. When God called his children in Hosea 11:10, he did so with the roar of a lion. In Joel 3:16, God roared so that the heavens and the earth shook. This angel wants everyone's attention! He has a message from God! That message must be heard and heeded by all.

What are the seven thunders? Recall that thunder and earthquakes often accompany God's judgments. Thunder was heard during the

plague of hail in Egypt (Exodus 9:23), and it accompanied the appearance of the Lord at Sinai (Exodus 19:16, 20:18). God used thunder as a weapon against the Philistines in 1 Samuel 7:10 —

And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel.

And Job perhaps put it best in 26:14 — “But the thunder of his power who can understand?”

Why are there *seven* thunders? Some surmise it may be an allusion back to Psalm 29, in which David describes seven voices of God, and about one of which he writes, “The voice of the LORD is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the LORD is upon many waters.” Others surmise that the seven thunders are the seven bowls that we will see poured out after the seventh trumpet sounds. We will see another idea in just a moment when we study verses 4-7. In any event, we know now what the seven thunders depict in a general sense because we understand what the symbols mean — God’s perfect (*seven*) judgment (*thunder*)!

4 And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.” 5 And the angel whom I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven 6 and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there should be no more delay, 7 but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.

The pronouncement of judgment by the seven thunders was not to be revealed at this time. John is told *not* to write down what they said. For some reason, God chose not to reveal everything about the coming judgment against Rome at this time. The details concealed here may have been revealed later in the book but we cannot know for sure, and as you can imagine there has been *much* speculation.

If in fact the judgment of the seven thunders was never revealed to us, then the situation reminds us of 2 Corinthians 12:4 where Paul said that during his trip to heaven he had heard things that it was not lawful for a man to utter. Despite what the humanists may tell us, some things are unknown and unknowable to mankind.

Perhaps the purpose of the seven thunders is to assure Christians that God has unrevealed weapons in his arsenal that will be used when and if needed to take care of future enemies of his people, but that are not needed to take care of Rome. God can, so to speak, take care of mighty Rome with one hand tied behind his back! This view would also explain why John was told to seal up this part of what he saw and heard. That is, it was to be sealed up for the same reason that Daniel was given in Daniel 8:26 — “seal up the vision, for it pertains to many days hence.” It is also possible that the seven thunders depict the final judgment of the world that is still yet to come, which again would explain why it was sealed up at this time. With each of these possibilities, we are reminded of the timeframe for this book — it concerns things that were shortly to come to pass (1:1, 1:3, 22:6, 22:10).

What does the angel do next? First, the angel lifts his right hand. This then, as now, was done when taking an oath. The raised hand signifies that what is being done or said is taking place in full view of Heaven and emphasizes the solemn and momentous nature of what is being said. Hailey: “A more solemn oath could not be imagined as the angel swears by the eternity and omnipotence of God.”

And what does the angel swear? The angels swears that there would be no more *chronos* — which either means no more time or no more delay. Those who say this book points to the end of the world understandably prefer that *chronos* mean time, but the Greek scholars (Vine, Arndt, Gingrich, Vincent) tell us it means delay. This interpretation

also fits perfectly with the context and the timeframe given elsewhere in the book. It also fits perfectly (as we will soon see) with what the angels actually says, and it fits perfectly with the description of the seventh trumpet in 11:14 — “behold, the third woe cometh quickly.”

Thus, this mighty angel stands on earth and sea, raises his right hand, and swears before God that there will be no more delay. In the seventh trumpet and the seven bowls that follow, the complete judgment of God against Rome will be fulfilled. What right does anyone have to insert a delay of 2000 years and counting? And what would such a delay say about this solemn oath appealing to the eternity and power of God and proclaiming no more delay?

What else does the angel say? Look at verse 7 — “but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.” What is this mystery of God that was announced to the prophets?

As we discussed earlier, a mystery in the Bible is usually something that was formerly not understood but that has now been revealed. Which mystery is in view here?

One possibility is that this mystery concerns the conflict of the church with Rome, the terrors ahead for the church, and the church’s ultimate victory over Rome. A mystery is something unexpected and unknown to men unless it is revealed by God — and the triumph of the church over the mighty Roman empire certainly fits that description! But was that mystery ever told to the prophets? Yes. Daniel wrote all about it 600 years earlier.

Another possibility takes a *broader* view of the mystery, a term that is used elsewhere in the Bible to speak of God’s plan of redemption through Jesus Christ —

- **Ephesians 1:9-12** Having made known unto us the **mystery** of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ,

both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.

- **Ephesians 3:8-12** Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the **mystery**, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.
- **1 Corinthians 2:7-8** But we speak the wisdom of God in a **mystery**, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.
- **Colossians 1:25-27** Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; Even the **mystery** which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

We often say that Jesus can return at any time, and that is certainly true, but has that always been true? From the moment he ascended into Heaven in Acts 1 has it been true that he could return at any time? No. Jesus himself told them things in Acts 1:8 that had not yet happened, and he could not return until they did. Jesus had foretold the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 in Matthew 24, and he could not return until that event transpired. The Old Testament contained prophecies of things that had not yet come to pass in Acts 1, and Christ could not return until they did. For example, the eternal king-

dom that Daniel wrote about was not established until later in Acts 2. Jesus could not return to claim a kingdom that did not yet exist.

How about *after* Acts 2? Could Jesus have returned to claim his own on the day *after* Pentecost? No, not yet. Daniel also wrote about certain Roman kings (as we will see later in our studies of this book), and those kings had not yet come to power. (Paul also wrote about one of them he called the son of perdition in 2 Thessalonians 2:3.) In short, Jesus could not come again until *all* that was written about in the prophets that was to occur on this earth had been fulfilled — and that happened (in my opinion) after Domitian was murdered near the end of the first century. (See Daniel 7:26.) It was sometime after that event (perhaps very shortly after depending on how we interpret the judgments in this book) that the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, was finally and totally fulfilled. From that point on, Jesus could return at any time to claim his own.

Modern commentators like to say that the New Testament writers all thought Jesus was about to come back immediately, but they were obviously mistaken since he did not. But that is not what they thought at all! In fact, Paul said just the *opposite* in 2 Thessalonians 2:2-4 —

That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: **for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first**, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.

Paul knew that Jesus could not return until all had been fulfilled, and that is what he told those Thessalonians who *mistakenly* thought Christ's return was imminent.

Talk about a message of comfort! Talk about a message of victory! This mighty angel is swearing that the mystery of God to redeem the world through Jesus Christ, which was "foreordained before the foun-



dation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20), would be finally and completely fulfilled without delay. From that point, no one could ever again say (as did Paul) "that day shall not come *except*," but rather could say "that day can come at *any* time!"

## Revelation — Lesson 14

Our handout this week is a summary of what we discussed near the end of class last week. As you recall, the mighty angel who opens Chapter 10, stands on sea and land, raises his right hand, and swears a solemn oath that that “there should be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.” We discussed the meaning of “mystery” in that statement, and I proposed a broad understanding of the term that includes the entire scheme of redemption from A to Z, where A started before creation and Z ends with the fulfillment of the prophecies about Rome.

Why choose that particular Z as our ending point? Because that event (whenever we date it) marks the final fulfillment of every prophecy that had to be fulfilled before Jesus could return again. Paul told us as much in 2 Thessalonians 2:2-4 when he wrote, “for that day shall not come, **except** there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition.”

A question left open on the handout is whether that dividing line occurred with the death of the evil emperor Domitian in A.D. 96 or with the sacking of Rome and the later fall of Rome in the fifth century (or perhaps some other event regarding Rome). If you had asked me that question when I first taught this class back in 1991, I would have told you it was fall of Rome in A.D. 476. Today, I am leaning more toward the fall of Domitian in A.D. 96. Here is how that latter event was described by the prophet Daniel in Daniel 7:23-27 —

Thus he said, The fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces. And the ten horns out of this kingdom are ten kings that shall arise: and another shall rise after them; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings. And he shall speak great

words against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time. **But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end. And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.**

We will consider this question much more closely as we proceed through the remainder of the book.

10:8 Then the voice which I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll which is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” 9 So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll; and he said to me, “Take it and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth.” 10 And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it; it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. 11 And I was told, “You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.”

John is not given the book, but instead he is told to take it. This distinction emphasizes his commitment to undertake the responsibility of recording and presenting God’s message. This part of the vision reminds us of Jeremiah 15:16 (“Your words were found, and I ate them”) and of Ezekiel 2:8 - 3:3 —

“But you, son of man, hear what I say to you.  
Do not be rebellious like that rebellious

house; open your mouth and eat what I give you." Now when I looked, there was a hand stretched out to me; and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. Then He spread it before me; and there was writing on the inside and on the outside, and written on it were lamentations and mourning and woe. Moreover He said to me, "Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and He caused me to eat that scroll. And He said to me, "Son of man, feed your belly, and fill your stomach with this scroll that I give you." So I ate, and it was in my mouth like honey in sweetness.

As did Jeremiah and Ezekiel, John eats the book to signify his acceptance of this responsibility. He makes the message a part of himself.

The scroll was bitter. Why? Because it contained some bad news — the church would suffer great persecution. It was also bitter for John to prophesy of the destruction that would befall the wicked world.

But, the scroll was also sweet. The church would ultimately triumph over Rome, and, just as Daniel had foretold, the eternal kingdom of God would sweep away all the kingdoms of this world.

Verse 11 tells us that John would prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings. Except for "kings" in place of "tribes," these are the same categories from which the saints were purchased in 5:9. How does the language in verse 11 of *peoples* and *nations* fit with the notion that this book is largely about a *single* nation, Rome?

The Roman empire was composed of many peoples and nations and tongues and kings. Rome at various times in its history conquered and thus included the Sabines, the Etruscans, the Sicilians, the Berber tribes of North Africa, the Illirians, Carthage, Macedonia, Syria, Judea, Spain, Gaul, Egypt, much of what is now Great Britain, the Dacians, Lybia, and the Parthians. That list is made up of many peoples and nations and tongues and kings!

At the end of class last week, a question was asked about whether the little book eaten by John could have been the book of Revelation itself, or rather a symbolic depiction of the book since John is seeing it in a vision. It is possible. What little we know about the little book fits well — both are revelations given by God to John, both were “eaten” by John in the sense that John was given the responsibility to convey their contents, both contained things that were bitter and things that were sweet. Another possibility is that the little scroll is a summary of the vision. This view fits well with the description of the book as “little,” and it fits well with the following chapter, which many see as a summary of the remainder of the book.



## Chapter Eleven

1 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told: “Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, 2 but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for

forty-two months. 3 And I will grant my two witnesses power to prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.” 4 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands which stand before the Lord of the earth.

Barclay: “It has been said that [Chapter 11] is at one and the same time the most difficult and the most important chapter in Revelation.” (I’m not certain I agree with either assessment.)

Chapter 11 begins by considering the question of what was to become of the faithful servants of God during these great trials and judgments. And we see yet another description of this group — this time as a measured temple of worshipers, separated from the world and under God’s protection.

What is the purpose of the measuring rod? In Ezekiel’s vision of the restored temple, a measuring rod was used to make a separation between what is holy and what is common. Recall Ezekiel 42:19–20 —

Then he turned to the west side and measured, five hundred cubits by the **measuring reed**. He measured it on the four sides. It had a wall around it, five hundred cubits long and five hundred cubits broad, **to make a separation between the holy and the common.**

We are also reminded of Zechariah 2:1-5 —

I lifted up mine eyes again, and looked, and behold a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then said I, Whither goest thou? And he said unto me, **To measure Jerusalem**, to see what is the breadth thereof, and what is the length thereof. And, behold, the angel that talked with me went forth, and another angel went out to meet him, And said unto him, Run, speak to this young man, saying, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein: For I, saith the LORD, will be unto

her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her.

The separation between the holy and the profane also reminds us of 2 Corinthians 6:17-18 —

Wherefore **come out from among them, and be ye separate**, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

What is John told to measure? The temple, the altar, and those who worship there. The word for temple here indicates the inner sanctuary where only priests were allowed. It is not the Greek word denoting the entire temple with all of its buildings, courts, and porches.

Which temple is John to measure? Is it the Jewish temple in Jerusalem? Some commentators consider this verse evidence that the book was written before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But we must remember that John is seeing a vision, and objects can exist in a vision whether or not they exist on earth. Because so much of John's imagery has come from the Old Testament, it is very possible that the temple he sees here is the sanctuary of the Old Testament tabernacle. That sanctuary had only one court, and, as Hebrews tells us, was a type of the church.

This temple is the church. Recall Paul's description of the church in Ephesians 2:18-22 —

For through him we both have **access by one Spirit unto the Father**. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto **an holy temple** in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an **habitation of God** through the Spirit.

All Christians are now priests (Revelation 1:6). We all have access to the inner sanctuary. As we just read in Ephesians, God's place of habitation is now among men. Recall 1 Peter 2: 5 — "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ."

The church was sealed in 7:3, the church was numbered in 7:4, and now the church is measured in Chapter 11. Does God care what happens to the church? Absolutely! These images show God taking great interest in and care of his church. He marks them, he numbers them, he measures them. And God's measurement is the only one that matters. It does not matter how the world measures us, and it does not matter how we measure ourselves. What matters is how God measures us. If we fall short on his scale, it matters not how we fall on the scales of men.

What is the court in verse 2? The ancient tabernacle had one court (Exodus 27:9). Solomon's temple had an inner court (1 Kings 6:36), an outer court (1 Kings 7:12), a court for the priests (2 Chronicles 4:9), and an upper court (Jeremiah 36:10). Herod's temple also had multiple courts, with the great court eventually being called the court of the Gentiles because it was open to everyone.

The temple in John's vision has only one court as far as we are told, and John is told *not* to measure that court — that is, not to protect it or separate it from what was common. The Greek word translated "leave that out" in verse 2 can literally mean to cast out by force.

What is represented by this outer court? One popular view is that the measured temple denotes the faithful in the church, and the outer court denotes those who prove unfaithful and who compromise with the world by following the doctrines of Balaam, Jezebel, and the Nicolaitans. That is possible, but it is also possible that the measured temple denotes that spiritual part of a Christian's life that is hidden with God in Christ and that in this book is viewed as already residing in Heaven, and the outer court denotes the physical life of the Christian under Roman persecution, something that would be temporary both from the standpoint of Rome and from the standpoint of our limited time here on earth. I favor this second view because it seems



to me that Revelation has already made the division between the faithful and the faithless in the church, with the latter already being place firmly in Rome's camp as those who dwell upon the earth.

God is telling the church that it will soon undergo a period of intense persecution but that it will be sustained. Rome will be allowed to trample the church for awhile but it will not be allowed to destroy its heart; that is, its inner sanctuary.

God is telling the church that he will not permit it to be annihilated, and that must have been a real fear for Christians at this time. How could the church withstand mighty Rome? It must have appeared to many as if the church would soon be completely wiped out.

Do we have similar fears today? It is easy to become discouraged when we look at the state of the Lord's church today in a world that seems to be in free fall, and sometimes seems to be carrying the church down with it. "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) Yes — but only if we are faithful and only if we pass that faith on to others through our faithful proclamation of the gospel. We should not be discouraged because we are in the minority because God's people have *always* been a minority on this earth except for two times — just after creation and just after the flood. But if we ever stop proclaiming the word of God to a lost and hostile world, then we have good cause to be discouraged, and the answer to Jesus' question in Luke 18:8 may be "no."

Why was the trampling to last 42 months? This period of time is the same as 1260 days (42 months of 30 days each) and is also found in Revelation 12:6 where it is also called "time, times and half a time" (Revelation 12:14); that is, three and one half years (12 months times 3 years plus 6 additional months).

As elsewhere in Revelation, this time period should not be interpreted literally but instead is used to symbolize a state of affairs. To determine what state of affairs is depicted, we should first consider what all that symbol is used to describe:

- It is the period during which the holy city will be trampled in 11:2.
- It is the period during which the witnesses will prophecy in 11:3.
- It is the period during which the woman will be nourished in the wilderness in 12:6, 14.
- It is the duration of the beast's authority in 13:5.
- In Daniel 7:25 and 12:7 it is the period of time during which the little horn will persecute God's people.

We haven't studied all of those texts yet, but in each of them the symbol  $3\frac{1}{2}$  depicts a period of time during which God's people will be persecuted yet sustained. That is, the symbol depicts a temporary persecution.

Why is 42 months used to depict a temporary persecution? We could ask the same question about 1260 days. The solution appears when we note that 42 months and 1260 days are each equal to  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years, which is a broken 7.

Why not always use  $3\frac{1}{2}$  years? Why are 42 *months* used sometimes, and 1260 *days* used at other times? It may be that going from years to months and even to days makes the same time period look even more temporary. Others say that days are used here to denote the day to day activities of the two servants as they prophesy about God.

We have seen the number 7 used many times in this book to denote something that is perfect and total. In fact, this book is constructed around the number 7 — the letters to the 7 churches, the 7 seals, the 7 trumpets, the 7 thunders, the 7 bowls of the God's wrath. So it is not surprising to discover that some of the most important symbols in this book are keyed to the number 7. Later we will see 666, which is one such symbol. Here we see another such symbol,  $3\frac{1}{2}$ .

If God's judgment of Rome is a 7, then Rome's persecution of the church is just a  $3\frac{1}{2}$ . Isn't that a beautiful symbol? Rome can't pour 7

bowls of wrath on the church! Rome doesn't have 7 of anything to use as a weapon against the church!

By saying that the persecution will last 3½ years, God is saying that the persecution is temporary. He is not giving them a specific date 3½ years later when it will end. (Although we should pause to note that at least once God used the symbolic 3½ for the duration of a literal event — the 3½ year drought brought about by the prayer of Elijah discussed in James 5:17.)

Who are the two witnesses? Many different answers have been proposed to that question, including Moses and Elijah or Enoch and Elijah. Some say they denote the Old and New Testaments, while others say they denote the prophets and the apostles. Others say that the two witnesses are the apostles and the Holy Spirit, and they point to John 15:26 for support —

But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.

In my opinion, the two witnesses once again describe the church. But you sound like a broken record! Can this symbol really be yet another symbol for the church? It is starting to seem like nearly every symbol we come to somehow describes the church! Exactly! And that is how it seemed to its first century audience as well. They were left with precisely the impression that God wanted them to have — the church is so important to God and so loved by God that he is constantly looking at it and caring for it and thinking about it! Jesus is in love with his church! If you ever doubt that, read Revelation!

But on what basis can say that the two witnesses denote the church? In verse 4, they are called two olive trees and two lampstands. In Zechariah 4 two olive trees are used to denote two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth. They are Zerubbabel of the royal line and Joshua, a priest. What is it that combines both the priesthood and royalty? The church is a royal priesthood. (1 Peter 2:9)

The church is a kingdom of priests. (Revelation 1:6) And as for the lampstands, remember that the seven churches in Chapters 2 and 3 were depicted as golden lampstands.

But why are there *two* witnesses? Although there are many different symbols for the church in this book, each shows us the church from a different perspective. Here the focus is on the testimony of the church. These two witnesses testify, and two is the number of confirmed testimony.

- **John 8:17** It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true.
- **Deuteronomy 17:6** At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.
- **John 5:31–32** If I bear witness to myself, my testimony is not true; there is another who bears witness to me, and I know that the testimony which he bears to me is true.
- **Matthew 18:16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.
- **Luke 10:1** After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come.
- **1 Timothy 5:19** Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.

Why do the two witnesses prophecy in sackcloth? Sackcloth was a coarse fabric woven from goat or camel hair, and it was worn at times of mourning or penitence. It was also the characteristic attire of the Old Testament prophets.

What is very clear in this depiction is that the church continued to operate even while being persecuted. Rome may have trampled the church, but Rome was not able to stop the church. The proclamation of the gospel continued despite Rome's best efforts to stamp it out.

Once again, we have a lesson for the church today. God is depending on his church to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. He has given us that great commission, and he expects us to do it. If we do not do it, then it will not be done. Even in the darkest hours of persecution, God expected the church to continue its mission — and it did. What excuse will we have if we are ever found to have failed in that mission? If they preached Christ in the face of death, then how will God respond if we fail to preach Christ in the face of ridicule?

To sum up, so far in Chapter 11, John has been told to measure the temple of God, and two witnesses have been sent out to prophecy for 3½ years. The message in a nutshell is that the church is going to be persecuted but that persecution will be temporary. Although Rome will trample the church for a short time, the spiritual strength of the church will not be harmed.

5 And if any one would harm them, fire pours out from their mouth and consumes their foes; if any one would harm them, thus he is doomed to be killed. 6 They have power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood, and to smite the earth with every plague, as often as they desire. 7 And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit will make war upon them and conquer them and kill them, 8 and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which is allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.

The two witnesses are at first pictured as unstoppable. Anyone who harms them is doomed to be killed. They, like Elijah and Elisha, have the power to shut the sky that no rain may fall. They, like Moses and Aaron, have the power to smite the earth with plagues.

But in verses 7 and 8 it seems that this pair was not unstoppable after all. The beast from the bottomless pit makes war on the witnesses and conquers and kills them.

Is this defeat a permanent defeat? No. The beast (which we will later see is Rome) does not have a final victory over the church. We know this, if for no other reason, because Daniel told us so 600 years before these events occurred. Daniel 7:23–27 tells us about the church's victory over Rome, and verse 27 concludes:

And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.

We also know from verse 2 that this apparent victory will not last. Rome was to trample the holy city for only 3½ years.

Rome may have believed it would be victorious. Rome may have appeared to all the world to be victorious. The church may have even thought that Rome was going to be victorious. And so, for now, Rome is pictured as being victorious. But, as we will soon see, that victory is only an illusion. As terrible as the beast was, it could not stop the church. It could kill the witnesses and seek to destroy their work, but there would be only one *permanent* defeat, and it would be the defeat of Rome.

Why show their defeat at all if it's not a real defeat? One word — drama! This is the part of the show where it looks like the hero is dead for sure! How will he ever get out of this one? Those who think we need to add drama to the worship assembly with dramatic music or dramatic performances need to take a look at Revelation! The Bible is dramatic without any help from us!

What is the great city in verse 8? It is “allegorically called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified.” Thus, allegorically, it is called three cities or nations — Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem (the city where the Lord was crucified).

What is the allegory for each of these locales? Rome, like Sodom, was a center of iniquity. Rome, like Egypt, oppressed and persecuted God's people. Rome, like Jerusalem, promoted a false religion.

I say the allegory extends to *three* locales, but it most likely actually extends to a fourth — Babylon. The city here is called great, and Babylon is called "great" 10 times in Revelation. For example, in 14:8, we read, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication." Rome, like Babylon, persecuted God's people and promoted a false religion.

But shouldn't we take verse 8 as a *literal* identification of the great city? How can we? The most immediate problem is that *three* and possible *four* locales are given. Which one is the great city? A second problem is that one of the locales, Egypt, is not a city. And if we take this symbol literally, why stop there? Why not then take all of the others symbols in this chapter literally? The descriptions of the great city are symbolic, just like the other descriptions in this book.

Lenski wrote:

Here Jerusalem is to be taken ideally, as the headquarters of all anti-Christianity. The actual city became such a symbol when it crucified Christ and never repented and was then razed to the ground.

Hailey wrote:

John sees this great city as a spiritual Sodom in its moral depravity, as an Egypt holding all people in bondage to lust and sin, and as a Jerusalem that rejected truth and put to death the author of truth.

The message to the church in all of this was that the church was going to suffer just as Christ himself suffered. Rome was, in effect, trying to cast Jesus outside of the city gates just as Jerusalem had done.

Are we surprised by that message? We shouldn't be. Our own country is doing the same thing. We are throwing Jesus out of our schools, out of our government, and out of our public and social discourse.

The courts have turned freedom *of* religion into freedom *from* religion. Those who lead public prayers are often told not to mention the name of Jesus in their prayer. He is no more welcome in our society than he was in Jerusalem or in Rome — and his followers should expect no better. “In this world ye have tribulation.” (John 16:33) If we do not have tribulation by the world, it may be because we are *of* the world rather than merely *in* the world.

There are many who identify the great city with Jerusalem, but in my opinion that identification just doesn't fit with the context of this book. If the villain in this book is Rome (which seems indisputable to me), then why would God include a discourse about the judgment of Jerusalem at the hands of that great villain? And why would those seven churches in Asia be all that concerned about the judgment of Jerusalem at the hands of Rome, the very power who was persecuting them? How would Rome's destruction of Jerusalem provide any comfort to Christians being persecuted by Rome? It might even have the opposite effect — “You're worried about Rome? You should be. Look at what it did to Jerusalem! You're worried that you've been forgotten by God? You should be. He may be punishing you at the hands of Rome just like he's punishing Jerusalem at the hands of Rome.”

Yes, when you focus on a verse here and a verse there, some of them could fit the destruction of Jerusalem. (Luke 21:24, for example, looks a lot like Revelation 11:2.) But when you step back and look at those verses in their context, I think you will discover that from that perspective they fit Rome much better.

Every description of the villain in this book fits Rome perfectly, and this description is no exception. The great city pictured here is Rome.

9 For three days and a half men from the peoples and tribes and tongues and nations gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, 10 and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had



been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.

Verses 9 and 10 paint a vivid portrait of the wicked world celebrating the death of the two witnesses. Evil men had once celebrated the death of Jesus, no doubt thinking they had at last overcome him and had the last word — and yet look at what happened just a few days later. The evil celebrants in these verses are about to relive that history. Things are not what they seem!

How long do they gloat? Verse 9 tells us — 3½ days. We know what that means! It means the world's celebration is premature and temporary. It means their celebration will not last long. Why? Because this apparent defeat is not really a defeat at all, just as Jesus' apparent defeat on that cross was no defeat of Jesus at all, but rather was the defeat of the world and of Satan, the prince of this world.

Those who hate the church celebrate and rejoice at its apparent demise. Verse 10 tells us that the church had been “a torment” to those who dwell on the earth. Why? Because those who dwell on the earth were evil, and they did not like to be reminded of that fact.

Are we a torment to those living in sin? Do we set before them an example of righteous living that would create such torment in them? Why would we want to do that? Because while some of those in torment are likely to strike back at us, others may be led to repentance. The church is not only the light of the world, it is the salt of the world — and salt sometimes causes torment. Jesus often caused people to gnash their teeth! When was the last time we did that? (And I'm not including when we do that to each other!)

How can we *avoid* ever causing someone torment? By living the same way they do. In fact, if we proclaim righteousness but live unrighteously, our hypocrisy will cause them great happiness rather than great torment. Those who compromise with the world will never cause the world to experience any torment — at least not in this life. If you want to avoid experiencing what these two witnesses experienced, then just blend in with the world.

Those who dwell upon the earth thought the church had been defeated, and they were very glad to be rid of it. As you recall from our introductory classes, the Roman historian Tacitus referred to Christianity as a disease, which is how many people see it today.

What about us? Are we friends with the world, or would the world like to be rid of us? We know what the Bible has to say about friendship with this evil world — “know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” (James 4:4)

This country’s view of Christ is changing, or perhaps I should say *has* changed. The Hollywood that produced *Ben Hur* in 1959 and honored it with 11 Academy Awards is the same Hollywood that in the late 80’s produced *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which portrays Jesus as a lustful sinner, Paul as a lying fraud, and Judas as a selfless hero. Why the change? Why the attack? Could it be because they are in torment and are striking out at the source of that torment?

And please note that this is *not* an attack against religion — it is a very focused attack against Christianity. The media establishment that released *The Last Temptation* is the same media establishment that passed on a movie version of *The Satanic Verses* and balked at publishing cartoons showing Mohammed with a bomb in his keffiyeh. As one critic noted, “When it came to the prospect of enraging the Islamic faithful, the instinct for self-preservation took precedence over the commitment to controversial religious explorations.”

But self-preservation cannot be the sole reason that Christianity is the focus of their attack. Why? Because they have backed away from other controversies when self-preservation was never an issue. In 1990 when Disney was about to release the movie *White Fang*, the Humane Society complained that the movie was making “an anti-wolf statement.” Disney caved immediately, agreeing to remove a dramatic scene in which a wolf attacks a man and to adding a pro-wolf disclaimer to the end of the film. When the Hopi Indians complained to Robert Redford about what they called the sacrilegious treatment of their ancient rites in his film *Dark Wind*, he caved immediately and made the changes they requested. It seems that the prospect of being

labeled anti-wolf produced greater worry in Hollywood than the prospect of being labeled anti-Christ!

The next time you are tempted to befriend this world just remember what this world thinks about and says about your Savior! “Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” (James 4:4) And this world is filled with enemies of God. “For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.” (Philippians 3:18-19) You tell me if a better description of Hollywood was ever penned!

## Revelation — Lesson 15

Chapter 11 began by introducing us to two witnesses. At first, they seemed unstoppable, but a beast from the bottomless pit killed them. Afterward, those who dwelled on the earth celebrated and exchanged gifts. Why? Because the two witnesses had been a torment to them. Things looked bleak in verse 10 — but that's all about to change. Those who were celebrating and exchanging gifts in verse 10 will be in great fear in verse 11.

11:11 But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. 12 Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up hither!" And in the sight of their foes they went up to heaven in a cloud. 13 And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. 14 The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

There are many wonderful words in the Bible, but "but" has to be one of the most wonderful! And there are few uses of "but" that are more wonderful than the "but" in verse 11 — "But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them." Some of the most important verses in the Bible begin with the word "but."

The "but" in Romans 3:21 is one of the few that rivals the "but" here in verse 11. Another important "but" appears in Psalm 22:3, which offers an interesting parallel to what we see in Chapter 11. The early Christian must have also asked the question in Psalm 22:1 — "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from

helping me, and from the words of my roaring?” And they must also have found comfort from the reply in 22:3-4 — “**But** thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel. Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them.” In fact, much of Revelation is a reminder to them of what the Psalmist said in Psalm 22:3-4. God delivered his people before, and he will do so again.

Things look very bleak for the church ... but. It looks like Rome is going win ... but. It looks like Satan may have the last word this time ... but. It looks like the church is finally finished ... but. God will *always* have the final word!

After 3½ days God raises the church from the dead. The two witnesses start breathing again and get back on their feet. Where is the celebration now? Just one verse ago, the world was making merry and exchanging presents! What are they doing now? Verse 11 tells us they are now in great fear. My, how the situation has changed!

And that’s not all that has changed. Notice how the verb tenses have changed in verse 11. In verses 9-10, we read, “And they ... *shall* see their dead bodies ... and *shall* not suffer their dead bodies to be put in graves. And they that dwell upon the earth *shall* rejoice over them.” But in verse 11, we read, “They *stood* upon their feet.” So certain is this course of events that John speaks of future events as though they were past events.

The earlier persecution was temporary, as depicted by the symbolic 3½ years. The apparent defeat is even more temporary, as depicted by the symbolic 3½ *days*.

In the sight of their foes, the two witnesses ascend into Heaven. They are completely vindicated. Few saw Christ ascend into Heaven, but this ascension occurs in full view of God’s enemies. All the world now knows that they are on God’s side and under God’s protection. And God is moving them to safety — which must have caused the greatest fear of all. Why did they need to be moved to safety? Rome was about to find out!

The first thing that happens is a great earthquake, which serves as an omen of a coming judgment on those who rejoiced at the apparent defeat of the church.

A tenth of the city falls and 7000 are killed. Once again only a fraction is affected; that is, even this judgment is not yet final. More is on the way.

Why a tenth and why 7000? The destruction of a tenth is an image of decimation (which literally means to take one in ten). The use of 7000 foreshadows the perfect and complete judgment that is coming and that will not allow for repentance.

What about those who are not killed? Verse 13 tells us they were terrified and gave glory to God. Does this mean that finally someone was led to repent? Did the message finally get through to them? Can the judgment be called off as it was in days of Jonah? No.

This apparent repentance is not a real repentance. Things are not what they seem, and we have seen this before. The great city here is modeled after the city of desolation in Isaiah 24-27. In those chapters, the prophet looked beyond Judah and saw a world of sin, called a waste city or city of desolation. God shook the earth, and that lofty city was brought low. The Bible tells us that out of the destruction there emerged a people who feared God — and they were right to fear God! What we see here is not repentance, but rather rationality!

Those left alive in verse 13 are not Christians. Their motive is not love but rather fear. How do we know their conversion is not genuine? For the simple reason that they remain on this earth. In this book, the faithful are pictured as being in Heaven with God, while the wicked are repeatedly referred to as those who dwell upon the earth. The witnesses ascend into Heaven. Those looking on in astonishment do not. Those called the foes of God in verse 12 remain the foes of God in verse 13 — they are now just astonished foes probably wondering for the first time whether they chose the winning side! They are much like a sports fan who roots for whichever team seems to be

winning at the moment. Remember that one day *every* knee will bow to Christ and *every* tongue will confess to God. (Romans 14:11)

What did Nebuchadnezzar say after he saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego come out of that fiery furnace unhurt? Read Daniel 3:28-29 —

Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set at nought the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way."

What was Nebuchadnezzar's motivation? We see the same motivation and the same response here in verse 13. Those who remain alive now recognize that God is going to win, and they want to be on the winning side. Verse 13 doesn't tell us that they are Christians — rather what it tells us is that they are not fools!

The people in verse 13 "worship" with the same motivation as that of Nebuchadnezzar. Their fate remains unchanged. We are not told that they repented in any way from their murders, thefts, sorceries, and idolatries. Just a few verses earlier they were exchanging gifts to celebrate the apparent demise of the Lord's church!

There are many atheists in this world — but there are no atheists in the next. The Psalmist tells us that it is the fool who says in his heart there is no God. (Psalm 14:1) There are many fools in this world — but there are no fools in the next. No atheist or agnostic will remain so forever! Some day all atheists will believe, and all agnostics will care. Someday all fools will repent of their foolishness.

Nikita Khrushchev once gave a speech in which he said that the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin "flew into space, but didn't see any God

there.” If Yuri had really wanted to see God from his tiny space capsule, all he needed to do was open the door! Nikita and Yuri are believers today. I don’t know if there are any atheists in foxholes, but I do know there are no atheists in Hell (only *former* atheists). We are seeing that same sort of realization in verse 13.

Verse 14 tells us that the third woe is soon to come. The seventh and final trumpet will be the third and final woe of the three woes proclaimed by the eagle in 8:13. The Greek word translated “soon to come” means “without delay, quickly, speedily.”

Let’s take a moment to review where we are: The message John is told to relay is that the church will undergo severe hardship and may at times appear to be defeated. But John’s message also tells us that God is on the church’s side and all will be well in the end. The church’s final victory is assured.

So far, John has relayed this message in two ways: First, the city of God will be trampled under foot for 3½ years, but the inner sanctuary will be protected. Second, two witnesses will prophesy for 3½ years, but then be killed by the beast. Their apparent defeat, however, is only temporary. After 3½ days they come back to life and ascend to Heaven.

In Chapters 12 and 13 this message will be told again in two different ways: First, in Chapter 12, a woman will be forced to flee into the wilderness for 3½ years, yet will find there a place of nourishment and protection. Second, in Chapter 13, a beast will overcome God’s people, and yet his authority will last for only 3½ years.

As we study this book, I know that sometimes it seems I repeat myself a lot. The reason for that is that God is repeating himself a lot! The central message of this book is being told again and again through many different images and symbols. Do you want the *Cliff’s Notes* version? Here it is: God loves the church! Things may appear bleak, but the church will be victorious! God’s enemies will not win, but rather will be judged and punished! (But isn’t God’s version so much better!)



15 Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

A great silence followed the opening of the seventh seal in Chapter 8. The sounding of the seventh trumpet is followed by loud voices in heaven.

Most (but not all) commentators think that the seventh seal contained (or unleashed or revealed) the seven trumpets and the seven bowls that followed, and that the seventh trumpet contained the seven bowls of wrath that followed. If so (and this view makes sense to me), then this seventh trumpet marks the end of Rome.

It may be that as the seventh trumpet sounds, the seven bowls containing the full and destructive wrath of God are poured out. That is, although we will hear the details later, it may be that the bowls are poured out when this final trumpet sounds.

Recall, for example, what we were told in 10:7— “but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.”

In any event, we know that at this point the judgment is done and the outcome is inevitable. Hence the cry goes out: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”

What is meant by the phrase “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord”? The judgment of Rome and the victory of the church depict a public vindication of something that was already true in fact — Jesus is king! This verse does not mark the beginning of Christ’s kingdom or of Christ’s authority over anyone. Instead, it depicts a public reaffirmation of that kingdom and that authority. Recall —

- **Revelation 1:5** Jesus is [not will be] the ruler of the kings of the earth.
- **Ephesians 1:21** Jesus sits [not will sit] at God's right hand, far above every principality and power and every name that is named.
- **1 Peter 3:22** Jesus "has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him."
- **Psalms 29:10** The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.
- **Daniel 4:17** The Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets over it the lowliest of men.

The word "kingdom" as used here includes more than the church. (The two terms are not always synonyms. See the lesson on God's kingdom available at [ThyWordIsTruth.com](http://ThyWordIsTruth.com) as part of our series of lessons on the Lord's church.) Here the kingdom includes all of the people and nations of the world. Jesus has *all* authority. In the widest sense, the universe is his kingdom. Jesus does not just have authority over believers. He is king of everyone and everything. All are subject to the rule of Christ. In Acts 2:36-38, those who heard the first gospel sermon were told to obey Christ — not to *make* him Lord — but because he was already Lord. We obey Christ because he is our Lord and King — not to make him our Lord and King. It is a subtle distinction, but it is an important distinction.

Verse 15 says that Jesus shall reign forever. Again, note that Jesus is reigning now and was reigning then. Paul tells us about the reign of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 —

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. **For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.** For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith, all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted,

which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, **that God may be all in all.**

What do those verses tell us? They tell us that Jesus is reigning now — “**For he must reign**, till he hath put all enemies under his feet.” They tell us that he will reign until his enemies are destroyed, with the last of those enemies being death.

But hasn’t death already been defeated? Yes. We were freed from the bondage of sin and death by the cross. Death has been defeated, and yet it continues. (Rome also continued for quite awhile after being defeated.)

The writer of Hebrews described mankind’s relation with death in Hebrews 2:14-15 —

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

In Romans 5:12, Paul personifies death as a cosmic power that entered the world through Adam and that reigns over everyone.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.

And yet when Paul wrote, death had already been defeated. Paul told us in Romans 8:38-39 that not even death could separate us from the love of God —

For I am sure that **neither death** nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will

be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The defeat of death occurs at the resurrection of the dead; the two are one and the same. And that is precisely Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 15 — if there is no resurrection of the dead, then death will forever remain unconquered. When Jesus rose from the dead never to die again, death was forever defeated! Death will have been finally destroyed on that great day when we too rise never to die again.

And 1 Corinthians 15 tells us something else about that last great day. Paul tells us that when Jesus comes again, it will not be to establish a kingdom, but rather it will be to offer up to the Father an already established kingdom. And once Christ delivers his kingdom to the Father, God will be all things in all. His reign will be unchallenged. Death will not just have been defeated; death will have been destroyed. No one will doubt the defeat of death on that day!

16 And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, 17 saying, "We give thanks to thee, Lord God Almighty, who art and who wast, that thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign. 18 The nations raged, but thy wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth." 19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

In verse 17 the 24 elders say to God, "thou hast taken thy great power and begun to reign." What does that mean? This is the same question that we just considered with regard to Christ in verse 15.

As we often do, let's start with what it does *not* mean. It cannot possibly mean that God was not reigning prior to the judgment of Rome because we know that God has always reigned over his creation. If God was not reigning over Rome, then how were they in subjection to him? What right did God have to judge them and punish them if they were not his subjects?

But the world is in such a mess! How can God be reigning when everything seems to be going so wrong? Premillennialists often make that argument to support their warped views about the kingship of Christ. But what does the Bible say? Psalm 29:10 tells us that "the LORD sat enthroned at the Flood, and the LORD sits as King forever." Was the world in a mess at the Flood? Was God reigning over the world when it was in a mess? Yes and yes. And God is reigning over our world as well. Remember Psalm 47:8 — "God reigneth over the heathen: God sitteth upon the throne of his holiness."

What then does verse 17 mean when it says that God has "begun to reign"? We know what it means! It means that the events described in this book are a powerful reminder of his reign. They are a new expression of his reign. They depict a public vindication and reaffirmation of his reign. If anyone ever doubted that God was king, look at what he is doing here! He has begun to reign! He is coming in judgment to exercise his royal power against his rebellious subjects.

Hailey: "The kingdom of prophecy was now a definite realization among men, for at the defeat of His enemies God had taken His power and rule over the world."

Did the kingdom come in Acts 2? Yes. Did the kingdom come with power in Acts 2? Yes. Did the world know it at that time? No. Does the world know it following the events described here? Absolutely! After God judges Rome, there is no doubt about which kingdom is the eternal kingdom!

Verse 18 tells us "the nations raged, but thy wrath came." We are about to see the bowls of God's wrath poured out on top of Rome. The

time for repentance is over; the time for judgment is here. This verse is modeled after Psalm 2 —

Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure. Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him.

And how does God respond to the raging nations? “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.” That reminds me of Isaiah 52:15 — “The kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.” God is in control of the nations of this world, and he takes them out when he sees fit. Remember Psalm 110:5-6 —

The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries.

It is comforting today in a world filled with raging nations and people who imagine vain things to know that God reigns.

Verse 18 tells us that this is “the time for the dead to be judged, for rewarding thy servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear thy name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.” Thayer tells us that “to destroy does not mean to extinguish or bring to extinction, but to change for the worse, to corrupt,” as moths corrupt garments in Luke 12:33 or as evil dispositions corrupt minds in 1 Timothy 6:5.

Now verse 18 *has* to be the end of the world, right? No, it doesn’t have to be, and, in my opinion, it isn’t. We need to remember the all important time frame, and we need to read verse 18 in its context, right there between verses 17 and 19. And we need to remember how Old Testament judgments were described. When we do, I think we will discover that this language is yet another vivid image of Rome’s judgment. The details of this judgment will be given in Revelation 20, and I will have much more to say on this topic when we get there. But for now, whenever verse 18 happens, the message is clear — Christ’s enemies will be judged and destroyed; Christ’s servants will be rewarded.

Notice that the prophets are among those rewarded in verse 18. They had looked for and foretold the coming King and his eternal kingdom, and now their reward was to see those prophecies fulfilled. Their reward was to witness the unfolding of the mystery.

Why is the ark of the covenant seen in verse 19? The ark of the covenant was located in the Holy of Holies, the inside of which no ordinary person had ever seen and into which the High Priest went only on the Day of Atonement. But that is no longer the situation for a Christian. Recall Hebrews 10:19-22 —

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true

heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

The ark of the covenant provides reassurance that God remembers his promises. It is always in his presence to remind him of those promises. Whatever the terrors to come, God will not forget his promises.

In a similar way, the thunder, the lightning, the earthquakes, and the hail are Old Testament symbols of judgment intended to remind us that God keeps his promises. He promised to judge and punish the church's enemies — and he will. He promised to vindicate the church — and he will. God keeps his promises.

## Chapter Twelve

1 And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; 2 she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.

Chapter 12 begins with a great portent or great sign. In the gospels. John uses this Greek word for “sign” where the other three gospel writers use the Greek word normally translated “miracle.” The Greek word for “sign” occurs seven times in Revelation — three times in reference to God and four times in reference to the deceptions of Satan. This sign, of course, is from God, and the first thing we see is “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.”

Who is this woman? Let's look at the clues. First, she wears the sun and the moon, which Genesis 1:17 reminds us were designed to give light to the world. Second, she wears a crown of twelve stars, where we recall that 12 is the number that depicts God's people (12 patriarchs, 12 tribes, 12 apostles).



So she gives light to the world, she wears a crown, and that crown has 12 stars. She must be yet another symbol for the church, right? Wrong! (And just when you thought things were getting predictable!)

It's not entirely wrong, but this woman represents more than just the church in its general New Testament sense. How do we know? Because she is shown to have existed before the birth of Christ and before the establishment of his kingdom in Acts 2.

So who is she? Some say she is the church, while others argue she is the virgin Mary. In my opinion, she represents all of God's people throughout time. She is the faithful remnant. She represents those who keep God's covenant. We see similar images in the Old Testament. Recall Isaiah 54:5-7 —

For thy Maker is thine husband; the LORD of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called. For the LORD hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused, saith thy God. For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee.

And also Isaiah 66:7 —

Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man child.

And also recall Micah 4:10 —

Be in pain, and labour to bring forth, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in travail: for now shalt thou go forth out of the city, and thou shalt dwell in the field, and thou shalt go even to Babylon; there shalt thou be delivered; there the LORD shall redeem thee from the hand of thine enemies.

It is in the very next chapter, Micah 5:2, that we read:

But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.

Some commentators see the reference to the sun, the moon, and the stars in the description of the woman as further evidence that she embodies the faithful remnant throughout time. The stars, they tell, us depict the Patriarchal age, in which the mystery was still very much hidden. The moon depicts the Mosaic age, in which the prophets proclaimed the mystery, and yet it was still only dimly understood. Finally, the sun represents the Christian age in which the mystery was fulfilled and revealed.

I said a moment ago that this woman is not the church in its general New Testament sense. What does that mean? When we think of the church we rightly think of the body of Christ to which each of us was added at our baptism. But what about the faithful people of God who died *before* the establishment of the church? After the great roll call of faith in Hebrews 11, that chapter ends with verses 39-40:

And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

The faithful remnant under the old covenant were not made perfect without us, but rather we were all made perfect together by the blood of Christ. Also, read Hebrews 9:13-15 —

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, **for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament**, they which

are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.

Thus, if we understand the church to be the collective spiritual body of God's people, including that faithful remnant who died prior to Acts 2 but who received the promise in Christ, then this woman represents the church after all.

Who is the child? No one who has read this far in the Bible could have any doubt as to the identity of this child! It is, of course, Jesus, who descended through the Jewish line; that is, from those who were God's people under the old covenant. We will witness the birth of this child in verse 5. The child is Jesus, who from a physical perspective was brought forth from out of God's people. This child had been in the womb of the faithful remnant since Genesis 3.

Some of the most beautiful and dramatic images in the Bible are found here in Chapter 12. The destiny of this woman depends upon her child; it was her own sin that made his birth necessary.

3 And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth;

J. R. R. Tolkien once said, "It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him." That's good advice for us, for here we meet a powerful, blood thirsty dragon who appears before the woman waiting to devour her child.

Where have we seen this same cast assembled before? For that we must turn from the last book of the Bible all the way back to the first. In Genesis 3:15, God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall

bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” This battle has been going on for a long time — and guess what! It’s head bruising time!

This dragon is Satan, but it also depicts Rome. This dragon is Satan acting through the most powerful weapon in his arsenal, the mighty Roman empire and its godless emperors. It is Satan who John 8:44 tells us was a murderer from the beginning. It is Satan who is ever working for the death of God’s people.

How do we know that Rome is involved here? We know that from the dragon’s description — seven heads with diadems and ten horns. Why seven? Why ten? Why horns? Stay tuned. The details regarding these symbols will be given when they appear again in Chapter 13 and when they are explained by an angel in Chapter 17, and we will see that they represent Rome.

Even here, however, we have enough clues to get a glimpse of what we will discover in those later chapters. The word “diadem” in verse 3 occurs three times in Revelation, but nowhere else in the New Testament. It is different from the crown of victory (*stephanos*) that we have discussed before. The diadem originated with the Persians and is a headdress of royalty. It always denotes royal power or royal rule. Which royal rule is in view here? Well, who was reigning at this time on earth? What royalty was Satan using to attack the church? Satan is arrayed with the emperors of Rome! It was through their reign that Satan sought to destroy the church. This connection will be confirmed for us in Chapter 17.

What are the stars of Heaven in verse 4? They likely represent God’s people. They certainly remind us of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:5 — “Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.” And they remind us of Philippians 2:15 — “That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.”

But the dragon causes some of these stars fall to earth. Their fall to earth most likely indicates that the dragon caused them to fall away

from God. That is, they become part of “those who dwell upon the earth.” The word translated “cast” in verse 4 means to drag away or to pull away. It was through Roman persecution and emperor worship that Satan caused some Christians to compromise with the world and be lost. Satan’s success did not occur when a faithful Christian died physically, but rather when a faithful Christian was pulled away and died spiritually. And he did that to some, but not to all. Just as we say thirds in the descriptions of God’s earlier partial judgment, so we see a third here to describe Satan’s partial success in causing Christians to fall away.

There is a lesson here for us. This dragon should not be underestimated. Yes, Satan has been defeated. Yes, Satan is acting out the role in this book that God has given him. But, Satan is real, and Satan is dangerous. He causes people to fall away from God, and when that happens it is as if a star has fallen from Heaven — whether it be because of Roman persecution or just because you have other things you would rather be doing on Sunday.

A challenge of this book is that we begin to see things as God sees them, and I fear we do not always see a Christian’s fall from grace in the same cataclysmic terms in which Heaven views that departure. It looks like such a non-event from our perspective — the person is here, and then sometimes here, and then never here. We may ask about them, we may even call him, but then very often that is the end of it. Perhaps we need to picture that person as a shining star cast back down to earth by the tail of a great red dragon. That’s how God sees it.

# Revelation — Lesson 16

## The Handout

The handout this week shows two coins depicting the Roman emperor Domitian. No one doubts that Nero persecuted Christians, but there are some who doubt that Domitian ever did. We will consider that issue at length later, and I believe we will determine that the evidence more strongly supports the view that Domitian was a great persecutor of the church — although admittedly the extra-Biblical evidence is not as strong for Domitian as it is for Nero.



The handout shows some *circumstantial* evidence for Domitian's persecution of the church. On one coin, Domitian is referred to as *Divi Filius* — son of the divine, or son of god. On the other, his own infant son (who died very young) is referred to as “The Divine Caesar, Son of the Emperor Domitian.” The child sits on the globe and stretches his hands out toward seven stars. A divine child who holds seven stars in his hand — where have we seen that before? Speaking of Christ, Revelation 1:16 says, “and he had in his right hand seven stars.” These similarities are unmistakable. Domitian must have seen in Christianity a threat to his own claims of divinity for himself and for his own son. Remember what Paul say about him in 2 Thessalonians 2:4—“Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.” Read that and look at those coins!

In Chapter 12 a giant dragon waits to swallow up the son of God. We know very little about Domitian's son except that he died in infancy. It makes you wonder who swallowed up whom! Perhaps Domitian experienced the last of those Egyptian plagues *literally*. We will have much more to say about Domitian as our study continues.

### **Revelation 12:3-4 Continued...**

In verse 4 we are told that the great red dragon stood before the woman, waiting to devour her child when it was born. To an outside observer it must look like this child has no chance. How could anyone, much less a newborn baby, prevail against this great dragon? The great dragon likely had the same view — how could it be defeated by a mere baby? It will just swallow it up, and that will be the end of the matter. Right? Wrong! Things are not what they seem!

Satan had once attempted to swallow up this child literally through Herod the Great, which was really through Rome even then since it was by Rome's authority that Herod ruled. Now Satan was once again trying to do the same thing to the body of Christ, his church, and once again through Rome. Satan knew that he would never have a better opportunity than this — attack the church in its infancy with the mighty Roman empire, the greatest weapon he ever had. Satan had been waiting to devour this child since Genesis 3.

This devouring of God's people reminds us yet again of Old Testament imagery. In Jeremiah 51:34 Babylon swallows God's people "like a monster." Egypt, which also tried to devour a servant of God as a child (Moses) and which also persecuted God's people, is called a great dragon in Ezekiel 29:3. At the time of this book, the weapon has changed from Babylon and Egypt to Rome, but the one wielding that weapon is the same serpent we met in Genesis 3.

Revelation is often viewed as a book that looks forward — but it might better be described as a book that looks backward as it repeatedly describes Rome in the light of past events.

5 she brought forth a male child, one who  
is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron,

but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

We find in these verses more evidence that this child is Jesus. Verse 5 says that the child was to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. Recall Psalm 2:9 — “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

Also, recall Revelation 2:26–27 — “And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father.”

Later in 19:15, we will read, “And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.”

Before the dragon can devour him, the child is caught up to God and to his throne. Here we see the ascension of Christ back to his father’s throne in Heaven. On this earth, he was the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. On this earth, he was tempted by Satan, yet without sin. On this earth, he was put to death by lawless hands. But he rose from the dead, he defeated Satan, and he ascended back to Heaven, forever out of Satan’s grasp.

The birth in verse 5 likely involves much more than just the events that occurred in Bethlehem. The child that is born in verse 5 is the same child that is caught up to God in verse 5. Thus, this “birth” appears to cover the entire earthly ministry of Christ, from his physical birth in Bethlehem to his ascension in Acts 1.

Satan failed to defeat Jesus when he was most vulnerable, while he was made in the likeness of men, and while he was found in fashion



as a man. (Philippians 2:7-8) Satan certainly won't fair any better after Jesus has ascended to rule from Heaven!

Before we read any further, we know what the message is going to be! Just as these Christians had followed the example of Christ in their suffering, they would follow his example in ascending to Heaven. They, too, would escape the clutches of this great dragon.

What happens next? Verse 6 tells us that the woman flees into the wilderness. We are reminded of Moses fleeing from Pharaoh into the wilderness. We are reminded of the Israelites fleeing from Egypt into the wilderness. We are reminded of Elijah fleeing from Ahab and Jezebel into the wilderness. We are reminded of Mary and Joseph fleeing from Herod into the wilderness.

How long does this last? Verse 6 tells us that the woman is separated from the child for 1260 days, which is 42 months, which is 3½ years. This book is so beautiful when we understand the symbols! Those who take these numbers literally are missing so much!

The church is separated from Christ for 3½ years! That is, the separation is neither permanent nor complete. Just as the persecution is temporary, so is the separation between the Lord and his church.

Although the woman flees to the wilderness, God nourishes and sustains her there. God is assuring his people that although they are being persecuted by Rome and although Jesus is no longer with them in person, that situation will not last forever. But while it does last, God will sustain them and protect them and nourish them.

We are reminded once again of Ezekiel 29:3, which refers to Egypt as a great dragon — "Speak, and say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I am against thee, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lieth in the midst of his rivers, which hath said, My river is mine own, and I have made it for myself." God's people in the Old Testament were also nourished in the wilderness while running from a great dragon.

For those keeping count, this is the third time and the third different way that this message has been delivered to the readers of this book! First, the city of God will be trampled under foot for 3½ years, but the

inner sanctuary will be protected. Second, two witnesses will prophecy for 3½ years, but then be killed by the beast. Their apparent defeat, however, is only temporary. After 3½ days they come back to life and ascend to Heaven. Third, a woman will be forced to flee into the wilderness for 3½ years, yet will find there a place of nourishment and protection.

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, 8 but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

Is this a literal war in Heaven? Two questions — *How* could it be, and *why* should it be? Satan was defeated at the cross! Recall John 12:31— “**Now** shall the ruler of this world be cast out.” Jesus did not need Michael to do something he had already accomplished himself. This battle (like the woman, the child, and the dragon) is symbolic!

Why show us this symbolic battle? This battle and its outcome emphasize the point that if Satan could not defeat Jesus while he was on the earth, then Satan certainly cannot defeat Jesus now that Jesus is reigning in Heaven!

Is this scene a flashback? Are we seeing here a description of Satan’s actual fall some time prior to the events in Genesis 3? No. The timing here places the battle at the time of the ascension of Christ. This defeat is the defeat of Satan that Christ accomplished on the cross and at the resurrection and ascension. Was a great war like this really being fought on the cross? Absolutely! And Jesus won!

The Bible describes the victory of Christ as the outcome of a great conflict. Recall Isaiah 53:12 —

**Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong;** because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

And remember how Jesus described the conflict in Luke 11:20-22 —

But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you. When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace: But when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armour wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils.

And also recall Jesus' statement in John 14:30 — “for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me.” The outcome of that battle was never in doubt.

We also have our great battles with Satan, and they often would not look like much of a battle to an outside observer. But — and here is the theme of this book — things are not always what they seem!

The angel Michael serves here as Christ's representative. He is named three times in the book of Daniel. He is “one of the chief princes” in Daniel 10:13. He is the “prince of Israel” in Daniel 10:21. And, in Daniel 12:1, Michael is called “the great prince” who stood for God's people against their great enemies. He is called an archangel in Jude 9. Some surmise that he is the angel pictured in Revelation 10.

No place is found in Heaven for the dragon and his angels. His assault on Heaven is a complete failure. His defeat is decisive. When Jesus ascended he had completely defeated Satan. Recall —

- **1 John 3:8** The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.
- **John 16:11** The ruler of this world is judged.

- **John 16:33** I have overcome the world.
- **John 12:31** Now shall the ruler of this world be cast out.
- **Colossians 2:15** And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.
- **Hebrews 2:14** That through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil.

Verse 9 refers to the dragon as that ancient serpent. This reference is a clear identification of the dragon with the serpent in Genesis 3. It was through this serpent's deceptions that sin entered the world, and he has been an active enemy of God and man ever since. He is the devil or *diabolos*, which means accuser or slanderer. And he is Satan or *satanas*, which means adversary or opponent.

Verse 9 also describes Satan as the deceiver of the whole world. Paul told us in 1 Timothy 2:14 that it was by deception that the world was plunged into sin. In John 8:44, Jesus said of Satan, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it." In fact, the first recorded words of Satan in the Bible contained a lie —

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, **Ye shall not surely die.**

God gave Eve a command, and Satan convinced her to do the very opposite. God told Eve a fact, and Satan convinced Eve that the opposite was true. Satan's method of operation has not changed one bit! Why should he change, when what he does works so well? God tells us that those who believe and are baptized shall be saved. And what does Sa-

tan say? He says that those who believe and are saved shall be baptized. A small twist — but a deadly one! Satan is still twisting God's word and telling people, "Ye shall not surely die!"

Satan is a deceiver! He delights in twisting the word of God. He quoted the Bible and twisted the scriptures even to Jesus in Matthew 4 — he does the same thing today. How else could a rational person read the word of God and conclude that it approves of homosexuality? How else could a rational person read the word of God and conclude that baptism is not essential to salvation? Someone sent me an email recently arguing that baptism is not even part of the gospel! How can we explain such blindness? They have been blinded and deceived by Satan just as surely as Satan deceived Eve in the garden. Satan's methods of operations have not changed, and nor are they likely to change while they continue to work so well. We must not be ignorant of his devices! (2 Corinthians 2:11)

Here is the message of these verses in a nutshell: The power behind Rome has already been defeated. The defeat of Rome will soon follow.

10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

"Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come." We have seen language like this before. In 11:5, for example, we were told, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever."

As before, the statement in verse 10 does not mark the beginning of God's kingdom or of Christ's authority. Instead it depicts a public

vindication and reaffirmation of those things. (Although, we should note that the Lord's eternal kingdom was *literally* established shortly after the ascension of Christ.)

In verse 10, we are told *why* "the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come." It is because "the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God." The defeat of Satan is the cause for this public vindication and reaffirmation of God's sovereignty.

Verse 10 tells us something very interesting about Satan — he accuses us day and night before God! This description of Satan reminds us at once of the opening chapters of Job, although there you will recall it was God who first brought up Job as an example to Satan — "Hast thou considered my servant Job?" Perhaps Satan had been accusing others before God used Job as an example of righteousness.

Remember when as a child you had a brother or sister who would always rush off to your parents to accuse you? That is Satan's full time job! Whenever you sin, you should picture Satan rushing off to God to tell him what you just did! And Satan is the father of lies, and so there is no telling what lies he is telling God about us. But we should not be worried — our God is an all-knowing, righteous judge. And we have another before him who is pleading our case.

And the next time we are tempted to start accusing each other, we should remember this description of Satan as the accuser of our brethren, who accuses them day and night before our God. That is not good company to keep!

Verse 11 tells us *how* Satan was conquered. "And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." Verse 11 is one of the key verses in this entire book.

Satan was *figuratively* defeated by a great battle in Heaven. Satan was *literally* defeated by the blood of Christ, by the word of Christ, and by

the faithful proclamation of that word by those who loved not their lives even unto death.

We are reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous reminder that "when Jesus calls a man, he bids him to come and die." And we are reminded of Matthew 16:24 — "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." And of John 12:25 — "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Verse 11 is a reminder that this book of comfort and assurance is not promising a *physical* deliverance from the clutches of Rome. God is promising a *spiritual* deliverance from the power behind Rome.

Satan was defeated by the death of those he was trying to kill? That doesn't sound like much of a defeat! Yes, but things are not always what they seem! (How many times will we see that theme in this book?!) Satan was defeated by the death of Christ on that cross, and he is defeated when Christ's servants follow the example of their Master. The death of Jesus was a defeat—but not for Jesus. The death of Jesus was a judgment—but not against Jesus.

Satan was defeated by the blood of the Lamb. It was that blood that provided the forgiveness of sins that took the faithful forever out of his clutches. It was that blood that made Satan's accusations of no effect.

12 Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

Those who dwell in Heaven are told to rejoice. Remember that God's people, even those still physically on earth, are pictured in Revelation as dwelling in Heaven. The phrase "those who dwell upon the earth" always refers to the enemies of God in this book.

Why are they told to rejoice? Because their victory is assured. The Lamb has conquered Satan through his death and the power of his word. Satan could not defeat Jesus while he was on earth, and Satan

certainly won't be able to do any better now that Jesus has ascended back to Heaven. The power behind Rome was utterly and completely defeated at the cross. Rome will be the next to go.

We have seen the wrath of the Lamb. In verse 12, we see the wrath of the dragon. The difference, of course, is that the dragon's wrath is not a righteous wrath. In fact, Satan's wrath is directed here not toward those dwelling in Heaven but to his own followers who dwell on the earth. Satan has no concern for their welfare, but will use them as he sees fit in his attempts to thwart God's plans. But Satan's schemes are not working, and it certainly can't be his fault! He blames his minions, which partly explains his wrath.

But the text gives us another reason for his wrath — he knows that his time is short. We see here Satan's frustration at being unable to destroy the church with such a deadly weapon, and he knows that his opportunity to use Rome as a weapon is coming to an end. That is, Satan knows that his opportunity to attack the church through Rome will not last forever.

Just as Satan grasped his opportunity and attempted to kill Jesus in his infancy, Satan also saw an opportunity and attempted to crush the church in its infancy. In each case, Satan failed and was utterly defeated.

13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured



from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

The dragon sees that he has been thrown down to earth, and so he pursues the mother of the child. That is, Satan realizes that his plans to defeat Jesus have backfired, and so he begins to attack Jesus's followers. If he can't reach the Lord's body in Heaven, he will attack the Lord's body on earth. (Although this woman represents the faithful people of God, be they faithful Jewish people under the Old Covenant before Christ came or faithful Christians under the New Covenant after Christ came, at this time the focus is on the latter because here we see the woman *after* the ascension. Thus, at this point on the timeline, we can refer to the woman as the church.)

Remember, persecution does not mean that God is no longer in control. God was in control at the cross, and God was in control while Rome persecuted the church. God is in control no matter what! (Of course this does not mean that everything that happens is the will of God. Sin is clearly not the will of God. See our lesson on *Time and Chance* at [www.ThyWordIsTruth.com](http://www.ThyWordIsTruth.com).)

The woman is given wings with which to escape the pursuing dragon. That is, the woman is protected and preserved by God. Wings are often used to symbolize God's protection:

- **Exodus 19:4** You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.
- **Deuteronomy 32:11** Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone did lead them.
- **Psalms 36:7** How precious is thy steadfast love, O God! The children of men take refuge in the shadow of thy wings.

- **Isaiah 40:31** But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

What happens next? The dragon attempts to kill the woman with a flood, but the earth swallows the water. As with so many of the images in this book, this one takes us back to the Exodus. As the people of God escaped the great dragon of Egypt, God held back the water to allow his people to escape when Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea on dry ground. (See Exodus 14:21–31 and Psalm 106:9.)

Elsewhere, the Bible also portrays floods that are threatening to engulf God's people, sometimes as a judgment by God. Recall —

- **Isaiah 8:7-8** Now therefore, behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them the waters of the river, strong and many, even the king of Assyria, and all his glory: and he shall come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks: And he shall pass through Judah; he shall overflow and go over, he shall reach even to the neck; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel.
- **Isaiah 43:2** When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.
- **Psalm 144:7** Send thine hand from above; rid me, and deliver me out of great waters.
- **Psalm 32:6** For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found: surely in the floods of great waters they shall not come nigh unto him.

What sort of flood had Satan unleashed on them? It was a flood of delusion and deception. It was a flood of false religion. It was a flood of idolatry. It was a flood of false charges. It was a flood of false philosophies. It was a flood of immorality. It was a flood of compromise. It was a flood of perversion.

Satan may not have had much luck with that flood, but that did not keep him from trying it again. We are being threatened by a flood today that in some ways is worse than the one they faced. While we are not facing the same threat of physical persecution, we are living in a world that is awash in deception, false religions, and immorality. The waters from that flood threaten to swallow us up, and that flood was released by Satan.

What does it mean that the earth swallowed up the flood waters? Isn't the earth in the enemy's camp? First, we should note that the concept of water being absorbed by the sands of an arid wilderness would have been familiar to John's initial readers. The rivers flowing eastward from the Lebanon mountains disappear in the sands of the eastern desert. We recall that Job accused his friends in Job 6:15-20 of being like a deceitful brook that vanishes away — "when it is hot, they are consumed out of their place."

But is that all that is involved here, or is there a symbolic meaning behind this flood being swallowed up by the *earth*? Is there some sense in which the earth came to the rescue of the woman? Hailey says yes:

In the same way the earth, that is, the unregenerated earthlings, helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing up the lies of the dragon. In doing this the earth established a clear distinction between the world, satiated with its false religions and philosophical teachings, on the one hand, and the church, clothed with truth and righteousness, on the other. From the viewpoint of Satan and the world, the earth's help was incidental and unintentional: but from the viewpoint of the church, it was providential. As long as the world absorbs the river of Satan's lies, and the church drinks from the fountain of divine truth, the separation between the two will remain clear and distinct. But when the woman begins to compromise with Satan and his lies, becoming submerged in his river of falsehood, tragedy follows.

One reason that Rome fell was that Rome turned on itself. We will see that very thing later in this book, and Daniel told us about it 600 years before Revelation was written.

Remember the sequence of events here. We started off with the dragon on earth trying to devour the child. We then moved to Heaven, where Satan was defeated and cast out. We now see Satan back on earth again and being defeated again. What is the message here? God can defeat Satan anywhere he happens to be. He can defeat Satan in Heaven, and he can defeat Satan on earth, which Satan claims as his own turf.

What happens next? The dragon wages war against the offspring of the woman. The woman herself and her child are now beyond the reach of the dragon. That is, Jesus and the faithful people of God (as a whole and pictured as already dwelling in Heaven) are unstoppable and cannot be defeated by Satan.

However, Satan still wages war against individual Christians; that is, against the other offspring of the woman. In my opinion, these *other* offspring are those Christians who are still physically present on earth. This, in my opinion, is the same division between the inner sanctuary and the outer court that we see in 11:1-2.

The promise given in Revelation that Satan will not be able to defeat the church is not new or unique to this book. Recall Jesus's statement in Matthew 16:18 — "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." And recall Hebrews 2:14 — "That through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil."

Chapter 12 ends by saying that "the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus." Chapter 13 will provide the details of that attack.

Chapter 13 will introduce us to two of the weapons that Satan would use next in his battle against the church — a beast from the sea and a beast from the earth. As we will see, these beasts represent Rome, but

they do so from different perspectives. Just as we see the church from many different perspectives in this book, so do we see Rome from many perspectives. Chapter 13 will prove to be the key to understanding the remainder of the book, and so we will spend some extra time in this chapter.

## Chapter Thirteen

12:17b And he stood on the sand of the sea. 13:1 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.

Who stood on the sand of the sea? That's a good question. Some say it is the dragon, but verse 17 just told us the dragon went off to make war. Some say it is John, but verse 1 refers to John in the first person, unlike the third person reference in verse 17. I think it most likely refers to the dragon.

In verse 1, John sees a beast rise out of the sea. We have seen the sea used before to depict separation, and we have seen the sea used to depict the restless, unsettled nations of the world. That latter symbol seems to be the one God is using here. Recall the similar imagery in Isaiah 17:12-13 —

Ah, the thunder of many peoples, they thunder like the thundering of the sea! Ah, the roar of nations, they roar like the roaring of mighty waters! The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff

on the mountains before the wind and  
whirling dust before the storm.

And that symbol fits perfectly. This beast represents Rome, and Rome rose from the restless, unsettled nations of the world.

But there may be additional reasons behind the use of the sea here. In Isaiah 60:5, the prophet compares “the abundance of the sea” with “the wealth of the nations.” In Jeremiah 51:13, the prophet says the following about Babylon: “O you who dwell by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come.” And later in verse 42 of that same chapter, he writes, “The sea has come up on Babylon; she is covered with its tumultuous waves.” And in Ezekiel 26:3, God says the following about Tyre, “Behold, I am against you, O Tyre, and will bring up many nations against you, as the sea brings up its waves.” Thus, not only does the sea denote wicked and restless nations, it also denotes judgment.

This beast has seven heads with ten horns and ten diadems. This is the same description we were given of the dragon in 12:3. When we last saw the dragon we were told that it had gone off to make war against those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus. What we see here is one of the weapons that Satan was going to use in that conflict.

This beast is both a weapon of Satan and a manifestation of Satan. Satan was the driving power behind the attack by Rome against the church. That the beast is now wearing Satan’s royal headdress tells us that the dragon has given power and authority to the beast to act on his behalf.

What is represented by the seven heads? When we first saw them in 12:3, I mentioned that we would see them again here in Chapter 13, and that their meaning would be explained to us by an angel in Chapter 17. Rather than wait until we get to Chapter 17, I think it is helpful to jump over there now and discover what these symbols mean.

# Revelation — Lesson 17

## Revelation 13:1-2, Continued...

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.

Chapter 17, beginning in verse 7, contains a short commentary in which an angel explains to John the meaning of some of things that he has seen. The angel, in effect, steps outside of the vision in order to comment upon an explain what John is seeing.

Chapter 17 will begin by showing us a woman sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns — the same symbol we saw in Chapter 12 and the same symbol we see here in Chapter 13. Whatever this symbol means, its repeated appearance indicates it must be important. As another indication of its importance, an angel in 17:9-10 tells us what it means:

This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while.

Those two verses are crucial in understanding this book. That is why we have jumped ahead a few chapters to discuss them now. In addition, to telling us what the seven heads represent, these verses also tell us *when* the book of Revelation was written.

So what are the seven heads? The angel in Chapter 17 tells us they are two things — they are seven mountains, and they are seven kings.

The identification of the seven mountains would have been immediately clear to a first century reader. Swete: “No reasonable doubt can be entertained as to the meaning of these words.”

Gentry: “Perhaps no point is more obvious in Revelation that this one: *Rome* is the one city in history that has been distinguished for and universally recognizable by its seven hills. ... Suetonius and Plutarch record for us that in the time of Domitian the festival of *Septimontium* (“the feast of the seven hilled city”) was held annually in December to celebrate the seven hills enclosing Rome. ... This point is well nigh indisputably certain. Indeed, ‘there is scarce a poet that speaks of Rome but observes it.’”

Mounce: “There is little doubt that a first-century reader would understand this reference in any way other than as a reference to Rome, the city built upon seven hills.”

Coins minted at the time this book was written depicted the goddess Roma sitting upon the seven hills that surrounded the city of Rome. When this book shows us a bloodthirsty harlot sitting upon seven mountains it is flashing a giant neon sign that reads “Rome! Rome! Rome!” If anyone ever tells you it means something else, they need to explain to you how a first century reader with that coin in his pocket would have understood this image to mean anything other than Rome.

But we are told something else about the seven heads — they also represent seven kings: five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while. It is this verse that tells us when this book was written — it was written during the reign of the king who “is.”

Who are the seven kings? Before we answer that question we should pause and ask whether we should take this “7” literally or figuratively. Our general rule in interpreting apocalyptic language is to take numbers (and other symbols) figuratively unless we are forced for some reason to do otherwise, such as for instance when an angel makes an appearance to tell us that 7 means 7. Rome was surrounded by 7 *literal* mountains, and the angel in Revelation 17 told us that the 7 heads



represented 7 mountains. The same angel also told us that the 7 heads mean 7 kings, which the parallelism might suggest are 7 *literal* kings — but I think we will also see that even there 7 has a symbolic aspect and that, for *symbolic* reason, 3 of the kings will be ignored in the counting so that 10 literal kings become 7 literal kings *and* 7 symbolic kings. Thus, just because we see a few literal 7's does not mean that 7 has no symbolic significance in those cases — in fact, one could argue that the symbolic significance is increased when the symbolic 7 lines up with a literal 7.

So, who are these seven kings? Once again, before we answer that question, we need to travel back in time from the king who “is” about 600 years and read what Daniel had to say about him and his fellow kings. Daniel 7 is inextricably linked to Revelation 13 and Revelation 17.

First, consider Daniel 7:7-8 —

After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrible and dreadful and exceedingly strong; and it had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots; and behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.

And then consider Daniel 7:19-25 —

Then I desired to know the truth concerning the fourth beast, which was different from all the rest, exceedingly terrible, with its teeth of iron and claws of bronze; and which devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet; 20 and concerning the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn which came up and before which

three of them fell, the horn which had eyes and a mouth that spoke great things, and which seemed greater than its fellows. 21 As I looked, this horn made war with the saints, and prevailed over them, 22 until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints received the kingdom. 23 "Thus he said: 'As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, which shall be different from all the kingdoms, and it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces. 24 As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings shall arise, and another shall arise after them; he shall be different from the former ones, and shall put down three kings. 25 He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High, and shall think to change the times and the law; and they shall be given into his hand for a time, two times, and half a time.

The link between Daniel and Revelation is unmistakable and indisputable, although what the linked symbols mean is another story.

As we have previously discussed, the fourth kingdom in Daniel 7 is Rome. This fourth kingdom in Daniel is shown as a beast with ten horns, and verse 24 tells us that the ten horns are 10 kings.

So where are we? Daniel depicts Rome as a beast, as does Revelation. Daniel focuses on the kings of Rome, as does Revelation. Daniel depicts the kings as 10 horns, while Revelation depicts them as 7 heads.

Why do we go from 10 horns in Daniel to 7 heads in Revelation? The move from horns to heads is easy — we are told in each book that they depict kings. Why doesn't Revelation also use horns? Well, it does. In fact, it even uses 10 horns, just like Daniel. We will discuss those 10 horns in a moment. For now, though, we are looking at the seven

heads, and the horns in Daniel and the heads in Revelation both depict kings.

But now that we have gone from horns to heads, the real question is how we go from 10 to 7. Daniel had 10 horns denoting 10 kings, while Revelation has 7 heads denoting 7 kings. We are missing 3 kings! What happened to them? Daniel 7 answers that question in verse 8:

It was different from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, **before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots.**

What happens to the 10 horns when you pluck up 3 of them? You are left with 7 horns, which represent 7 kings. And, in my opinion, those 7 horns that represent 7 kings in Daniel 7 correspond with the 7 heads that represent 7 kings in Revelation 17. (That's a lot of numbers, and especially a lot of 7's — but does that really surprise us?)

Daniel starts with 10 horns and plucks up three, leaving 7 horns. But these 7 horns are followed by another horn which Daniel 7:8 and 7:21 tell us is a little horn who makes war on the people of God. This little horn would be the 11th horn. But after we subtract the 3 plucked up horns, the little horn would be the 8th horn.

Revelation 17 speaks of 7 heads that are 7 kings in verse 10. Is there an 8th head in Revelation? Yes, in the very next verse. Revelation 17:11 tells us about an 8th that belongs to the seven —

As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition.

So how do we fit the horns in Daniel with the heads in Revelation? Easy. The seven kings in Revelation are the seven kings in Daniel that remain after three are uprooted. The king represented by the little horn in Daniel is the 8th king in Revelation 17. The three uprooted kings in Daniel are ignored in Revelation.

So who are all of these kings? That is the million dollar question. There are numerous possibilities, but in my opinion there is only one possibility that fits perfectly with all of the evidence.

First, let's list out all of the candidates:

- **Julius Caesar** (49-44 BC)
- **Augustus** (31 BC - AD 14) — Luke 2:1
- **Tiberius** (14 - 37) — Luke 3:1
- **Caligula** (37 - 41)
- **Claudius** (51-54) — Acts 11:28
- **Nero** (54 - 68) — Acts 25:11
- **Galba** (68 - 69)
- **Otho** (69)
- **Vitellius** (69)
- **Vespasian** (69 - 79)
- **Titus** (79 - 81)
- **Domitian** (81 - 96)

Rome was still a Republic under Julius Caesar, and so he is not generally listed among the Roman emperors (although some disagree). Augustus is generally considered the first Roman emperor (although, again, some disagree). The emperors from Augustus to Nero make up the Julio-Claudian Dynasty, while Vespasian and his two sons Titus and Domitian make up the Flavian Dynasty. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius reigned and died during A.D. 69, the year of the four emperors (with Vespasian being the fourth).

Before we start looking for the dirty 7, let's get one objection out of the way quickly. The text talks about *kings*, whereas Rome had *emperors*. Are we correct to be looking for these 7 kings among the Roman emperors, or should we be looking for people who were called kings? The Roman emperors were called kings. What did the chief priests shout in John 19:15? "We have no **king** but Caesar."

So now what are we looking for? We must find 5 kings who have fallen, one king who is, one who is yet to come but who will remain only a little while, and an eighth king who goes to perdition.

We have two big decisions to make in locating our kings: (1) Where do we start? With Julius Caesar or Augustus? (2) What do we do with the three Civil War kings? Ignore them or include them?

For the mathematicians among us, that strategy gives us four possibilities. We start with either Julius Caesar or Augustus, and then we count out 8 kings, either including or ignoring the 3 Civil War kings. Here are the four lists we get by that procedure:

	OPTION 1	OPTION 2	OPTION 3	OPTION 4
1	Julius Caesar	Julius Caesar	Augustus	Augustus
2	Augustus	Augustus	Tiberius	Tiberius
3	Tiberius	Tiberius	Caligula	Caligula
4	Caligula	Caligula	Nero	Claudius
5	Claudius	Claudius	Galba	Nero
6 (One Who Is)	Nero	Nero	Otho	Vespasian
7 (Little While)	Galba	Vespasian	Vitellius	Titus
8 (Little Horn)	Otho	Titus	Vespasian	Domitian

And so, our four options are:

- OPTION 1: We start with Julius Caesar and include the three Civil War kings.
- OPTION 2: We start with Julius Caesar and omit the three Civil War kings.
- OPTION 3: We start with Augustus and include the three Civil War kings.
- OPTION 4: We start with Augustus and omit the three Civil War kings.

Some argue for the additional options that arise if we separate the eighth king from the others in time to permit intervening kings between the 7th and the 8th. But why then would we be told that the

reign of the 7th would last only a short time? That detail suggests to me that the 8th king follows immediately after the 7th king.

Right from the start I think we can rule out Option 2. Why? Because Option 2 places Vespasian in the role of the 7th king who was to reign only a short time, and Vespasian reigned for 11 years.

What about the other three options? Galba reigned 7 months, Vitellius reigned 8 months, and Titus reigned 26 months. So we cannot rule out any of the other options on that basis.

Options 1 and 3 have at least two problems. First, those options push the date of the book back to the reign of Nero or shortly thereafter, which in my opinion is much too early. Second, those options provide poor candidates for the eighth king, with Option 1 choosing Otho and Option 3 choosing Vespasian. Neither of these emperors fits the descriptions of the eighth king, and Otho hardly had time to do much of anything.

Another problem with Option 1 is that it starts with Julius Caesar as the first emperor. Was Julius Caesar the first emperor of Rome? Modern historians say no. If you consult a list of Roman emperors today you will see Augustus listed first. Why? Because Rome was a republic under Julius Caesar, not yet an empire. But how could a republic be ruled by a dictator? Simple — just write a law.

The Roman republic originally entrusted the government to two consuls so that the citizens of Rome would be protected against the tyrannical rule of a single man. But it was soon felt that circumstances might arise in which it was important for the safety of the state that the government should be vested in the hands of a single person, who should possess absolute power for a short time, and from whose decisions there could be no appeal to any other body. That person was called a dictator, and Julius Caesar held that office for five terms, eventually being declared “Dictator in Perpetuity.” Now, there may be a fine line between a Roman emperor and a dictator in perpetuity, but there is a line.

And if we include Julius Caesar on the list of Roman emperors, then why not include Crassus and Pompey? They ruled with Julius Caesar in the First Triumvirate. And why not include Lepidus and Marc Antony, who ruled with Augustus in the Second Triumvirate? And why not include Sulla, whose own dictatorship in 82 BC set the precedent for Julius Caesar's dictatorship, and the eventual end of the Republic under Augustus? In short, if we open the door for Julius Caesar, others will likely try to push through with him. And yes, it is true that some ancient historians include him on lists along with Augustus and his followers, but that points more to the fame of Caesar than to his office. Yes, it is true that Suetonius included Julius Caesar on his list of 12 Caesars, but no one is arguing that Julius Caesar was not a Caesar! What we are saying is that the first Caesar was not an emperor.

But is that the only reason to start with Augustus? No. I think a better reason to use him as the starting point is that the New Testament treats him as such. He was the emperor who was around to welcome the King of kings into this world, and whether or not he saw that star in the sky, after that date his empire would never be the same. In addition to being the historical starting point, Augustus is the natural starting point.

So where does that leave us? By the process of elimination we are left with Option 4. Does Option 4 fit the evidence? Yes, it fits it very well. In fact, it fits so well that could likely rule out Options 1 and 3 on that basis alone.

Who are the five kings who have fallen? They are the first five Rome emperors: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. These are the same five that span the time from the birth of Christ to the death of Paul. Who is the one king who is? After skipping over the three plucked up Civil War kings, the king who is would be Vespasian, who reigned from AD 69 to 79, during which time this book must have been written. Who is the one who is yet to come but who will remain only a little while? That would be Titus, Vespasian's eldest son who reigned for 26 months. And who was the eighth king who goes to perdition? None other than Domitian, Vespasian's younger son, who

I believe is also the little horn of Daniel 7 and the man of perdition from 2nd Thessalonians 2.

It seems to fit like a glove, but we need to be careful with regard to Domitian. Those who reject Option 4 argue that Domitian was not actually a great persecutor of the church, but was later turned into one by those who wanted to make him fit the description of the 8th king. Is that a fair criticism? Yes, and no.

Yes, in the sense that some commentators have overstated the case for Domitian to perhaps make him a better fit for their theories. One such statement describes Domitian as “the emperor who bathed the empire in the blood of Christians.” We have such evidence for Nero, but not for Domitian. Is it possible he did that? Yes. Do we know that he did that? No.

But saying that we do not know whether he bathed the empire in the blood of the saints does not mean that we cannot know whether he was a persecutor. I think we can, and I think he was. And I would point to three sources of evidence: circumstantial, Biblical, and extra-Biblical (*not* listed in order of importance).

We have already examined some circumstantial evidence for a Domitian persecution of Christians. The coins we discussed last week showed Domitian’s son as a divine child reaching for 7 stars and described Domitian himself as a son of a god. How could such a person not come in conflict with Christianity?

As for the Biblical evidence, we have looked at much of it today. There is a reason Christians have been seeing Domitian in the pages of Revelation for millennia. If our interpretation is correct, then (as we will see as we continue into Chapter 13) there was to be a revived persecution by an “8th king” who would arise after the death of Nero. Who else could this be but Domitian? The Bible, in my opinion, is our best evidence on this subject, and it, in my opinion, does just about everything in pointing to Domitian but mention him by name. (But Nero is never mentioned by name in the Bible, either.)



As for the extra-Biblical evidence, there is quite a bit (but admittedly not nearly as much as we have for Nero):

- When Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan in AD 111 for advice on how to conduct trials for Christians, he said that some Christians had defected “as much as 25 years ago.” That would have been during the reign of Domitian. And when Pliny says he had never been present for any such trials, the only time in Pliny’s life when such trials would have likely occurred is during the reign of Domitian.
- When Melito, a bishop of the church in Sardis, wrote an apology to the emperor Marcus Aurelius in AD 175, Eusebius tells us he wrote, “Nero, and Domitian, alone, stimulated by certain malicious persons, showed a disposition to slander our faith.”
- Tertullian was an attorney in Carthage, and in his apology to Septimius Severus in AD 197, he wrote: “Consult your histories. There you will find that Nero was the first to rage with the imperial sword against this school in the very first hour of its rise in Rome,” and “Domitian too, who was a good deal of a Nero in cruelty, attempted it ... soon stopped ... restored those he had banished. Such are ever our persecutors.” Eusebius quotes Tertullian to the effect that John returned from exile on Patmos during the reign of Domitian and lived in Ephesus until the reign of Trajan.
- Hegesippus, who lived between AD 117 and 189, writes of Christians who were called before Domitian and examined by him. Upon hearing them, “Domitian despising them, made no reply; but treating them with contempt, as simpletons, commanded them to be dismissed, and by a decree ordered the persecution to cease.”
- Eusebius, who published his church history in AD 325, describes Domitian as “the second that raised a persecution against us.”

Thus, the extra-Biblical evidence clearly points to a Domitian persecution. Perhaps it was not as bad as Nero’s and perhaps it was inter-

mittent at times, but it could still be very, very bad and not be as bad as what Nero did. Domitian persecuted God's people. To those who argue otherwise, I would respond as did Tertullian: "Consult your histories!"

But how can we date the book during the reign of Vespasian when much of that same extra-Biblical evidence dates it during the reign of Domitian? We dealt with this issue at length during our introductory lessons, where you will recall we suggested that John may have been exiled by Domitian before he became emperor. Also, the book may have been written during the reign of Vespasian, but not circulated until John was released, perhaps during the reign of Domitian.

Also, dating the writing of this book during the reign of Vespasian fits with Revelation 17:8, which seems to suggest that Revelation was written during a lull in the persecution —

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to perdition; and the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will marvel to behold the beast, because it was **and is not** and is to come.

Revelation 17:11 tells us that the "beast which was, and is not" comes back as the eighth king (Domitian). The beast who was would be Rome under Nero, and the beast who is to come would be Rome under Domitian. The time when the beast "is not" would be the time between Nero and Domitian when the persecution against the church temporarily subsided.

Does this all fit with history? Yes. Tertullian speaks of Nero as "the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood, when our religion was but just arising at Rome," and he called Domitian "a limb of the bloody Nero." Eusebius writes that Domitian "finally showed himself the successor of Nero's campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us." Rumors even circulated that Domitian was Nero himself who had either returned to life or had not actually died.

Our next question is why are the three short lived kings ignored? They are ignored so that the kings of Rome will fit the structure of this book, which as we know is built around the number 7. The three plucked up kings are ignored so that Domitian will be the 8th king rather than the 11th.

Why did God want to associate Domitian with the number eight? The number 8 in the Bible depicts a resurrection or new beginning. The eighth day denotes the start of a new week. Male children were circumcised on the eighth day to depict their new relationship with God. The year following seven sabbatical years was the year of Jubilee when all things were renewed (Leviticus 25). Domitian was thought to be a resurrected Nero because he began anew the persecution of the church.

So who are the 10 horns in verse 1? Again, Chapter 17 gives us some hints —

- **Revelation 17:12** And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.
- **Revelation 17:16-17** And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled.

So what then do we know about the 10 horns? We know the horns are kings. We know that they do not presently have royal power. We know that they will receive authority at a time of critical importance or activity. We know that they will play a role in the harlot's destruction. (The beast will also play a role. But how can the beast as Rome be partly responsible for the destruction of the harlot, which is also Rome? Recall that inner strife was one of the reasons that Rome fell. We see parallels today. Who is doing more today to harm the U.S.?

Iran or North Korea or the U.S. itself? Aren't we our own worst enemy? Rome certainly was.)

So in light of those clues, who are the 10 horns? They may represent the client kingdoms and federates of Rome. Michael Grant in his book *History of Rome* (page 196) gives us the following description of the Roman client king system —

The client kings were tied to the service of Rome in order to defend its frontiers and serve as listening posts to the outside world. In return, they were supported by the Romans against internal subversive movements and allowed a free hand inside their own countries. Thus Rome was spared the trouble and expense of administering these territories; and the formula worked well.

He describes the rise of the federates in his book *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (pages 8 and 125) —

In 382 Theodosius I took the revolutionary step of allowing whole German tribes to reside in Imperial territory as separate, autonomous, allied or federate units, committed to serving in the Roman army, though under the command of their own chieftains. Thereafter the practice continued and increased, until such federates became a regular and widespread feature of the life of the Empire.

The Visigoths were the first such group to receive “federate” status and were allowed to live under their own laws and ruled on the condition that they provide soldiers and agricultural workers for the Romans.

Did these groups contribute to the fall of Rome? The city of Rome itself was sacked in A.D. 410 by Alaric, a Visigoth. It was the first time in 800 years that the city had been taken by a foreign invader.

But why are there 10 horns? The number 10 is the number of completeness. It implies that nothing is wanting and that the whole cycle

is complete. Thus, the 10 horns may simply represent *all* of the client kingdoms and federates. It use may also refer to the fact that they, in a sense, drove the final nail into Rome's coffin—they *completed* the judgment that began in the first century.

That view of the 10 horns suggests that the ending point for Rome was the fifth century fall of the western empire rather than the first century fall of Domitian. Is there an explanation of the 10 horns that would fit with a first century terminus? Yes, and this possible explanation of the 10 horns would also answer another puzzling question.

As you recall, Daniel 7 also referred to 10 horns, but we have identified those 10 horns (after 3 are plucked up) with the 7 heads in Revelation 13. Why would Revelation take a symbol straight from Daniel 7 and apply it to something else?

The answer may be that the symbol is not applied to something else. It may be that the 10 horns and the 7 heads in Revelation 13 each depict the Roman emperors, but do so from different perspectives. (We are about to see two beasts that each represent Rome from a different perspective.) Under this view, the 7 heads and the 10 horns each represent the same kings, with the latter symbol including the 3 plucked up kings from Daniel 7.

But how does the description of the 10 horns in Revelation 17 fit with the Roman emperors? Recall the clues: The horns are kings. They have not yet received a kingdom or royal power. They will receive authority at a time of critical importance or activity. They will play a role in the harlot's destruction.

Revelation 17:11 tells us that the 8th king (Domitian) "belongs to the seven." That is, he came from the earlier kings and he embodied the earlier kings. Revelation sets Domitian up as the personification of the emperors who preceded him. Daniel 7:8 describes the little horn in similar terms: "behold, there **came up among them** [the 10 horns] another horn, a little one."

But what about the description that they have "not yet" received royal power? If "not yet" means they never had it prior to when they re-

ceived, then this view collapses. But “not yet” does not always mean “and never had” — and these 10 are said to be “kings” who had “not yet” received royal power, suggesting they may be kings who had it previously and would receive it again at some point.

As embodied in Domitian, the earlier kings (although dead) received a kingdom and royal power when he did. That was the time of critical importance, and indeed is a point of focus in this book and a point of focus in Daniel. Finally, they played a role in the destruction of the harlot because from this perspective they are viewed as part of Domitian, who was chiefly responsible for the destruction of the harlot. The emperors were why Rome was being judged!

So which is it — the client kings or the previous emperors? It could be either, and the description perhaps fits the client kings better than the earlier emperors. The time frame of the book, however, might steer us away from the client kings, who did not do their work against Rome until the fifth century.

It could also be neither. We know that the number 10 denotes completeness and so the 10 horns, which are 10 kings, may depict all of Rome’s allied kings and conquered kingdoms gathered together at a critical point. Later in 16:14 we will see “the kings of the earth and of the whole world” gathered for a great battle.

Looking again at 13:1, notice that the seven heads are said to have blasphemous names written upon them. This part of their description refers to the deification of the Roman emperors. Recall how Paul described the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 —

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

That sounds just like what history tells us about Domitian. As we discussed in our introductory classes, Domitian ordered that he be

addressed as “Our Lord God Domitian.” Recall the blasphemous descriptions of Domitian on the Romans coins we looked at.

And Domitian was not alone. Every emperor called himself *divus* or *sebastos*, which means divine. On his coins, Nero referred to himself as The Savior of the World. The emperors took as their title the Latin word *dominus*, or its Greek equivalent *kurios*, which mean Lord, and which is used in the Bible as a title for Jesus.

Verse 2 tells us that the beast “was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth.” These descriptions point us unmistakably back to Daniel 7. The fourth kingdom in Daniel 7 is Rome, with the first three kingdoms being Babylon (shown as a *lion* in Daniel 7:4), Medo-Persia (shown as a *bear* in Daniel 7:5), and Greece (shown as a *leopard* in Daniel 7:6). Daniel 7:12 tells us that these beasts lost their dominion but didn’t die.

We learn about the first two kingdoms from the book of Daniel. Babylon, the first of the four kingdoms, was the invading power that carried Daniel and his three friends off to exile in Babylon. The Medo-Persians, the second kingdom, was the one that came to power after Belshazzar saw the writing on the wall in Daniel 5. It was this second kingdom that through Daniel into the lion’s den. The third kingdom was Greece, which conquered Persia under Alexander but then fell into four parts after his death. Rome was the fourth kingdom.

The beast in Revelation 13 is pictured as being part leopard, part bear, and part lion. Rome had the tearing power of the lion (Babylon). Rome had the crushing force of the bear (Medo-Persia). And Rome was swift and ferocious like a leopard (Greece). Rome, the fourth beast in Daniel 7, embodied all of the wickedness of the first three beasts and much more. Thus, it is described as being composed of pieces of the previous three kingdoms.

Hailey: “This beast symbolized all the anti-God opposition by force that could ever be brought against the people of God.”

As a final point, we should note that as bad as Rome was, there is nowhere in this book any hint that the Christians were to violently re-

sist Rome or seek to overthrow Rome. Although the situation had worsened, the commands in Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 had not be repealed — “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God,” and “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” Yes, Rome had veered far away from the ideal government described by Paul and ordained by God — but nowhere are we told to take matters into our own hands. When Peter commanded his readers to “honor the emperor” in 1 Peter 2:17 he was most likely referring to none other than Nero himself!



## Revelation — Lesson 18

13:3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder.

One of the heads seemed to have a mortal wound. A better translation is given in the ASV — “And I saw one of its heads as though it had been smitten unto death.” The phrase “as though it had been smitten” simply means that the head was portrayed as having been slain. It does *not* necessarily mean that the head only appeared to have been slain. Remember Revelation 5:6– “I saw a Lamb [Jesus] standing, as though it had been slain.” The lamb had been slain and was portrayed as such.

Did the wound kill the entire beast or just the head? Later, in verse 12 we find out that it kills the entire beast — “its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.” That is, the entire beast dies when one of its heads dies. Whatever this beast is (and we will discuss that point in just a moment), it is inextricably linked to its seven heads (as we would expect). If, as we have suggested, these seven heads are the emperors of Rome, then this beast is something that lives and dies with them. We have wondered before whether the focus of these judgments is Rome itself or these early emperors of Rome. This detail supports the latter view.

Which emperor is depicted by this head that is slain? To help us answer that question, we once again turn to our angelic commentator in Chapter 17. In Revelation 17:8 we read:

The beast that you saw **was, and is not, and is to ascend** from the bottomless pit and go to perdition; and the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will marvel to behold the beast, **because it was and is not and is to come.**

That verse tells us that the first beast “was and is not and is to come.” Here in verse 3 we see a head on that beast that dies but is then healed, and from verse 12 we know that it was the beast itself that died and was healed. What sort of beast could be said to have died and then come back to life? And whatever sort of beast it was, the statement in 17:8 that it “is not” suggests that when this vision was received, the beast had already died, but had not yet come back to life. What is this beast?

The answer is that this first beast represents Rome (no surprise there), but it does so from a particular perspective — the beast depicts Rome as a civil persecutor of God’s people, which reached its heights in the first century under Nero and Domitian. How do we know that? Two reasons. First, the description of the beast tells us that it is a persecutor, and second, the focus on its heads is a focus on the emperors of Rome. Putting those together, we see a beast that depicts the Roman persecution from the standpoint of the Roman emperors, that is, from the standpoint of the Roman civil authorities. The government ordained by God had gone bad and turned against the people of God. The first beast denotes this rogue Roman government.

In a moment, we will meet a second beast in this chapter, and we will see that it is also a persecutor. In fact, the second beast will kill those who refuse to worship the first beast. There is no doubt that the descriptions of these beasts overlap, and that both show Rome as a persecutor, but as we will see when we get to the second beast, they do so from different angles.

If our view of this first beast is correct, then the death of the first beast meant an end or at least a dramatic drop in persecution by the civil authorities, and the resurrection of the beast would mean a sudden reappearance of that persecution.

Did that happen? Yes. Recall our earlier comments about Nero and Domitian. Tertullian said that Nero was “the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood,” and Eusebius wrote that Domitian “finally showed himself the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us.”

This image of the beast coming back to life has an interesting historical parallel. After the death of Nero in A.D. 68, there were many rumors that he had in fact not died but rather was planning to return and retake Rome. This belief came to be called the Nero Redivivus Legend. The earliest written version of the legend is found in the Sibylline Oracles, which claim that Nero did not really die but fled to Parthia, where he would build a large army and return to Rome to destroy it. At least three Nero imposters emerged to lead rebellions. The first, who sang and played the lyre and whose face was similar to that of the dead emperor, appeared in A.D. 69 during the reign of Vitellius. Sometime during the reign of Titus there was another impostor who appeared in Asia and also sang to the accompaniment of the lyre and looked like Nero. Twenty years after Nero's death, during the reign of Domitian, there was a third pretender. Domitian himself was regarded by some as the Nero Redivivus.

Why would Nero Redivivus have been so frightening? What sort of persecution occurred under Nero? What sort of person was Nero? Suetonius tells us the following about Nero:

He castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his home attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife. And the witty jest that someone made is still current, that it would have been well for the world if Nero's father Domitian had had that kind of wife.

We are also told that Nero married his step-sister and that he murdered or had murdered his step-father, his mother, and his wife. He first tried to kill his mother, Agrippina by putting her aboard a boat that had been constructed to collapse, but after she survived, he had her hacked to pieces by his soldiers. (It tells us something about Nero's mother that he was *cheered* by the Romans when he returned to Rome after the deed was done!) He took the wife of his closest friend (Otho) as his mistress and later kicked her to death when she was with child. In A.D. 64, he set fire to Rome so that he could rebuild it, and when suspicion turned on him, he blamed the Christians, who all

knew were anticipating a fiery end of the world. As one modern historian puts it, “The belief that the fire had been started deliberately became so prevalent that Nero was forced to point a finger away from himself. He singled out the strange eastern cultists called Christians.” Tacitus describes Nero’s subsequent persecution of Christians in this way:

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.

In short, it would be difficult to find a greater enemy of God and of God’s people than the Roman emperor Nero — and the rumor of the day was that this great enemy was about to return.

Chaos and civil war followed the death of Nero. Nero wasn’t alone in death: The Julio-Claudian Dynasty fell with him. When Nero came to power in 54, there were six other males who traced their heritage back to Augustus or Claudius. These men all died during Nero’s reign. Nero’s death left a political vacuum that many rushed to occupy.

Initially, the leader of the Spanish rebellion, Galba, was the accepted replacement. But the sole basis of his regime was his soldiers’ support, and when they turned against him in January 69, he was murdered. Nero’s friend Otho attempted to take Galba’s place, but he was immediately challenged by the legions on the Rhine, who wanted their commander, Vitellius, installed as emperor. The German legions invaded Italy and toppled Otho in April. In Palestine, the war against Jewish rebels was coming to an end, and the troops there proclaimed their general, Vespasian. Another invasion of Italy followed, Vitellius was removed, and Vespasian became emperor in December 69, thus becoming the fourth Roman emperor in 12 months.

So what then are we saying? The beast is Rome as a civil persecuting power. That beast came to the forefront under Nero, but when Nero died, so did the beast, as the persecution temporarily subsided. When Revelation was written, the beast was still dead, which also fits with

history. This book was written during a lull in the persecution that occurred during the reign of Vespasian. Later, though, the beast would come back to life under Domitian, who was in a sense Nero Redivivus. Tertullian called him “a limb of the bloody Nero.” Domitian represented a new beginning of persecution against God’s people. He was the eighth king.

**4 Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”**

In this verse we see two of the most horrible images in this entire book: dragon worship and beast worship.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: “A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

If we worship the dragon, then like the dragon we will become. If we worship the beast, then like the beast we will become. And have no about it — dragon worship and beast worship are alive and well today!

As we have already discussed, this dragon is Satan who was the driving power behind Rome against the church. He had given his authority to Rome so that it would attack the church on his behalf.

And why did they worship the beast? Because it had died and come back to life! It was unstoppable! What we see here is a ghastly parody of Jesus, who truly died and came back to life. Like Pharaoh’s magicians, Rome is saying, “Look! We can do that, too!” In fact, this a theme that runs throughout this book, although it does so right beneath the surface. Barclay describes the question “Who is like the beast?” as a grim parody of the great question “Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods?” in Exodus 15:11.

Just imagine this scene from the church's viewpoint. It must have almost seemed to them that even God was powerless to stop this beast. What hope did the church have against such a powerful, unstoppable beast? Would it ever be killed once and for all? Would it always come back from the dead? Could it ever be stopped?

The situation looks bleak, but the very next verse should provide hope to an alert reader! (If you don't see why verse 5 provides hope, then it is time for a review!)

5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months; 6 it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain. 9 If any one has an ear, let him hear: 10 If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Verse 5 tells us that this resurrected beast has authority for 42 months. Now that we know what the symbol means, this statement provides a reason to rejoice. A period of 42 months (or 3½ years — a broken seven) tells us that this situation was temporary. The beast might seem invincible, but God is telling us in verse 5 that all is not as it seems! Jesus died and rose from the dead, never to die again. That will *not* be true of this beast from the sea! Jesus is a 7! This beast is a

broken 7! (Keep that thought in mind as we inch ever closer to verse 18.)

The resurrected beast is pictured as haughty and blasphemous. Domitian, who required that he be addressed as “Our Lord God Domitian,” fits the bill on both counts. Remember the coins we looked at that described Domitian as a son of a god and that pictured his own infant son as a deified world conqueror reaching for 7 stars.

The resurrected beast makes war on the church and is pictured as actually conquering them. This is exactly the same situation we saw in 7:7 where the beast (Rome) came out of the bottomless pit and conquered and killed the two witnesses (the church). Here, as in Chapter 7, we are simply being shown the situation from the beast’s perspective. Rome thought it had defeated the church and so is shown here as defeating them — but things are not what they seem!

What is meant in verse 8 by the phrase “every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain”? (A parallel passage appears later in 17:8.) Does this mean that those in the book of life were predestined for salvation before they were even born, and that those not in the book were predestined for damnation before their birth? Of course not! How could it? The entire Bible screams out against such a heinous concept. It is not God’s will that anyone should perish! (2 Peter 3:9) It would seem difficult to reconcile that fact with the idea that God predestined the vast bulk of mankind to damnation before the world was created! A Christian should be repulsed by such an idea! Why proclaim the gospel if the Book of Life has already been filled up? And what about Revelation 3:5, which talks about God blotting names out of that book?

So what then is meant by verse 8? Paul tells us exactly what it means in Ephesian 1:4-6 —

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself,

according to the good pleasure of his will, To  
the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein  
he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

God's plan was that there would be a book of life and that those in his eternal kingdom would have their names in that book — and that was God's plan from before the foundation of the world.

We earlier discussed what it meant for God to mark his people as his own special possession, and that mark is tied to having one's name marked or recorded in the Book of Life. The Old Testament closes with a beautiful description of this idea in Malachi 3:16-17 —

Then they that feared the LORD spake often  
one to another: and the LORD hearkened,  
and heard it, and a book of remembrance was  
written before him for them that feared the  
LORD, and that thought upon his name.  
And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of  
hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels;  
and I will spare them, as a man spareth his  
own son that serveth him.

One of the greatest Bible scholars I ever knew was Marion Williams, and here is what she wrote next to Malachi 3 in the margin of her Bible (which I now have): “No matter how lonely this life, how far from loved ones and friends, think on this splendid, magnificent truth: Almighty God says of us, ‘This one is mine’ — the ultimate recognition, the ultimate friendship.” Yes, God has a Book of Life. Yes, God has a Book of Remembrance. And, yes, that is the book you want to be in!

And what is meant by verse 10, which says, “If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain.” This verse is made up of two quotes — one from Jeremiah and one from Jesus. In Jeremiah 15:2, the prophet was told to tell the people that those destined for death would go forth to death, those destined for the sword to the sword, those for famine to famine, and those for captivity to captivity. The idea there was that there is no escape from the decree of God. But verse 10 also quotes



Jesus in Matthew 26:52 that all who take up the sword will perish by the sword. There are at least three lessons in this verse.

First, Christians must accept the consequences that occur in this life from following Christ. We know those consequences will involve persecution, and part of taking up our cross is accepting those consequences.

Second, Christianity can never be defended with physical force. As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:4, our weapons are not carnal. Barclay: "It is an intolerable paradox to defend the gospel of the love of God by using the violence of man."

Third, verse 10 ends by listing the weapons that are available to a Christian — steadfastness and loyalty. The Greek word translated steadfastness or endurance does not mean passive endurance but rather means courageously accepting the worst in this life so that we can turn it into glory for God. The Greek word translated loyalty or faith means fidelity that never wavers. Those were the weapons that Christians used in the first century to conquer the mighty Roman empire, and those same weapons will still conquer the strongholds of Satan today. Remember again 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 —

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Was the church at war with Rome? Yes. Are we at war today with the godlessness that threatens to engulf us? Yes. Are our weapons carnal? No. Our weapons are steadfast endurance and loyalty to Christ. Nothing on earth can defeat us while we wield those weapons!

11 Then I saw another beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a

lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.

The first beast arose from the sea. In verse 11, we meet a second beast that arises from the earth.

Why are there two beasts? One reason is that (as we will soon see) each beast depicts Rome from a different perspective, and God wanted to show us two different perspectives. But is there a *symbolic* reason for having two beasts? Perhaps. Earlier, we saw the church depicted by *two* witnesses, and in our study of the seven heads followed by an eighth there were *two* that stood out — the one that died (Nero) and the eighth (Domitian). I think the use of *two* beasts is intended to focus our attention on the *two* witnesses (the church) and on the *two* great persecutors of the church (Nero and Domitian). Which pair will prevail?

The use of two could also be intended to focus our attention on the two dynasties of Roman emperors that are involved here. The first, the Julio-Claudians, started with Augustus and ended with Nero. The second, the Flavians, started with Vespasian and ended with Domitian. Is it a coincidence that the deaths of Nero and Domitian marked the ends of their respective dynasties? I think this historical fact is another reason why God shows us two beasts.

The first beast depicted Rome as a persecuting power. What does this second beast depict? As we always do, let's consider the clues.

The first thing we see about this beast is that it rises from the earth. This part of the beast's description stresses the human origin of this beast. In verse 18 we will see that it is given a "human number." This second beast is man-made. It is a beast made with human hands.

If you want an interesting Bible study exercise, trace through the Bible the concept of things made or not made with human hands. In Daniel 2:45, the great stone that represents the eternal kingdom of God (the

church) is described as a stone that “was cut out of the mountain **without hands**.” Also, recall:

- **Acts 17:24-25** God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples **made with hands**; **Neither is worshipped with men’s hands**, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.
- **2 Corinthians 5:1** For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house **not made with hands**, eternal in the heavens.
- **Colossians 2:11** In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision **made without hands**, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.
- **Galatians 1:11** But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is **not after man**.

There is a sharp line drawn in the Bible between those things made with human hands and those things that are not.

We will see other clues about this second beast in later chapters. In 16:13 and 19:20, the second beast is called “the false prophet.” That clue tells us that this beast is religious in nature, but when combined with the first clue we know that it is a man-made religion; that is, it is a false religion.

Verse 12 gives us yet another clue. This second beast causes men to worship the first beast. The first beast was focused on the Roman emperors as civil persecuting authorities, and so this second beast causes me to worship those Roman emperors.

Finally, verse 11 tells us that this second beast looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. It is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. What is it that shows up as a wolf in sheep’s clothing? Matthew 7:15 — “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” (And again, we see the parody of this beast trying to portray itself as Christ, the true lamb who was slain.) It is

also possible that verse 11 says that this lamb spoke like a *serpent*. If so, it would be pointing us straight back (yet again) to Genesis 3.

So, having considered the clues, what does this second beast depict? It depicts Rome, but from a different perspective than did the first beast. The first beast from the sea portrayed the civil persecuting side of Rome. This second beast from the earth portrays the perverted religious side of Rome.

These two aspects of Rome were just two sides of the same coin. They worked hand in hand to stir up persecution of the church. History tells us that the first beast (civil persecution) was likely worse under Nero than under Domitian, but the second beast (perverted religion) was likely worse under Domitian than under Nero.

13 It works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; 14 and by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast which was wounded by the sword and yet lived; 15 and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.

Throughout this book, that which is genuine and from God has been accompanied by that which is false and from the earth, and the signs and wonders from God are no exception. Here we see that the beast also had signs and wonders, but of course they are just the false signs and the false wonders that even today generally accompany a false religion. Paul described such signs and wonders (and confirmed that they were false) when he described the lawless one (Domitian) in 2 Thessalonians 2:9 — “Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and **lying** wonders.” Verse 14 also confirms that these were false signs — they **deceived** those who dwell on the earth.

Stephen Benko in his book *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (page 128) writes that “certain elements in the official Roman religion were based on magical principles” and that “magic was an accepted form of religious piety.” History tells us that the Roman priests were both ventriloquists and magicians. Originally ventriloquism was a religious practise. The name comes from the Latin phrase meaning to speak from the stomach. The noises produced by the stomach were thought to be the voices of the dead, who took up residence in the stomach of the ventriloquist. The ventriloquist would then interpret the sounds, as they were thought able to speak to the dead, as well as to foretell the future. Roman priests used ventriloquism to make it appear as if statues of Roman emperors were speaking. An example of such a person may have been Elymas the sorcerer in Acts 13:8 who had influence over a Roman proconsul. And you remember what Paul said to him in verse 10 — “O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?”

Verse 15 says that this second beast would kill those who refused to worship the first beast. The magistrate and Roman religious hierarchy had the power to impose death on those who refused to confess Caesar as Lord. Hailey: “This put the Christian in the position where he must confess either Christ or Caesar as Lord, thus choosing between immediate death and a few added years of life before eternal death.”

As an aside, we rightly include confession as a step in God’s plan of salvation, but I wonder sometimes if we fully appreciate its importance. We make the good confession prior to our baptism (as we should), but when we do we should think back on those prior times when the one making that confession was making a choice between Christ and Caesar with a sword held at his throat.

As another aside, the idolatry pictured again and again in this book points directly at Rome and these false religious practices. Those who think the villain in this book is Jerusalem have trouble explaining all of these references to idolatry.

16 Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, 17 so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 18 This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six.

Verse 16 tells us that the beast marked his own people. Just as God marked his people in Chapter 7 to indicate that they were his, the beast marks his people in Chapter 13 for the same reason. God knows his people. Satan also knows his people. Everyone on earth then and everyone on earth today is wearing one mark or the other. Each of us belongs to someone.

Verse 17 tells us that no one could buy or sell without the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. When we discussed the letters to the seven churches in Chapters 2-3, we discussed the economic persecution that Christians suffered at the hands of the pagan guilds. A confession that Caesar is Lord was often required before one was allowed to buy or sell. Those who refused to make that confession were perceived as unpatriotic and suffered severe economic hardships.

Verse 18 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible, ranking up there with John 3:16. It has entered the public consciousness to a greater degree than any other verse in this book. People who can't even name the four gospels can still tell you more than you care to hear (from them, anyway) about 666.



Verse 18 begins with a call for wisdom, and yet that verse has spawned a great deal of foolishness. Did you know that the modern barcode is the mark of the beast and an indication that we are living in the end times? Some say so. The two bars that denote '6' appear at the beginning, middle, and end of every barcode found on the back cover of most books. Terry Cook in his book *The Mark of the New World Order* writes that "the entire [UPC barcode] system is very deceptively designed around the infamous numerical configuration, Biblically known as 666, the mark of the Antichrist or devil." Mary Stewart Relfe in her book *The New Money System 666* writes that "the Prophet John identified this Cashless System of Commerce 1900 years ago as one in which business would be transacted with a 'Mark' and a Number; the Mark will obviously be a Bar Code; the Number will be '666;' the combination of the two, about which you will read in this book, will be an integral part of the '666 System.'" Ridiculous? Yes, extremely so, but sadly not uncommon when it comes to explanations of 666.

Verse 18 tells us that the number of the beast is 666, a human number. What does that mean? The number 7 means perfection. By contrast, the number 6 means imperfection. The number 6 denotes something that had fallen hopelessly short of perfection. Man was created on the sixth day, and he fell from perfection. The number 3 is the number of divinity. Thus, three 6's depict something that has fallen hopelessly short of divine perfection. It had aspirations of being a 777, but it fell far short.

Does that symbol accurately describe this beast? Yes! No symbol could describe it any better! This beast represents the false perverted religious side of Rome. It represents the man-made Roman religion that worshiped the creature rather than the creator. God is 777! Rome is 666! It is a beautiful symbol that shows the stark contrast between God and his creation. Nothing man-made can ever be a 777.

Hailey: "666 stands for the complete and total failure of all human systems and efforts antagonistic to God and His Christ — all are doomed to ultimate and complete defeat and failure."

But can this really be all there is to 666! Surely it must be something more than that! We need to view this symbol in the proper perspective. The 666 symbol is just another symbol in this book full of symbols. It may stand apart from the other symbols in modern consciousness, but it does not stand apart from them in the text. Yes, 666 is a wonderfully descriptive symbol, but there are many other wonderfully descriptive symbols in Revelation. We must remember that this book was primarily intended to provide comfort to the first century Christians who were suffering intense persecution by Rome. If our interpretation of the book ignores that fundamental fact, then our interpretation is almost certainly wrong. The church needed to know that Rome was a 666! (Let's keep all of this in mind as we get closer to discussing the 1000 year reign *with* Christ in Revelation 20.)

And the church needs to understand today that there are many, many 666's in our own world. We are surrounded by man-made churches, man-made religions, and man-made philosophies — and all of them are just 666. There are many so-called churches today that should have 666 printed on their signs out front because they are a man-made church proclaiming a man-made gospel. Nothing made by man can ever be a 777. And on that great last day, the last thing you want to rely on is a 666. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) That name is 777!

Next week we will consider another possible significance for 666.



## Revelation — Lesson 19

### More on the Two Beasts...

Last week, we considered several possible reasons why there are *two* beasts in Chapter 13. There is an additional possibility that we should consider as well. According to Roman mythology, Rome was founded by the twin brothers, Romulus and Remus. That same mythology tells us that Romulus was the first king of Rome, and that shortly after their birth the twins were ordered to be killed by exposure, but they survived and were nursed by a wolf — which is often depicted in Roman art and Roman coins.



Because Romulus was raised by a wolf, one early source called him “the son of the beast.” It is possible that the two beasts in Revelation 13 are pointing all the way back to the two mythological founders of Rome.

### Revelation 13:18 Continued...

With regard to verse 18, one commentator has noted that “no verse in Revelation has received more attention than this one with its cryptic reference to the number of the beast.”

Last week we discussed the famous number 666 in verse 18, and we concluded that it depicts something that has fallen hopelessly short of

divine perfection, which would be denoted by 777. As Lenski explained about 666:

In other words, *not* 777, but competing with 777, seeking to obliterate 777, but doing so abortively, its failure being as complete as was its expansion by puffing itself up from 6 to 666.

There is another possible significance for 666 that we should discuss, and it stems from something called *gematria*. Gematria refers to the representation of words by their numerical equivalents so that the number conveys a message.

We know that the use of gematria was common at the time. At Pergamum, inscribed stones have been found containing numerical riddles based on gematria. Graffiti from the ruins of Pompeii reads “I love her whose number is 545” and “Amerimnus thought upon his lady Harmonia for good. The number of her honorable name is 45.” A difficult passage in Suetonius is explained by noting that Nero is there numerically resolved into “matricide.” One commentator states that “gematria was widely used in apocalyptic [literature] because of its symbolic and enigmatic quality.”

Here are the questions we need to consider: (1) Is the reference to 666 in verse 18 an example of gematria? (2) If so, then to what or to whom does it refer? (3) And, again if so, is that meaning the primary meaning of the symbol or a secondary meaning?

Let’s start with the third question first. Earlier we discussed the symbolic meaning of 666 as something that has fallen hopelessly short of the divine 777, and we saw how that symbol perfectly depicted the second beast from the earth. That fit is so perfect and is explained so well in terms of the symbol 7 (around which this entire book is constructed), I am convinced that this symbolic understanding of 666 is the primary meaning behind the symbol. And so, if we determine that gematria is in use in verse 18, I submit it must be a secondary meaning of the symbol. And there is some additional evidence for that view — the verse itself begins with a call for wisdom, which may be an indication that a dual meaning is involved here. We have dis-

cussed before how difficult it is to determine secondary meanings for prophecies absent being explicitly told by God. There is no such explicit statement here, but there may nevertheless be a suggestion.

So, that leaves us with two questions — was gematria used, and, if so, to what or to whom does it refer?

Before we answer those questions, we should pause to consider an important warning. One has to be very careful when heading off into this direction in the Bible because right near the edge there is a very steep slope heading straight down into sheer speculation and utter nonsense. Those going down this road sometimes find themselves trying to read some numerical significance into every word of the Bible. Many books have been published that claim to have discovered a secret code in the Bible that predicts the names, locations, and dates of future events. What those books fail to tell you is that those same methods could be applied to almost any book to obtain similar secret messages.

We need to be particularly careful with gematria because, as we know, it is possible to prove anything with numbers if one is willing to twist the facts while ignoring the context and all other evidence to the contrary. Some people treat numbers and statistics in the same way that a drunk treats a lamppost — for support rather than for illumination!

Here are two quick examples: Here's a numerical "proof" that Hitler was the antichrist. Let A = 100, B = 101, C = 102, etc. and note that 107 (H) + 108 (I) + 119 (T) + 111 (L) + 104 (E) + 117 (R) = 666! Or, consider the following numerical "proof" that Shakespeare translated the King James version of the Bible: How old was Shakespeare in 1611 when the King James version was published? 46. The 46th word in Psalm 46 is "shake." The 46th word from the end of Psalm 46 is "spear." Coincidence? Certainly. Silly? Yes. More silly than most of the crazy notions people have about 666? No. People need to quit looking for secret messages in the Bible and start obeying the message that is clear for all to understand.

But with that said, anyone who studies 666 and the history of its interpretation must be struck some strange curiosities. For example,

we all know the six Roman numbers: I(1), V(5), X(10), L(50), C(100), and D(500). What do you get when you add up the values of the five Roman numbers? 666. Take the first seven primes numbers (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, and 17) and sum their squares:  $4 + 9 + 25 + 49 + 121 + 169 + 289$ . What do you get? 666. Spooky! (and irrelevant!)

So, going back to the text, is gematria used in verse 18? Possibly. We know that gematria was common at the time, and we know that some of the earliest commentaries on Revelation have turned to gematria to explain this verse.

But then what could 666 denote? There are a number of words and names that could be represented as 666, depending on the language we choose (Hebrew, Greek, Latin) and how we then associate letters in that language with numbers. Having this many variables makes it very difficult to determine which (if any) was the word or phrase that God intended for us to associate with 666.

We should probably not expect a perfect fit. Why? Because in my view the primary meaning of 666 does not rely on gematria but rather relies on the symbolic meaning of 666 as falling short of 777. That is, the number 666 was not chosen to represent a name but was chosen for its symbolic significance. It may *also* represent a name, but if it does we should probably not expect the same perfect fit we would have had if the number had been chosen solely on that basis.

There is evidence that some have tried to change the text to make what they consider a better fit. Some of your Bibles may have a footnote that says some early texts have 616 in verse 18 rather than 666. Lenski describes that textual issue:

This is not a faulty transcription but a deliberate alteration that was made very early and against which the strongest protest was at once raised. The alteration was made so that by gematria the number would fit the emperor [Caligula]. This was the man who made the effort to have his image erected in the Temple at Jerusalem...

Thus, those early texts that show 616 in place of 666 most likely represent someone's attempt to make the number 666 a better fit for someone's name by changing it to 616. The correct value is 666.

But those early manuscripts with 616 do tell us something important. Those changes from 666 to 616 confirm that from very early in its history commentators have understood verse 18 to include an example of gematria. We should not be too quick to discount viewpoints that are closely related in time to the original readers of this book.

So what *could* 666 represent? There are numerous candidates, but, not surprisingly, the leading candidate is Nero, whose name could also be said to denote Domitian as Nero Redivivus. Various numerical representations will give you 666 from either Nero Caesar or Neron (the Latin form of his name that appears, for example, in the subscript in the KJV at the end of 2nd Timothy), but other names can be made to fit as well. In short, no one can be certain that gematria is used, and if it is used, no one can be certain who is represented, but Nero is a likely candidate because of the context of verse 18.

Let's next consider the other side of the argument. A very good case can be made for the proposition that no gematria at all is involved in verse 18. For example, verse 18 omits a definite article before "man," which may indicate that no particular man is in mind. Also, as one commentator notes, "what is not generally stressed is that [the most commonly given] solution [pointing to Nero] asks you to calculate a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek form of a Latin name, and that with a defective spelling." Lenski gives us other objections as well:

It is surprising to note how many men think that "666" is the product of gematria. ... Yet nowhere is Scripture, nowhere in Revelation do we meet with another case of gematria. ... A number that is produced by gematria would remain an insoluble conundrum; yet the very title of this book is "Revelation." ... Take some name and set down the value of each of its letters, add these, write the sum. A hundred other names may produce the same sum.

Those are all good objections, and some of them are even compelling. But with those objections stated, I still believe it is possible that 666 has a secondary significance based on gematria, and I would point to verses 17-18 for support as well as the view of ancient commentators on that subject.

So, in summary, my opinion is that the primary significance of 666 is that it falls hopelessly short of the divine perfection denoted by 777. That idea fits perfectly with the context of this second beast representing the false perverted religion of Rome. I also think there is *possibly* a secondary meaning in which 666 denotes Nero.

What then is the setting at the end of Chapter 13? A terrible dragon has given his authority to a seven headed beast that has arisen from the sea. The beast is killed but comes back to life. A second beast arises and looks like a lamb but sounds like a dragon. The second beast performs signs and wonders and causes the earth to worship the first beast. The chapter ends with the whole earth in the spell of the dragon and the beasts.

What does the church need at this point? The church needs comfort and assurance, which is exactly what Chapter 14 provides.

## Chapter Fourteen

1 Then I looked, and lo, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps, 3 and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before

the elders. No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth. 4 It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are chaste; it is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes; these have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, 5 and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are spotless.

Look at the incredible contrast between the last verse of Chapter 13 and the first verse of Chapter 14! Chapter 13 ended with the mark of the beast that was written on all those who worshiped the dragon. Chapter 14 begins with those who have the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father on their foreheads. There is no doubt to whom these people belong! 2 Timothy 2:19 — “The Lord knows those who are His!”

And right away we have a lesson for us today. Is there ever any doubt about to whom we belong? There was no doubt for those Christians in Rome. To be a Christian in Rome meant a constant risk to one's life and livelihood. There were very few nominal Christians at that time. But what about today? What would happen to our attendance if our country began to persecute those who confess that Jesus is Lord? We need to live our lives in such a way that no one will ever have any doubt that we belong to Christ. Our Christian walk should be so apparent to the world that it is as if we literally had the name of Christ marked on our foreheads.

We have already seen many of these symbols, and we won't repeat here all that we said about them earlier (but we will repeat some of it).

The Lamb, of course, is the resurrected Christ. Although the Lamb had been slain (Revelation 5:6), the Lamb now stands on Mount Zion. What about the harps? We've already talked about them. What about the new song? We've already talked about it. What about Mount Zion? That's a new one!

What is Mount Zion? Zion was initially introduced as the stronghold and city of David in 2 Samuel 5:7 and 1 Chronicles 11:5. In time it came to represent God's dwelling place among his people, as in Psalm 9:11. It was a refuge because God was there, as in Psalm 48:2-3 — "Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge." It was a symbol of security, as in Psalm 125:1 — "They that trust in the LORD shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever."

Zion also denoted deliverance. Psalm 14:7 tells us that Zion is the place from which deliverance comes — "O that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion!" Romans 11:26 quotes Isaiah 59:20 and tells us that Zion is the place from which the Deliverer will come — "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob." What did the church need? Deliverance! Where are these people now standing? At the very source of deliverance!

Finally, Zion played an important role in the Messianic promise:

- **Psalm 2:6** "Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion."
- **Psalm 110:2** "The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies."
- **Isaiah 2:3** "for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."
- **Isaiah 59:20** "And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the LORD." (Romans 11:26)
- **Isaiah 28:16** "Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste." (Romans 9:33; 1 Peter 2:6)
- **Micah 4:7** "and the LORD shall reign over them in mount Zion from henceforth, even for ever."
- **Isaiah 35:10** "And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their



heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

- **Isaiah 62:11** “Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him.”

In Hebrews 12:22-24, we read:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

Chapter 14 shows the Lamb standing on Mount Zion with the 144,000. Is this a *future* scene or a *present* scene? Look at the verses we just read! The promises of Zion arrived with Jesus! The writer of Hebrews said that we “have come” to Mount Zion. The apostles quoted the Zion promises and said they had been fulfilled in Christ. Zion is something we have right now — and something those first century Christians had as well.

So who are the 144,000? We have already looked at this symbol and discussed it at length in our discussions of Chapter 7. The 144,000 here represents what it did earlier — the church, the people of God, ALL of God’s people. That is what the symbol means: 12 times 12 times 1000! ALL of God’s people with no one left out!

Chapter 14 adds to the earlier description of the 144,000 and confirms that our identification is correct. Verse 3 tells us that the 144,000 had been redeemed from the earth, which is also true of the church —

- **1 Corinthians 6:20** “You were bought with a price.”

- **1 Corinthians 7:23** “You were bought with a price.”
- **1 Peter 1:18-19** “You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”

Verse 4 describes the 144,000 as virgins, and in 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul describes the church as a “pure bride” presented to her one husband, Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 5:21–33 Paul describes the relationship between Christ and his church as a marriage. Throughout the Old Testament, idolatry was viewed as spiritual fornication. Thus, the church, following the command in 1 Corinthians 10:14 to flee from idolatry, is pictured as a virgin. This image of virginity may also be intended to emphasize that the redeemed had no congress with the harlot (depicting Rome) that we will meet in Chapter 17.

Verse 3 tells us that only the 144,000 could learn the new song. This new song is the song of redemption we saw in 5:9–10. This is not a song for angels because angels do not share in the saving help provided by Christ (Hebrews 2:16). “The angels might look with admiration and wonder on the work of redemption, but they have no experience of it.” This is a song for the redeemed! That *only* the 144,000 could learn this song tells us that the 144,000 is *all* of the redeemed. The 144,000 is not just a part of the church. The 144,000 is the church. To argue otherwise is to say that there are some in the church who cannot sing the song of redemption.

Verse 4 describes the 144,000 as those redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb. James 1:18 describes the church as “a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” And that image fits best with the church of the first century, who were literally the first fruits redeemed from mankind. And yet many today would have these first fruits refer instead to the *last* fruits at the end of time!

Verse 4 describes the 144,000 as those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. In Luke 9:23–24 Jesus says “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.”

This is a beautiful picture. We generally think of a lamb as following a shepherd, but here the church is the one following and the Lamb is the one leading. Earlier we saw the wrath of the Lamb. A lamb that has wrath? A lamb that leads? Our Lamb is like no other lamb!

Verse 5 describes the 144,000 as spotless. Ephesians 5:27 describes the glorious church as being without spot or wrinkle or blemish.

The 144,000 represents all of God’s people, which at this time was the church — ALL of the church. No one is left out. God has marked each one so that none will be misplaced. Had God forgotten about the church? Absolutely not! Did Jesus care what was happening to his church? Absolutely he cared! That is the message of these beautiful verses. There are no more beautiful descriptions of the church of Christ than those found in Revelation. We must always seek to see the church as God sees it. If we ever do, then this book of Revelation will become a book of revolution!

6 Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; 7 and he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water.”

Verse 6 is the only occurrence of the word “gospel” in any of John’s writings. This angel delivers an eternal gospel — good news to those who follow God and a warning to those who don’t. If there is a final opportunity for repentance in this book, this would seem to be it. The hour of judgment has come. But even as that hour comes, God continues to proclaim the eternal gospel. It is not God’s will that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Those who were worshiping the emperor would soon discover they had made a very bad choice. The emperor did not make heaven or earth or the sea or the fountains of water. The emperor is not a creator; the emperor is a creature. The judgment about to come will demonstrate to all that God alone is worthy of worship.

8 Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion.”

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” We have been waiting 14 chapters to hear that message proclaimed! Who is Babylon? Who else could it be but Rome? Who else made all nations drink the wine of her impure passion? Who else did Peter refer to as Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13? Who else at this time could better be described as Babylon, the great enemy of God’s people? In Chapter 17 we will see Babylon as a harlot who is drunk with the blood of the saints. Who else could that be but Rome?

Some might say that Jerusalem could be this Babylon. But what effect did Jerusalem have on the seven *Asian* churches who initially received this letter? How did Jerusalem make *nations* drink the wine of her impure passion? Was Jerusalem identified with seven mountains? Babylon is Rome. That was true in First Peter, and it is true in Revelation.

And the good news is that Babylon *is fallen*. The past tense emphasizes the certainty of the event. In Genesis 17:5 God said to Abraham, “I *have* made you the father of a multitude of nations,” even though at the time Abraham had no children! The past tense stressed the *certainty* of the fulfillment. At least 50 years before the actual Babylon fell to the Medes, God said, “Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed.” (Jeremiah 51:8) And remember Isaiah 48:3 — “I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went forth out of my mouth, and I shewed them; I did them suddenly, and they came to pass.”

The “wine of her impure passion” is likely a reference to Jeremiah 51:7 — “Babylon hath been a golden cup in the LORD’s hand, that

made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad.” We see a mingling of two images — the wine of Rome’s fornication and the wine of God’s wrath. Swete: “The wine of Rome, as of Babylon, was the intoxicating influence of her vices and her wealth; but viewed from another point it was the wine of wrath, the wrath which overtakes sin.” Psalm 75:8 — “For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out of the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them.”

We will learn in Chapter 17 that the “wine of her impure passion” also denotes the blood of the saints and the martyrs. The next angel will serve Babylon another drink — the unmixed wine of God’s wrath!

We should pause here to consider a modern day lesson. Was Rome the last nation to have and to share with other nations the wine of its impure passion? Was Rome the last nation to be a source of moral infection to the world? Hardly. Our own country also shares the wine of its impure passion with the entire world. By the age of 16, the average child raised in the U.S. has witnessed 26,000 overt sex acts and as many as 400,000 sexual references and innuendos, as well as 200,000 portrayals of violence, including 33,000 murders, in television and in movies. And those numbers do not include video games. Is it possible that we are already drinking the wine of our own impure passion?

And what about the church? Do we stand apart or join right in? Tertullian writing in the second century said that the principal sign of a man’s conversion to the Christian faith is that he renounces the bloodthirsty Roman spectacles. (*Spectacles*, Chapter 24) What have we renounced? What is the principal sign of our own conversion?

9 And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, 10 he also shall drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented

with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.” 12 Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

God’s wrath is reserved for those who worship the beast. Their judgment is coming, and the penalty is severe.

Is this language literal or figurative? Our general rule in interpreting apocalyptic language is to view it figuratively unless we are forced to do otherwise, and here it would seem we are if anything forced to view it figuratively. Otherwise, how do we explain the wine of God’s wrath? *Literal* wine? We should similarly view the fire, the sulphur, and the smoke.

So what is this figurative language describing? Is this a description of Hell? We see similar language used elsewhere to describe Hell and the final judgment yet to come, but as we know that alone is not enough to conclude that the language here is describing the final judgment. In fact, similar language is used elsewhere to describe previous judgments of God.

Fire and brimstone (or sulfur) were *literally* used to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:24 and afterward became a symbol for other judgments of God.

We find similar language in Isaiah 34:9-10 describing a judgment against Edom —

And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from

generation to generation it shall lie waste;  
none shall pass through it for ever and ever.

Was Edom literally destroyed by fire and brimstone as Sodom was? No. Was Edom judged by God as Sodom was? Yes. Could this description from Isaiah 34 be taken literally? No. In Isaiah 34:9–10 we read that the land of Edom would burn endlessly, and yet in verses 13–15 we read that at the same time wild animals would live there. The language is intended to create an image of utter devastation.

What happened to Edom? After they helped Babylon conquer Judah, Babylon also conquered them. See Psalm 137:7, Obadiah 1:11–14, and Jeremiah 27:3–6. Eventually they ceased to be a nation, thus sharing the fate of Sodom, albeit not in quite the same swift and spectacular fashion.

So if the judgment of Edom can be described by Isaiah in terms of fire, brimstone, and smoke, why can't John use that same language to describe the judgment of Rome?

In my opinion, the final judgment is *not* being pictured in verses 10–11. Instead, those verses are showing us the same thing all of the surrounding verses are showing us — God's judgment of Rome. And those verses are describing that judgment in terms used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other judgments by God.

Could this language also be used to describe God's final judgment against the ungodly at the end of time? Yes. Does that mean it is being used that way here? No. In fact, the judgment pictured here takes place "in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb" (verse 10), whereas in 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 we see that the punishment brought about by the final judgment will take place "away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

But saying that this language is not describing the final judgment at the end of time does not mean this language is not describing Hell. Hell is what awaited these faithless persecutors, and Hell was the judgment they received. Hell was where they were headed once their

lives on this earth ended. There is no earthly punishment that could ever compare with the eternal judgment of Hell.

Note that in verse 10 the wine of God's wrath is poured *unmixed*. One commentator suggests it is undiluted with mercy because the day of mercy and long suffering is now past. These people had been offered mercy in the gospel that was proclaimed earlier, but that offer had been rejected. The time for judgment is here for those who reject the truth and persecute the faithful. And what a terrible price to pay for rejecting Christ and bowing to Caesar! There is a high cost to compromise, and the time for payment has arrived.

Verse 11 includes the haunting phrase, "they have no rest, day or night." Can we imagine a punishment worse than suffering eternal restlessness? That is what is in store for the wicked. But with that said, we should note an interesting parallel all the way back to 4:8 — "And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: **and they rest not day and night**, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come."

Jude 7 tells us that the judgment of Sodom continues to serve as an example: "Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, **are set forth for an example**, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." Likewise, Isaiah 34:10 tells us that the smoke of Edom's destruction "shall go up forever." The smoke in verse 11 tells us that Rome also serves as an example.

Verse 12 is "a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." We see here again the weapons of the Christian warfare with the world — endurance and faithfulness.



## Revelation — Lesson 20

14:13 And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” 14 Then I looked, and lo, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15 And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat upon the cloud, “Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” 16 So he who sat upon the cloud swung his sickle on the earth, and the earth was reaped.

Verse 13 contains one of the seven beatitudes in this book: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.”

The “henceforth” means that the blessedness will occur after death for those who die in the Lord. The situation is very different for those who die outside the Lord. In this life and on this earth, Rome seemed blessed and the Lord’s people seemed cursed — but what a difference after death! Remember, things are not what they seem!

Verse 13 ends with a beautiful elaboration of that blessing: “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” Earlier we saw eternal restlessness; here we see eternal rest. They will leave their labors behind, but not so with their works. Their works will continue, both in eternity and on earth as a testimony to their faithfulness. We should all be toiling to leave behind that sort of legacy — not of money or property, but of good works. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable,

always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)

In verses 14-16, Jesus is pictured as riding on a white cloud, wearing a crown of victory, and holding a sharp sickle ready to reap the harvest. Except for its use in Mark 4:29, the sickle is mentioned only in this chapter of the New Testament, where it is mentioned seven times. These verses remind us of Joel 3:13 — “Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down; for the press is full, the vats overflow; for their wickedness is great.” They also remind us of Jeremiah 51:33 — “The daughter of Babylon is like a threshingfloor, it is time to thresh her: yet a little while, and the time of her harvest shall come.”

We have seen many images of Christ in this book, but this must be one of the most striking: Jesus wearing a golden crown and carrying a sharp sickle. Those today who believe that Jesus will save everyone (expect perhaps Hitler) need to consider this image of Christ very carefully.

A common symbol for judgment is the separation of wheat and chaff, and separation is a recurring theme in this book. The call to the church was the same then that it is now: “Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.” (2 Corinthians 6:17) We need to separate ourselves now, so that we will also stand separate on that last great day when Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. If we are no different than the goats today, then we will likely end up numbered among the goats on that day as well. The winepress of God’s wrath will eventually be experienced by all who leave God out of their lives and their thoughts.

17 And another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. 18 Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has power over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine

of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” 19 So the angel swung his sickle on the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God; 20 and the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for one thousand six hundred stadia.

We see two angels — one angel who carries a sickle and another angel who comes “out from the altar” and who “has power over fire.” The first angel begins to “reap the earth” when the second angel gives him the go-ahead.

The gathering of the vintage is a classic figure for God’s judgment of the wicked. He tramples the wicked as one tramples grapes.

Verse 20 tells us that the grapes are trodden “outside the city.” Which city? Rome is the most likely candidate, but some commentators argue that this city is the city of God, the church. Isaiah 63:3-6 is a judgment against Edom in which God is pictured as trodding the wine press alone.

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment. For the day of vengeance is in mine heart, and the year of my redeemed is come. And I looked, and there was none to help; and I wondered that there was none to uphold: therefore mine own arm brought salvation unto me; and my fury, it upheld me. And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury, and I will bring down their strength to the earth.

A few verses earlier in Isaiah 62:12 we see a reference to “the holy people, the redeemed of the LORD,” and we see that they will be called “Sought out, A city not forsaken.” What we see there seems to be a

picture of God trodding the wine press outside of the city alone. Perhaps, here, too, we see God stepping alone outside of his own city to trod the wicked in his wrath.

The vast amount of blood in verse 20 graphically depicts the severity of the judgment. The blood flows in a river as high as a horse's bridle and 1600 stadia or furlongs long, which is about 200 miles long. Its intent is to frighten, and it does a very good job! This coming judgment will be terrifying. As Egypt lost horse and rider in the Red Sea, so will Rome be engulfed, but this latter sea of blood will be much redder than the Red Sea!

Verse 20 causes a fair bit of trouble for the literalists. A river of blood 200 miles long, a modest 100 feet wide, and 5 feet deep would contain about 4 billion gallons of blood, which is enough blood to fill up over 3 billion people. Literal? Of course not. Terrifying? Definitely.

Why 1600 stadia? Is there some symbolic significance in that number? It is probably not a coincidence that 1600 is the square of a very familiar Biblical number, 40. The number 40 is often used to denote a period of trial or tribulation, with the exodus being the prime example (Psalm 95:10). Thus, 1600 may simply indicate tremendous tribulation, and the squaring may point back to our previous discussion of the significance of the number 2 in Chapter 13. Or 1600 may be the earthly number 4 squared multiplied by 10 squared for completeness, thus depicting a judgment against all who dwell on the earth (which is how the wicked are described in this book). It is also possible that the number was chosen simply to depict a great deal of blood. To paraphrase Freud, perhaps in this oil painting from God a brush stroke is sometimes just a brush stroke.

Where are we at the end of Chapter 14? Before the seals were opened we had a vision of Heaven assuring us that the true throne was in Heaven and not in Rome. Before the trumpets were sounded we were shown a period of silence in Heaven and told that the coming judgment was occurring due to a call for justice by the saints. Chapter 15 will show us a third vision of Heaven and occurs before the bowls of

God's wrath are poured out in Chapter 16. This book has a beautiful structure!

## Chapter Fifteen

**1 Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and wonderful, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.**

So far, the judgments have been partial and have allowed for repentance. The judgments of the seven bowls are total and final, and repentance will soon no longer be an option (although even here we will see glimpses of the longsuffering nature of God extending an opportunity for repentance).

Hailey: "If proclaiming the good news of redemption does not cause men to fear before God, and if partial judgments do not turn them from humanism and materialism to repentance, then such an unregenerated society forfeits its right to continue. A destruction by judgment is inevitable and just."

Verse 1 tells us that, with these final plagues, the wrath of God is ended. What does that mean? It means that this is God's final word with respect to Rome, the great enemy of God's people on which this entire book has been focused.

But it says the wrath of God is *ended*. Doesn't that mean we have finally reached the end of the world with this verse? No, it doesn't. First, remember the time frame of the book — it contains things that were to shortly come to pass. We are told that twice at the beginning of the book and twice at the end.

Second, as before when we were tempted to leap ahead thousands of years, we should pause first to consider whether similar language was ever used in the Old Testament to apply to an event of that time — and

the answer is yes, it has. In Ezekiel 7:2-3, with regard to a judgment against Israel, we read:

Also, thou son of man, thus saith the Lord GOD unto the land of Israel; **An end, the end is come** upon the four corners of the land. **Now is the end come upon thee**, and I will send mine anger upon thee, and will judge thee according to thy ways, and will recompense upon thee all thine abominations.

The judgment of Jerusalem described in Matthew 24:13-14 is another example: “But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.” Was that end the end of the world? No, because just a few verses later in Matthew 24:34, Jesus said, “This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.” So the “end” in verse 14 was a first century event — the judgment of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

As with Israel in Ezekiel 7 and Jerusalem in Matthew 24, there is a similar end with Rome in Revelation 15. In short, God can use the word “end” in contexts apart from the end of the world, and that is how the word is used here. The Greek word *teleo* translated “end” here simply means to carry out, accomplish, perform, or fulfill, and that is exactly what is happening in this chapter with regard to Rome.

2 And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. 3 And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, “Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, O King of the ages! 4 Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy. All na-

tions shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed.”

Swete says that these martyrs have come safely through the sea of martyrdom to arrive at the shore of heaven. Some translation of verse 2 indicate that those who conquered the beast were standing “on” rather “beside” the sea of glass. If so, then perhaps that small change indicates that the saints have moved closer to the throne through their suffering. Philippians 3:10 reminds us that we become like Christ by sharing in his suffering.

This sea is mingled with fire. What does that mean? The most common suggestions are that it refers either to the fiery judgments that were about to fall on Rome or that it refers to the fiery trials through which the Christians had emerged victorious. I much prefer the second option based on the context. The conquerers are standing on the sea, which is showing by reflection the fiery trials they endured. We are reminded of several verses:

- **Zechariah 13:9** And I will bring the third part through the fire, **and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried:** they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God.
- **Malachi 3:2-3** But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? **for he is like a refiner's fire**, and like fullers' soap: **And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver:** and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.
- **1 Corinthians 3:12-15** Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, **because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.** If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: **but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.**

Verse 2 also says that they held harps of God in their hands. What are the harps of God? We looked at this issue in our discussion of 5:8. Remember that what we are seeing here are *symbols*. This language is figurative. In the same verse where we see harps, we also see a sea of glass mingled with fire and beast along with its image and the number of its name. These harps are symbols for praise, just as elsewhere incense is used as a symbol for prayer. We saw a similar symbol in 14:2 — “the **voice** I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps.” And that verse is very instructive — perhaps the harps of God symbolize the harps that he created when he created the human *voices* that sing his praises.

And for those who think they can worship God by using their human hands to play a harp that was made with human hands, perhaps they should consider Acts 17:25 — “Neither is [God] worshipped with men’s hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.” We should worship God with the harps that he made — our voices.

Who are those that conquered the beast? They are the Christians (both living and dead) who endured and remained faithful to God despite the persecution, the temptations, and the trials. What incredible examples that have left for us to follow! Whenever we think we have it bad or are facing some persecution or trial, we should look back to their example and consider what they endured. As Hebrews 12:4 reminds most if not all of us today, we “have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”

In verse 3, they sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. The song of Moses in Exodus 15 celebrated a great victory of God over Egypt, the great enemy of God’s people. Here the song celebrates another great victory over another great enemy, Rome. The song of the Lamb celebrates the same victory because it is only through the Lamb that such a victory was possible. That both songs are sung confirms our view that the woman in Chapter 12 represents the faithful remnant under both covenants who are united in Christ as one redeemed people.



We have seen many comparisons in this book with the events of the Exodus, and here we see yet another with the song of Moses. But there is a key difference between the two events: The deliverance from Egypt was a *physical* deliverance while the deliverance from Rome was a *spiritual* deliverance. Hebrews 3 likewise tells us that Jesus “was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house.” Moses could do nothing for a dead Israelite, yet in Revelation we read that in the Lamb the dead are blessed.

The singers give no glory to themselves. Instead they sing, “Great and wonderful are **thy** deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are **thy** ways, O King of the ages! Who shall not fear and glorify **thy** name, O Lord? For **thou** alone art holy. All nations shall come and worship **thee**, for **thy** judgments have been revealed.” (Quite different from some of the humanistic songs in our own song book that are much more focused on man than on God!) Swete says that the singers seem lost in the joy of being before God, and in their praise they completely forget what they have been through to attain this position —

In the presence of God the martyrs forget themselves; their thoughts are absorbed by new wonders that surround them; the glory of God and the mighty scheme of things in which their own sufferings form an infinitesimal part are opening before them; they begin to see the great issue of the world-drama, and we hear the doxology with which they greet their first unclouded vision of God and his works.

And we are reminded of a song we often sing — “Sing On, Ye Joyful Pilgrims.” How does that song end? “My heart is filled with rapture, My soul is lost in praise!”

Is Revelation all about heaven and the end of the world? No. But does this book tell us a great deal about what Heaven will be like? Absolutely. Some day we too will be lost in the joy of being before God.

In verse 3, some translations have “king of the ages” while others have “king of the nations.” The ancient manuscripts are divided between

the two, but “king of the nations” seems to fit the context better. In any event, Jesus is King of kings, which means he is the King of the ages and the King of the nations.

- **Jeremiah 10:7** Who would not fear thee, O King of nations? for to thee doth it appertain: forasmuch as among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like unto thee.
- **Psalms 86:9** All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name.

The word translated “holy” in verse 4 could be translated “sacred.” It refers to that which is religiously right as opposed to that which is unrighteous or polluted. God’s righteousness was about to become clear to all. Psalm 98:2 — “The LORD hath made known his salvation: his righteousness hath he openly shewed in the sight of the heathen.”

5 After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, 6 and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, and their breasts girded with golden girdles. 7 And one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives for ever and ever; 8 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 ended.

What is the tent in verse 5? It is the tent of witness (or the tent of testimony) that held the ark of the covenant in the inner sanctuary of the temple. Only the High Priest could enter this inner sanctuary where God dwelt and then only once a year with the blood of an innocent victim. The priest would carry a censer of incense that billowed smoke to ensure that he did not see God. And John sees this tent opened.

What comes out of the temple of the tent of witness? The seven angels with the seven plagues. They come out of the inner sanctuary. What that tells us is that the judgment they are bringing is coming directly from God.

Back in 6:10 we saw that the coming judgment was a divine judgment brought about by the prayers of God's people. That point is further emphasized here by what the angels are wearing. They are pictured in priestly clothing—bright linen and golden girdles. Such a girdle was worn by a priest only when he was officiating on behalf of the people. These angels dressed as priests come directly from the presence of God to wage a holy war against Rome.

We have already discussed the four living creatures in 4:6-8 who protect God's reputation and demand punishment of the ungodly. It is one of these living creatures who passes out the bowls of wrath to the seven angels. The Greek word used here for "bowl" occurs only in Revelation (where it appears 12 times). It denotes a broad shallow vessel or a deep saucer. It is similar to some of the bowls used in the Old Testament for sacrifices and rituals.

What is the purpose of these seven bowls? The purpose of the seven seals was to **reveal**. The purpose of the seven trumpets was to **warn**. The purpose of the seven bowls is to **execute**.

Why does verse 8 say that no one could enter the temple until the bowls were completed? Because these events were a manifestation of the glory of God upon which no one could look.

We see something similar in 1 Kings 8:10-11 where, at the dedication of the temple, the priests could not enter the house of God because of a cloud of smoke. We are also reminded of Leviticus 16:2 —

And the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron your brother not to come at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the mercy seat which is upon the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat.'

The message from the Old Testament was that no one could look upon the glory of God and live. God's judgment of Rome was likewise a manifestation of his glory.

There is another possible reason why we are told that no man could come into the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels had been completed. That prohibition may be a symbolic statement that no approach of man to God could halt the coming judgment. The time for talk was over.

Swete: "The divine judgments are impenetrable until they are past; when the last plague has fulfilled its course, the smoke will vanish, and the vision of God be seen." Then we will see clearly what is now obscured.

What's next? Chapter 16 describes these seven bowls, which depict a total and complete judgment against Rome. The trumpets were intended to warn. The bowls are intended to recompense.

That Christians are not to take vengeance on their persecutors does not mean there will be no vengeance. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!

## Chapter Sixteen

1 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God." 2 So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and foul and evil sores came upon the men who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

Chapter 16 has been called a "vivid dramatization of the fight God puts up from heaven in behalf of his church."

No one to my knowledge has ever successfully assigned definite meanings to each of the symbols in this chapter, and neither will we. Milligan explains the situation well: “No attempt to determine the special meaning of the objects thus visited by the wrath of God — the land, the sea, the rivers, the fountains of the waters, and the sun — has yet been, or is ever likely to be, successful; and the general effect alone appears to be important.” And, as will see, the general effect is staggering.

Because 15:8 indicates that no one could enter the temple until the judgment had ended some surmise that the voice in verse 1 is the voice of God commanding the bowls to be poured out.

The first bowl contains foul and evil sores that afflict those who worship the image of the beast. This bowl parallels the sixth plague against Egypt in Exodus 9:11. The word used for “sore” in this chapter occurs elsewhere only in Luke 16:21, where it denotes the sores on Lazarus the beggar.

These comparisons with Egypt are here for a reason. They remind the readers of how God dealt with past enemies of his people. Everyone knows how the conflict with Egypt ended, and the conflict with Rome will end the same way: A total victory for God’s people.

There is a difference, though, right from the start between these bowls and the plagues of Egypt or even the seven trumpets. It was not until the sixth Egyptian plague and the fifth trumpet that men were affected *directly*, but men are affected directly starting with the very first bowl of wrath.

Were the Romans *literally* afflicted with these sores? No. (I know I keep asking that question and keep giving the same answer, but many misguided commentators try to literalize the symbols in this book, and by doing so they miss the whole point of the book and destroy its beauty in the process.) These bowls and the punishments they bring are symbolic. Yes, the sores in Egypt were literal as was the fire and brimstone in Sodom. But those sores and that fire and brimstone afterward became symbols for those earlier judgments. We have seen the language used that way by the Old Testament prophets, and that is

how the language is being used here. If the sores in verse 2 are literal, then what about the beast in verse 2? Is it a literal beast?

With the first bowl, God uses a symbol that reminds the reader of an Old Testament judgment against a great enemy of his people.

3 The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a dead man, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

The second bowl turns the sea into blood. Again we are reminded of a past display of God's wrath against Egypt. Exodus 7:19 —

And the LORD spake unto Moses, Say unto Aaron, Take thy rod, and stretch out thine hand upon the waters of Egypt, upon their streams, upon their rivers, and upon their ponds, and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and that there may be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone.

We know the plague against Egypt was literal, but is this plague also literal? No. The purpose of this symbol is to remind us of that previous plague. It is intended to remind us of how God dealt with Egypt.

Did all of the creatures in the sea literally die? No. In fact, there is no reason we should take the "sea" to refer to the literal ocean. Elsewhere in this book we have seen "sea" used symbolically, and that is almost certainly how it is used here. The first beast arose from the sea, that is from the unsettled and wicked nations of the world, and that is most likely what is intended here as well. The blood would denote, as one commentator described it, "the utter putrefaction of a dead society," or, as another said, it is a "a revealing illustration of the true nature of the spiritually dead."

Hailey: "A society abandoned to idolatry and its consequent morals, as was the Roman empire of John's day, is spiritually dead. In such a society, morals decline to the lowest level; the family collapses,

schools breed anarchy and rebellion, business ethics are forgotten, entertainment becomes base and sordid, and printing presses exude smut and filth, until the whole is strangled in its own death blood and suffocated by its own stench.”

In any event, this language in verse 3 is not to be taken literally. Similar figurative language was used in Zephaniah 1:2-4 to describe a judgment against Judah —

“I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth,” says the Lord. “I will sweep away man and beast; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will overthrow the wicked; I will cut off mankind from the face of the earth,” says the Lord. “I will stretch out my hand against Judah, and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and I will cut off from this place the remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests.”

Compare the description in Isaiah 13:19-22 of the fall of Babylon —

And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pride of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them. It will never be inhabited or dwelt in for all generations; no Arab will pitch his tent there, no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there. But wild beasts will lie down there, and its houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there satyrs will dance. Hyenas will cry in its towers, and jackals in the pleasant palaces; its time is close at hand and its days will not be prolonged.

Did that literally occur? No. History tells us that Babylon fell without a shot. The priests opened the gates and let Cyrus in after Belshazzar was assassinated.

But note that Isaiah said that Babylon would fall as Sodom fell, that no one would ever live there again, and that no one would ever pass

through it again. None of that was *literally* fulfilled. Alexander the Great headquartered there. People live there today.

What then is meant by such language? Babylon, the kingdom, would fall never to rise again. The language was designed to instill terror and describe the wrath and judgment of God against the ungodly. The language paints a picture of God's wrath against the ungodly. That was how the language was used Zephaniah and Isaiah, and that is how the language is being used here.

4 The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the fountains of water, and they became blood. 5 And I heard the angel of water say, "Just art thou in these thy judgments, thou who art and wast, O Holy One. 6 For men have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink. It is their due!" 7 And I heard the altar cry, "Yea, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are thy judgments!"

The second bowl turned the sea into blood. This third bowl turns the fresh water into blood. Again, we are reminded of God's wrath against Egypt and the first plague, which turned the Nile into blood.

Once again, is this literal? No. It is being used for the same purpose as the previous bowl. But why do we have two bowls that turn water into blood? One reason may be to show that this plague is worse than what befell Egypt because Exodus 7:24 tells us that the Egyptians could obtain water by digging, but that does not seem to be the case with this third bowl of wrath. Beyond that all we can say is that the two plagues combine with the other five to create a picture of utter devastation.

Does anyone teach that these passages should be taken literally? Yes. Hal Lindsey, who has sold millions of books on this subject, has the following to say about these verses:



As if the bloodied sea wasn't enough, the third angel poured out his bowl of judgment into the rivers and springs of waters, and they became blood also. It gets pretty grim when there is no fresh water to drink anywhere on earth. There's going to be a big run on Coca-Cola, but even this will give out after a while!

How ridiculous! How trivial! It is a crime when such a beautiful book as Revelation is butchered by the likes of Hal Lindsey! And why does he write such sensationalism? Greed! It sells! I am reminded of 2 Corinthians 2:17 — “For we are not, as so many, **peddling** the word of God.” There were many then, and there are still many today.

The prophets in verse 6 are the New Testament prophets. Notice the wonderful sarcasm and irony in that verse! The Romans were blood thirsty so God gave them blood to drink. They wanted blood so God gave them blood! He more than quenched their thirst for blood. It reminds us of what God said to Edom on Obadiah 15 —

For the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head.

In verse 7, the altar cries out to declare the justice of God. We have seen this altar before. Recall Revelation 6:9-10 —

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?”

That cry for justice was what prompted this display of God's wrath, and that cry came from the martyrs gathered under the altar. Those same martyrs voice their approval in verse 7. Their prayers have been answered.

Finally, we should pause to consider the vast difference between what the Romans had to drink and what Christians had to drink.

- **Isaiah 12:3** Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.
- **John 4:14** But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

The Christians had a life-sustaining drink that was utterly unknown to the pagans that surrounded them and that were drowning in a sea of blood and filth.

8 The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch men with fire; 9 men were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.

The fourth bowl causes the heat of the sun to intensify and scorch men with fire. To a waterless world filled with blood we now add the blazing sun. (This is starting to sound like west Texas!) The source of light that was created to guide and warm had instead been turned into an instrument of pain. We are reminded of Psalm 104:4 — “Who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire.” And we are reminded of Isaiah 47:13-14 —

Thou art wearied in the multitude of thy counsels. Let now the astrologers, the stargazers, the monthly prognosticators, stand up, and save thee from these things that shall come upon thee. Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame: there shall not be a coal to warm at, nor fire to sit before it.

But once again the Romans are getting what they gave. We should recall how Nero had used the burning bodies of Christians. Tacitus wrote that the Christians “were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.” The Romans wanted blood, and so God gave them a river of it. They wanted light, and so God gives turns up the heat of the sun.

We should also recall the beautiful description of God’s people given in Revelation 7:16-17 —

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

As we would expect, the condition of the ungodly is being pictured as opposite that of the godly.

And note the response in verse 9 — “they cursed the name of God who had power over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.” We are reminded of Romans 1:21 — “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” But notice that the phrase “they did not repent” suggests that even at this last stage, repentance was still an option.

10 The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was in darkness; men gnawed their tongues in anguish 11 and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores, and did not repent of their deeds.

The fifth bowl pours darkness on the throne of the beast and its kingdom. The throne of the beast is Rome. This bowl parallels the ninth plague against Egypt in Exodus 10:21 — “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be dark-

ness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.” The darkness here can also be felt. It causes men to gnaw their tongues in anguish.

This bowl may depict the moral darkness that we discussed in Chapter 9 where, as you recall, smoke from the bottomless pit darkened the sun and sky.

The Bible has much to say about darkness. In fact, the first recorded words from God were “Let there be light!” Spiritual darkness is often described as a judgment from God, and darkness is pictured as the domain of Satan and the opposite of the Christian walk.

- **Psalm 69:23** Let their eyes be **darkened**, that they see not.
- **Isaiah 9:19** Through the wrath of the LORD of hosts is the land **darkened**, and the people shall be as the fuel of the fire.
- **John 1:5** And the light shineth in **darkness**; and the darkness comprehended it not.
- **John 3:19** And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved **darkness** rather than light, because their deeds were evil.
- **John 8:12** Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in **darkness**, but shall have the light of life.
- **Romans 1:21** Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was **darkened**.
- **1 John 2:11** But he that hateth his brother is in **darkness**, and walketh in **darkness**, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that **darkness** hath blinded his eyes.
- **Ephesians 6:12** For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of **the darkness of this world**, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

- **Colossians 1:13** Who hath delivered us from **the power of darkness**, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.
- **2 Corinthians 4:6** For God, who commanded the light to shine out of **darkness**, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
- **Romans 13:12** The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of **darkness**, and let us put on the armour of light.

It was through the work of Satan that this world was plunged back into darkness, and it is through Christ that the light shone once again in that darkness. In fact, *both* the Old and New Testaments begin with God saying “Let there be light!”

**12 The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.**

The sixth bowl causes the water in the great river Euphrates to dry up to prepare the way for kings from the east. (By the way, if these bowls are describing *literal* plagues, then where did this water come from?)

We should recall that the sixth trumpet also depicted warfare as an instrument of God’s judgment. There in 9:13-19 we saw 200 million troops crossing the Euphrates river to march against Rome. But the war of the sixth trumpet was only a partial judgment — only a third were killed. The war of the sixth trumpet was horrifying, but how much worse must be the war of the sixth bowl!

Recall from our discussion in Chapter 9 that “Crossing the Euphrates” was a vivid picture representing the threat of military power. In the Old Testament, the Assyrians and Babylonians crossed the Euphrates river to attack the Jews. Rome feared an invasion from the Parthians across the Euphrates. The Euphrates symbolized a barrier or a deterrent to external invasion, and that barrier has now been removed.

The drying up of the waters is a common sign of God's power. In Exodus 14:21, God showed his power by drying up the Red Sea. In Joshua 3:17, God showed his power by drying up the Jordan river. In Jeremiah 51:36, God threatened to destroy Babylon by drying up her sea. In Zechariah 10:11, God threatened to destroy Egypt by drying up the Nile. Here, in Revelation 16, we see God drying up the Euphrates river to allow his armies to advance upon Rome even more easily than they did in Chapter 9. There will be nothing to stop them or even slow the down.

# Revelation — Lesson 21

## The Sixth Bowl of Wrath, Continued...

16:12 The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east.

It is possible that this image depicting the threat of invasion is recalling an event from history. As we know, in Revelation, Babylon — a *past* enemy of God's people — is used to depict Rome — a then *current* enemy of God's people. Here we see a dried up river being used to defeat figurative Babylon, and history tells us that ancient, literal Babylon was once conquered by a dried up river.

Last week, we mentioned that historical Babylon fell to the Persians without a shot being fired. Instead, as we discussed, there is evidence that certain priests of the false god Marduk thought the current rulers in Babylon were impious and preferred instead the Persians under Cyrus. Thus, we are told that the people, led by the priests, opened the gates to Cyrus, who was then greeted as a liberator.

But according to Herodotus, there is more to those strange events. He tells us that when the Persians captured Babylon they did so by drying up the Euphrates river, which flowed right through the center of Babylon. They diverted the river into a lake and entered the city through the dry channel of the river. There were huge brass gates in the walls that flanked the river Euphrates in its passage through the city, and these gates provided access to water for the citizens and could be closed as a defense if needed. But it was these gates that were left open allowing access to the Persian troops after Cyrus had reduced the water level of the river. Just as the actual city of Babylon had fallen by a literal drying up of the Euphrates, the figurative Babylon would fall by a figurative drying up of the Euphrates.

Our frequent comparisons between ancient Babylon and Rome are vital to properly understanding the book of Revelation. Those who

argue that the cataclysms in Revelation must literally occur need to explain why the same cataclysms pronounced against ancient Babylon did not literally occur. Read, for example, the judgment of Babylon in Jeremiah 50-51 and especially 50:3, 39-40 and 51:1-2, 25-26, 36-37, and 41-43 — and remember that Babylon fell without a shot being fired! Is there then a historical contradiction in the Bible? Not at all! In fact, Isaiah prophesied how Babylon would literally fall in Isaiah 45:1, and he even gave the name of the conqueror, Cyrus, before Cyrus was even born! “Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut.”

The vivid language in Jeremiah 50-51 is a *symbolic* description of Babylon's fall. The key verse is Jeremiah 51:64 — “Thus shall Babylon sink, and shall not rise from the evil that I will bring upon her: and they shall be weary.” From an earthly perspective, the end of Babylon may not have looked like much, but that was not the case at all from God's perspective. The prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah had been fulfilled. Babylon was finished as a world power. Her day was done. That was the state of affairs for ancient Babylon described figuratively in Jeremiah 50-51 — and that is the *same* state of affairs described by the *same* language against a *different* enemy of God's people in Revelation.

Who are the kings from the east in verse 12? Some say that these are the allies of Rome who are pictured as rushing in to her aid. But the text indicates that God dried up the river to help the invading kings from the east. Does that mean they are on God's side? No. It means only that God is using them for his own purposes as he judges Rome. In fact, verse 14 may show these same kings preparing for battle against God.

We should likely view these kings as we did the kings of the sixth trumpet. That is, they most likely depict the Parthians, whom Rome feared would attack them from East. William Barclay writes:

The greatest enemies of Rome, the one nation she could not subjugate, were the Parthi-



ans who lived beyond the Euphrates. Their cavalry was the most dreaded force of fighting men in the world. For the cavalry of the Parthians to come sweeping across the Euphrates was a thought to strike terror in the bravest heart.

Did Parthia literally conquer Rome? No. Was an attack from Parthia something that Rome feared and that could be used to figuratively depict some great catastrophe against them? Absolutely, and that is how it is used here. None of the previous bowls literally occurred and this bowl is no different. The purpose of the bowls is to paint a picture of complete and total destruction and judgment, and that is exactly what this bowl conveys.

13 And I saw, issuing from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, three foul spirits like frogs; 14 for they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. 15 (“Lo, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is he who is awake, keeping his garments that he may not go naked and be seen exposed!”)

The false prophet is mentioned here and in 19:20 and 20:10. If we compare the descriptions of the false prophet with those of the second beast from the earth in Chapter 13, we will see that they are identical. That second beast from the earth that represents the false religious side of Rome is none other than the false prophet that we see here and in Chapters 19-20. And the beast standing next to the false prophet is the first beast from the sea in Chapter 13. And standing behind each and pulling their strings is the dragon.

These three then are assembled against the advancing armies of God — the dragon (Satan—the power behind Rome), the beast (the beast from the sea—the civil, military might of Rome), and the false prophet (the beast from the earth—the false religious side of Rome).

These three form a hideous contrast to the Godhead—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We have seen much come from the mouths of the dragon and his minions. In 12:15 we saw a flood come from the mouth of the dragon. We saw blasphemies come from the mouth of the first beast in 13:5. We saw deceit come from the mouth of the second beast in 13:14. Here we see a foul demonic spirit like a frog emerge from the mouth of each. These spirits perform signs and assemble the whole world for battle.

Why are they compared to frogs? Frogs are famous for their empty and continuous croaking. Even today we have the idiom of having a frog in your throat. The sound of a frog is a symbol for meaningless speech, and such speech characterized the speech of the dragon and the two beasts. Once again, there may be a historical allusion — an ancient writer of the day once remarked that Nero was nearly reincarnated as a viper, but mercifully was allowed to come back as a frog so he could continue his singing!

Frogs are mentioned in only three other places in the Bible — the second Egyptian plague in Exodus 8 and twice in the Psalms (78:45 and 105:30). In Egypt, God sent a swarm of frogs, but here we see only three. Psalm 78 tells us that the frogs in Egypt “destroyed them.” Even so, when Pharaoh was given the opportunity to have them removed, what did he say? Exodus 8:9-10 —

And Moses said unto Pharaoh, Glory over me: when shall I intreat for thee, and for thy servants, and for thy people, to destroy the frogs from thee and thy houses, that they may remain in the river only? And he said, To morrow.

That is truly one of the classic answers in the Bible! A famous gospel sermon by Marshall Keeble based on those verses is entitled “Another Night with the Frogs,” and sadly Pharaoh was not the last person to reject the favors of God for another night with the frogs! Rome’s failure to repent tells us that they too wanted another night with these three frogs. John 3:19 — “And this is the condemnation, that light is

come into the world, and **men loved darkness rather than light**, because their deeds were evil.”

Some commentators note that in Zoroastrianism, the Persian religion, frogs were the bringer of plagues and an agent of the power of darkness. Hence, they argue that this symbol may have been attached to the symbol of the kings from the east.

In verse 15, a voice (almost certainly Jesus) says that he is coming as a thief! What does that mean? Rome had no idea what was coming. Rome would never have dreamed that they were going to lose. Rome thought it was the eternal kingdom! To Rome this judgment was not only a mystery, but it was a surprise! They were not prepared for it. This judgment would be totally unannounced, and that is something it had in common with the final judgment at the end of the world, which 1 Thessalonians 5:2 also tells us will come as a thief in the night. But this description marks a difference between the judgment of Rome in Revelation and the judgment of Jerusalem in Matthew 24. The judgment of Jerusalem did *not* come as a thief, but rather was preceded by signs and warnings (something a thief rarely does!).

### **16 And they assembled them at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon.**

If 13:18 with its cryptic 666 reference is the most well known verse in Revelation, then verse 16 must be in second place. If you ask the man on the street about Armageddon, you will most likely hear that it marks the location of the great battle at the end of the world. But where, I ask, did anyone ever get the idea that there will be a battle (great or otherwise) at the end of the world? That is when every knee will bow to Jesus Christ. There will be no fighting when Jesus returns to claim his own.

What is Armageddon? The name Armageddon or Har-Magedon means the Mount of Megiddo. The Bible speaks of “Megiddo and its three heights” in Joshua 17:11, “Megiddo and its towns” in Judges 1:27, “the waters of Megiddo” in Judges 5:19, and “the valley of Megiddo” in 2 Chronicles 35:22 and Zechariah 12:11. Megiddo in

Hebrew means “place of troops,” which provides a clue to what this symbol means.

Megiddo is located at a height near the edge of the Jezreel Valley, also known as the Plain of Esdraelon (Esdraelon being the Greek modification of Jezreel). The site is located almost exactly halfway between Haifa on the Mediterranean coast to the west and Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee to the east. It was the site where James Michener’s book *The Source* was based. From its advantageous location, Megiddo controlled one of the most important roads in the ancient world, the Via Maris, which was an international military and trade route that ran between Egypt in the south and Syria, Phoenicia, and Mesopotamia in the north and east. This location gave Megiddo great strategic significance.

From the most ancient times to the time of Napoleon and to the present day, Megiddo was one of the great battlegrounds of the world. One author states that “the area surrounding the ancient site of Megiddo in the Jezreel Valley has seen more fighting and bloodshed over an extended period of time than virtually any other spot on earth.”

It was at Megiddo that Thutmose III fought in 1479 B.C. what one scholar has called the first battle known in recorded history anywhere in the world (although he also suggests that Pepi I instead may have had that honor as early as 2350 B.C). It was at Megiddo that the Mongols lost their first major battle ever during their sweep across Asia and the Middle East. This was the plain where Barak and Deborah overthrew Sisera and his chariots in Judges 4. It was in this valley that Gideon’s 300 men defeated the Midianites in Judges 7. Saul and Jonathan were killed at the eastern edge of this valley in 1 Samuel 31. This is where Ahaziah died by the arrows of Jehu in 2 Kings 9. This is where Josiah perished in battle with Pharaoh Necho in 2 Kings 23. That battle was particularly important because this delay of Necho allowed Babylon to defeat the Assyrians and become the leading power of that time. Josiah’s defeat and death paved the way for the Babylonian exile of the Jews beginning in 586 B.C.

So why is Armageddon mentioned here in verse 16? Because God chose for this great scene the most famous battlefield on earth so that on that battlefield he could depict the complete judgment and utter destruction of Rome. Napoleon once remarked that all of the armies of the world could make battle there. In his book, "The Battles of Armageddon," Dr. Eric H. Cline from the University of Cincinnati recounts 34 battles fought at the city of Megiddo or its surrounding valley. About a dozen of those battles occurred in biblical times. Here is how he describes the area:

For four thousand years, this region has suffered almost constant warfare. Indeed, one may seriously ask if there has ever been a time when the rulers of the area, whether local or foreign, were not at war. The turbulent history of all Israel, and Judah, Canaan, and Palestine, is reflected in microcosm in this blood-soaked little valley, for virtually every major invader of Israel has had to fight a battle in the Jezreel Valley. Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites, Midianites, Amalekites, Philistines, Hasmonaean, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Muslims, Crusaders, Mamlukes, Mongols, Palestinians, French, Ottomans, British, Australians, Germans, Arabs, and Israelis have all fought and died there.

Are those pictured as assembling in verse 16 doing so to fight a *literal* battle? No. It is no more literal than the battle in Heaven we studied earlier. Is it a vivid image? Definitely. Armageddon was the perfect setting for the figurative battle between the Lamb and the dragon. It was the perfect stage for the great spiritual battle between the army of Satan and the army of God. This fight had been brewing since at least as early as Genesis 3. **Where would we expect such a battle to be pictured?** Wouldn't we expect the greatest battle to be fought on the greatest battlefield? That is where God shows it to us.

Hailey: "To look for a physical military battle between human armies to be fought in northern Palestine [with carnal weapons] at some fu-

ture date is completely without scriptural support and foreign to the spirit and purpose of Revelation.”

We will find out more about this battle when we get to Chapter 19.

**17 The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!”**

This seventh bowl poured into the air marks the culmination of the judgment of Rome. At this point Rome’s fate is sealed and its fall is inevitable. The verdicts of historians notwithstanding, the book of Revelation makes it clear that Rome fell because Rome persecuted Christians. Rome’s fall was a divine judgment from God. The most powerful empire the earth had ever seen went up against the church and lost.

Note that this bowl is poured into the air, thus completing the cycle through the elements — earth, water, fire (sun), and air. What does the air depict? Ephesians 2:2 tells us that Satan is the prince of the power of the air. The fall of Rome was a great defeat for Satan and it would affect his entire sphere of operation. He had tried to kill Jesus in his infancy through Rome under Herod, and he had failed. Satan then tried to kill the church in its infancy through Rome under the emperors, and once again he failed. Satan was the power behind Rome, and Satan’s complete defeat with regard to Rome will be described in detail when we get to Chapter 20.

With the seventh bowl, God declares, “It is done!” His judgment is complete. The Greek word used here means “it has become” or “it has occurred.” Rome is finished!

If what we see next in verse 18 comes as a surprise to you, then you just haven’t been paying attention!

**18 And there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earth-**

quake. 19 The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath. 20 And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found; 21 and great hailstones, heavy as a hundred-weight, dropped on men from heaven, till men cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

As usual, a great judgment of God is accompanied by lightning, thunder, and earthquakes. The purpose is to heighten the dramatic effect, and we have seen it many times before.

This earthquake was “such as had never been since men were on the earth.” That is, this judgment is different from the previous judgments we have seen in this book. This judgment of the seventh bowl is God’s final word with regard to Rome. This judgment is total and complete. Since there had never been an empire like Rome, its collapse created an earthquake like none before.

But doesn’t this description of the earthquake mean that this bowl must correspond to the final judgment at the end of the world? No. Similar language is used elsewhere to describe other past judgments. Compare Ezekiel 5:8-9, which describes a judgment against Judah at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar:

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, even I, am against you; and I will execute judgments in the midst of you in the sight of the nations. And because of all your abominations **I will do with you what I have never yet done, and the like of which I will never do again.**

And compare the description of God’s A.D. 70 judgment against Jerusalem in Matthew 24:21 — “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be.” Similar hyperbolic language is used here to de-

scribe another judgment against another great enemy of God's people.

The islands flee and the mountains cannot be found. Huge 100 pound hailstones fall from heaven, reminding us of the seventh plague in Exodus 9 and of the great stones that fell in Joshua 10:11. Again, such language often accompanies judgments in the Old Testament. Compare:

- **Micah 1:3-4** For behold, the Lord is coming forth out of his place, and will come down and **tread upon the high places** of the earth. And the **mountains will melt** under him and the valleys will be cleft, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place.
- **Nahum 1:5** The **mountains quake** before him, the **hills melt**; the earth is laid waste before him, the world and all that dwell therein.
- **Psalms 18:7-13** Then the **earth reeled and rocked**; the foundations also of the **mountains trembled and quaked**, because he was angry. ... Out of the brightness before him there broke through his **clouds hailstones** and coals of fire. The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, **hailstones and coals of fire**.
- **Ezekiel 26:18** Now shall **the isles tremble** in the day of thy fall; yea, the isles that are in the sea shall be troubled at thy departure.

Verse 19 says that the city was divided into *three* parts. What does that mean? There are many opinions, but it may be borrowing language from the judgment of Jerusalem described in Ezekiel 5:2 — “Thou shalt burn with fire a third part in the midst of the city, when the days of the siege are fulfilled: and thou shalt take a third part, and smite about it with a knife: and a third part thou shalt scatter in the wind; and I will draw out a sword after them.” There, as here, such language depicts the total destruction of the city.

Verse 19 also tells us that Rome did not fall alone. The other cities of the nations fell with her. The entire pagan world is pictured as collapse.



sing together. These cities had all drunk the wine of Rome's fornication, and now they were suffering the consequences.

With the seventh bowl God's judgment against Rome and her allies is completed. The fall of the city will be described in more detail in Chapters 17 and 18. The battle at Armageddon will be described in more detail in Chapter 19. The defeat of Satan will be described in more detail in Chapter 20.

## Chapter Seventeen

Chapters 17 and 18 are an obituary for the great city of Babylon, which, as we have seen, can be none other but Rome.

Babylon was said to have fallen in Chapter 14 and was broken into three pieces in Chapter 16. Chapters 17 and 18 provide the details of that fall.

Recall that we discussed portions of Chapter 17 at length when we studied Chapter 13 because verses 7–18 of Chapter 17 provide an explanation of many of the symbols found in Chapter 13 and elsewhere in the book. We will not repeat here all that we said earlier.

A main character in this chapter is a great harlot named Babylon the Great. Chapters 17 and 18 will provide the following descriptions of this harlot. Do they sound familiar? She is powerful (17:1, 3). She is successful (17:4). She is arrogant and proud (17:5). She sits on seven hills (17:9). She rules the world in John's day (17:15, 18). She is a terrible persecutor of God's people (17:6; 18:24). She is the leading commercial power on earth (18:3; 18:11-19). She is supported by a great military force (17:3, 7). She is destroyed in part by her own military power and inner strife (17:16-17). At the time this book was written, Rome was the only nation that fit each of these descriptions. Babylon is Rome — and Babylon is fallen!

1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated upon many waters, 2 with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have become drunk.”

In verse 1 we meet the great harlot who, like Jezebel in the Old Testament, has been actively seeking to murder God’s people. But, also like Jezebel, she has been judged, and we are about to see the details of that judgment.

Verse 1 tells us that she is seated upon many waters. Later in verse 15 we will see that these waters are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. That she is seated upon them tells us that she rules over them. Which city ruled the world when this book was written? Jerusalem? Hardly. This harlot is Rome.

Rome is being described here with Old Testament descriptions of ancient Babylon. For example, Jeremiah 51:13 addresses Babylon as “you who dwell by many waters” — and that was *literally* true for Babylon. The river Euphrates ran through the city, and it had irrigation canals extending out in every direction. Likewise, Jeremiah 51:7 describes Babylon as a “golden cup,” which we will here in verse 4 applied to Rome.

But did Rome *literally* rule the entire world? No, but Rome’s dominion was so large that it was commonly described in such terms. In Luke 2:1, for example, we are told that “a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that **all the world** should be enrolled.”

And while we are talking about whether we should take these descriptions literally, what about the name of the city itself? Is this vision focused on the literal city of Babylon? The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus in the first century B.C. relates that only a small part of ancient Babylon was inhabited in his day. Strabo the Greek geographer who died in A.D. 19 describes Babylon as being “in great part deserted.” Pausanias the Greek traveler and geographer of the second

century declares that nothing remained of Babylon except the temple of Belus and the walls of the city. Lucian, the second century Greek sophist and satirist, said that Babylon would soon have to be searched for like Nineveh, of which not a trace remained in his day. **Is that the great city John is writing about?** Of course not! And that simple, indisputable historical fact establishes beyond any doubt that no one can take everything in this book literally. And once we agree that this book contains images and symbols, then under what theory do we say that Babylon is *figurative* but the 1000 years are *literal*?

Verse 2 tells us that kings have committed fornication with this harlot. These kings have been her customers. Fornication in this context most likely means that these kingdoms have joined in with Rome and are on Rome's side — some voluntarily and others not.

In the Old Testament, disobedient cities are often called harlots. In Isaiah 23:17 we read that Tyre played the harlot with all of the kings of the earth. And in Nahum 3:4 we read that Nineveh betrayed nations with her harlotries. In Isaiah 1:21, the prophet, speaking of Jerusalem, writes "how the faithful city has become a harlot." Ezekiel 16:15 says, "You trusted in your beauty and played the harlot." Those fornications, like those of Rome, involved treacherous and deceitful relationships with other nations and with false gods all aimed at harming God's people.

Barclay notes that there is great symbolism behind these comparisons with a harlot. As John 3:16 reminds us, God so loved the world. "When we turn our backs upon God, it is not so much a sin against law as a sin against love." A second aspect of the image likely points to the harlot as one who not only sins herself but who causes others to sin. These understandings combine to create a very powerful image.

3 And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding

in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; 5 and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations." 6a And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

In verse 3 John is carried away into the wilderness. Over and over again the Bible, men such as Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist meet God in the wilderness. If our lives are too busy and too noisy to hear the voice of God in his word, then perhaps we need to go out into the wilderness (which might just mean that we turn off our TV and our phone for an hour!).

In Chapter 12 the people of God were pictured as a woman chased into the wilderness by an angry dragon. The woman John sees here in Chapter 17 is also in the wilderness, but as we will see she is quite different from the woman of Chapter 12.

This woman sits upon a scarlet beast that is full of blasphemous names and that has seven heads and ten horns. We discussed these images at length in our discussions of Chapter 13. This beast appears to be the same beast from the sea in Chapter 13, which represented Rome as a civil persecuting power.

The harlot is dressed in purple and scarlet, and she is arrayed with gold, jewels, and pearls. These images denote her wealth and her royalty. Rome was powerful in earthly terms. Rome was royal in earthly terms. Rome was rich in earthly terms. Rome was beautiful in earthly terms. And all of those descriptions were true of a great kingdom of John's day — but that great kingdom was *not* Rome! God tells us that it was the church and *not* Rome that was truly powerful and royal and rich and beautiful. Things are not always what they seem!

The harlot offers a golden cup to the other nations. This description is likely an allusion to a description of the actual Babylon found in Jeremiah 51:7 — "Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, therefore the na-

tions went mad.” The nations that shared Rome’s wealth also shared Rome’s guilt.

The mystery in verse 5 is simply that Babylon means Rome. The harlot wears on her forehead the name “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations.” She wears this horrible title proudly just as the High Priest wore the name of Jehovah upon his forehead. Rome was proud of its abominations and fornications and made no attempt to hide them. She displayed them proudly for all to see. There is also a historical connection with this description: a Roman prostitute in a public brothel wore a frontlet upon her forehead that displayed her name to the customers.

Barclay thinks that these verses may have an even more precise historical allusion in mind. The Roman Empress Messalina was the wife of the Emperor Claudius, who preceded Nero. Have you ever met someone in authority and wondered how he got there — and then you met his wife and understood? That may have been the case with Claudius. The historian Suetonius described Claudius in this way: “His knees were weak and gave way under him and his head shook. He stammered and his speech was confused. He slobbered and his nose ran when he was excited.” From this description of Claudius’ weakness, we can gather that Messalina was likely very powerful and influential, which was true up until the time when Claudius had her killed for plotting against him. In any event, Juvenal tells us that at night she would go down to the public brothels and serve there as a common prostitute. This description of Rome as a harlot would have rung a bell of recognition with anyone who remembered Messalina.

We should pause at this point to note that however bad Rome is pictured in this book, it was pictured just as bad and possibly even worse by the pagans who lived there. Tacitus called Rome “the place into which from all over the world all atrocious and shameful things flow and where they are most popular.” Seneca called Rome “a filthy sewer.” Barclay: “This was the civilization into which Christianity came; and it was out of this that men were converted to chastity. We may well speak of the miracles of the Cross.”

This harlot is vividly pictured as being drunk with the blood of saints and martyrs. She is not just an ordinary persecutor. Instead, she is glutted with slaughter, and she has revelled in that slaughter as a drunken man revels in his wine and drunkenness.

6b When I saw her I marveled greatly. 7  
But the angel said to me, "Why marvel? I  
will tell you the mystery of the woman,  
and of the beast with seven heads and ten  
horns that carries her.

The mystery of these symbols was something that was previously not understood but that will now be revealed.

Throughout this explanation we should reverse the rule that we have been using throughout our study of this book; that is, we should accept the explanation as literal unless there is an overriding reason to treat it otherwise. Why? Because the angel is *explaining* the apocalyptic language we have seen rather than giving us additional apocalyptic language. Many commentators have trouble with these verses because the angel's interpretation does not match their own. Their response often involves figurizing all or part of the angel's interpretation. In fact, some commentators have things so backwards that they treat the image as a literal description and the explanation of the image as a figurative description!

8 The beast that you saw was, and is not,  
and is to ascend from the bottomless pit  
and go to perdition; and the dwellers on  
earth whose names have not been written  
in the book of life from the foundation of  
the world, will marvel to behold the beast,  
because it was and is not and is to come.

We have already discussed the bottomless pit and the book of life. We have also already discussed this beast, which represents Rome as a civil persecuting power. Recall that the time when "the beast was" denotes the persecution under Nero, the time when "the beast is not" denotes the lull in persecution between Nero and Domitian, and the

time when “the beast is to come” denotes the resumption of persecution under Domitian, who was called Nero Redivivus by some.

Nero was the first to actively persecute the Church. The persecution had subsided considerably when the book was written during Vespasian’s rule. But the persecution began again under Domitian’s reign. Juvenal said that Rome under Domitian was enslaved to a “bald-headed Nero.” Tertullian called Domitian “a man of Nero’s type of cruelty” and “a sub-Nero.” Domitian renewed the persecution against Christians that Nero had started.

9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; 10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while. 11 As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition.

We have already discussed these verses at great length in our comments on Chapter 13. The five kings who have fallen are Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius (who followed Nero and who all ruled and died within about one year) are ignored in Revelation (but not in Daniel, which describes them as three uprooted horns). The king “who is” is Vespasian, which means the book was written during his reign. The one who will come and reign only a short time is Titus who ruled for only 2 years. (And no one would have guessed that Titus would reign only a short time. He was only 39 when he became emperor, and the people all expected him to reign for a very long time. But God knew otherwise, and soon Titus’ younger brother, Domitian, was emperor in his place.) The eighth king is Domitian, who began where Nero left off with regard to persecuting the church.

12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as

kings for one hour, together with the beast. 13 These are of one mind and give over their power and authority to the beast; 14 they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.” 15 And he said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. 16 And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, 17 for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled. 18 And the woman that you saw is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

Again, we discussed these verses at length in our study of Chapter 13. We discussed several views regarding the 10 horns and the 10 kings, which we will not repeat here.

Whatever they represent, verse 14 tells us something important about the 10 horns: “the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.” Did Jesus’ victory over these 10 horns *make* Jesus Lord of lords and King of kings? No. We are told that he conquered them *because* he is Lord of lords and King of kings. Jesus’ victory over Rome and Rome’s minions did not make Jesus king. Jesus was already king!

And there is a lesson in that for us. How often do we hear denominational preachers tell people that they need to make Jesus lord of their life? How often do denominational songs (some sadly in our own songbook) tell people they they need to crown Jesus king? There is not a shred of support in the Bible for such a notion — and yet we



continue to hear it and sing it. When Peter was asked “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” in Acts 2:37, he did not tell them they needed to make Jesus lord of their life. In fact, that would have made absolutely no sense. Why? Because he had just told them in Acts 2:36 that “God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Instead, Peter told them that they needed to obey their Lord; they needed to “repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” (Acts 2:38) Jesus is Lord of lords, which means he is everyone’s Lord. Jesus is King of kings, which means he is everyone’s King. The next time you see the word “king” or “lord” in a song, pause and consider just what it is you are being asked to sing!

Nowhere in Revelation does Jesus begin to rule over something new. He has all authority when the book begins, and he has all authority when the book ends. He reigns over the entire universe when the book begins, and he reigns over the entire universe when the book ends. He is King of kings and Lord of lords when the book begins, and he is King of kings and Lord of lords when the book ends. Do we see new expressions of that reign in this book? Yes. But do we see in this book Christ reigning over something or someone that he did not previously reign over? No.

# Revelation — Lesson 22

## Additional Comments on Chapter 17:

Last week we discussed the false denominational notion that people somehow make Jesus Lord or crown Jesus King. As we saw, people obey him because he is already Lord and King — not to make him Lord and King. There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the reign of Christ, and much of it comes from misunderstandings about the book of Revelation.

Sadly, many denominational interpretations of this book belittle the church and belittle Christ. To them, the church is just a mistake and just an afterthought. They tell us that Jesus failed to set up his kingdom during the first century, and that he is not ruling now. Here is how the *Wycliffe Dictionary of Theology* describes premillennialism —

It is held that the Old Testament prophets predicted the re-establishment of David's kingdom and that **Christ himself intended to bring this about**. It is alleged however, that because the Jews refused his person and work **he postponed the establishment of his kingdom** until the time of his return. Meanwhile, it is argued, the Lord gathered together 'the church' as **a kind of interim measure**.

How anyone could read the Bible and believe that Jesus failed in anything he intended to do is inconceivable! How anyone can read the Bible and conclude that the church is a mistake or an afterthought or "a kind of interim measure" is likewise inconceivable! Premillennialism is not simply a matter of opinion on which we can agree to disagree. Rather, it is a false doctrine that runs counter to the gospel of Jesus Christ, belittles the work of Christ, and belittles the church of Christ. We discussed these issues in our introductory classes, and we will have more to say about this dangerous heresy when we get to Chapter 20.

## Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 is a form of prophetic literature called a “doom song” that is common in the Old Testament. Isaiah 13:19-22 is a doom song for Babylon. Isaiah 34:11-15 is a doom song for Edom. Zephaniah 2:13-15 is a doom song for Nineveh. In each case, the ruin of a great city is described in vivid, poetic language interspersed with apocalyptic speech. Here — just as a careful student of the Old Testament should have expected — we have a doom song for Rome.

1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor.

Verse 1 reconfirms that this message of doom and the judgment that it relays are from God. The verse also brings to mind Ezekiel 43:1-2 where we read that “the earth shone” with the glory of God. Swete writes that this angel has “so recently ... come from from the presence [of God] that in passing he brings a broad belt of light across the dark earth.”

2 And he called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird;

In 14:8, an angel proclaimed, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great.” In verse 2 that message is repeated, and once again the past tense is used to stress the certainty of that event. In like manner, over 100 years before the actual fall of ancient Babylon, Isaiah 21:9 said, “**Babylon is fallen, is fallen**; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground.”

Verse 2 goes even further and tells us that the city has (past tense) become a dwelling place of demons, foul spirits, and every foul and hateful bird. The description of this city is very different from the holy

city we will see in Chapter 21, of which 21:27 will tell us: “And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination.”

Isaiah 13:17-22 describes the destruction of historical Babylon by the Medes using very similar language to what we read of the fall of Rome in verse 2 —

Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them  
... And Babylon ... shall be as when God  
overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall  
never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt  
in from generation to generation: neither  
shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither  
shall the shepherds make their fold there.  
But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there;  
and their houses shall be full of doleful crea-  
tures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs  
shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the  
islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and  
dragons in their pleasant palaces: and her  
time is near to come, and her days shall not  
be prolonged.

Was this a literal description of Babylon's fall? No. As we discussed earlier, ancient Babylon fell without a shot being fired. Is the language in verse 2 a literal description of Rome's fall? No. Why then is the city described that way? It is symbolic of the depth of Rome's fall. Barclay explains:

Surely the most dramatic part of the picture  
is the demons haunting the ruins. The pagan  
gods banished from their reign haunt the ru-  
ins of the temples where once their power  
had been supreme.

The language denotes utter devastation and utter desolation. That is what it meant in Isaiah 13 about Babylon, and that is what it means here about Rome.

3 for all nations have drunk the wine of  
her impure passion, and the kings of the  
earth have committed fornication with

her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness.”

Rome was a great military and commercial power, and Rome enticed other nations to follow her wicked example. Rome was powerful and arrogant and openly boasted of her abominations.

We are reminded of the description given in Isaiah 10:12-14 of the arrogant boasting and haughty pride of the king of Assyria, who says:

By the strength of my hand I have done it,  
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;  
I have removed the boundaries of peoples,  
and have plundered their treasures; like a  
bull I have brought down those who sat on  
thrones. My hand has found like a nest the  
wealth of peoples; and as men gather eggs  
that have been forsaken so I have gathered all  
the earth; and there was none that moved a  
wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped.

Rome had the same attitude as that Assyrian king and ultimately suffered the same fate.

The reference in verse 3 to the “merchants of the earth” is important. As we like to say today, if you want to understand something, then just follow the money. And if you followed the money in the first century you would end up in Rome. It was money that kept the emperors in power because it was money that allowed them to keep the army happy, and no emperor ruled very long when the army was unhappy. It was Roman money that fueled the fires of Rome’s power and of Rome’s persecution of the church, and God is including the merchants in this judgment of Rome. Then, as now, much and perhaps most of the misery in the world can be traced to greed. While the Christians were denying themselves, the Romans were denying themselves nothing. “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” (1 Timothy 6:10)

4 Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, lest

you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; 5 for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.

In verse 4, God calls for his people to come out of the city lest they follow Rome's evil example and share in Rome's destruction. This call is one that is made many times in the Old Testament. It was the call that Lot heard in Genesis 19:12-14. It was the call that Moses heard in Numbers 16:23-26. It was the call that the exiles in Babylon heard many times —

- **Isaiah 48:20** Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans!
- **Jeremiah 50:8** Move from the midst of Babylon, Go out of the land of the Chaldeans; And be like the rams before the flocks.
- **Jeremiah 51:6** Flee from the midst of Babylon, And every one save his life! Do not be cut off in her iniquity, For this is the time of the LORD'S vengeance; He shall recompense her.
- **Jeremiah 51:45** My people, go out of the midst of her! And let everyone deliver himself from the fierce anger of the LORD.

Was this call in verse 4 a call for the people to *literally* leave the city? No, and once again we should consider the example of ancient Babylon. Were the exiles in Babylon being told to literally flee that city? No, and, in fact God told them in Jeremiah 29:7 to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

Although the Jewish exiles in Babylon did eventually return to their homeland, they did not flee there. Instead, they returned in three groups. First, some of the exiles returned in 539 BC when Cyrus gave a decree that the Jews should return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. (That decree can be found in Ezra 1:2–4 and 2 Chronicles 36:23.) Second, others returned in 458 BC when Ezra led 1500 men with their families to Jerusalem. And third, yet others returned in 445 BC when

Nehemiah, a cup bearer in the court of Artaxerxes, asked the king to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And these returns happened *after* the judgment of Babylon by the Persians that Jeremiah wrote about in Jeremiah 50-51.

Likewise, the Christians in Rome are not being told to literally flee that city. Throughout this book the church has been pictured in Heaven. God is simply telling them to live that way. It is what Paul told us in Colossians 3:1-2 — “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.”

Barclay explains it well:

[T]his cry and challenge [to come out] do not involve a coming out at a definite moment. They imply a certain “aloofness of spirit maintained in the very heart of the world’s traffic.” They describe the essential apartness of the Christian from the world.... The Christian is not conformed to the world but transformed from the world (Romans 12:2). It is not a question of retiring from the world; it is a question of living differently within the world.

We are reminded of 2 Corinthians 6:16-18 —

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them,** says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.”

“Come out from among them and be ye separate!” That is a central theme of this book and one that we desperately need to hear today. God is always calling upon his people to cut their connection with sin

and to stand with him and for him. Dwight Hervey Small in his book *The High Cost of Holy Living* wrote:

Wherever the Christian finds himself, and whatever his calling in life, his life must stand as a radical protest against the world and its standards.

C. S. Lewis wrote:

Hope means a continual looking forward to the eternal world. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.

The church has a lot of problems today. Why? Heresy is inevitable when men become more interested in pleasing themselves and in pleasing the world than in pleasing God. Why are some today advocating leadership roles in the church for women? Because they think it pleases God, or because they want to please the world? Why are they bringing instruments into the worship? Because they think it pleases God, or because they want to please the world? Why are they watering down baptism?

Is the church becoming more like the world, or is the world becoming more like the church? Is the world setting our agenda or is God? Perhaps as Wordsworth once said, "The world is too much with us."

Verse 5 tells us that Rome's sins were heaped high as heaven. Yes, God is longsuffering, but at some point sin reaches a level that is intolerably high, and judgment falls. In Ezra 9:6, Ezra said of the people in his day, "I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens." How high are our own sins? How close is our own country to that divine tipping point? How many are left in our own land who are ashamed and blush to lift their faces to God? "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay,



they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore shall they fall among them that fall: in the time of their visitation they shall be cast down, saith the LORD." (Jeremiah 8:12)

6 Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. 7 As she glorified herself and played the wanton, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning. Since in her heart she says, 'A queen I sit, I am no widow, mourning I shall never see,' 8 so shall her plagues come in a single day, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she shall be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her."

God commands that Rome be punished and that vengeance be exacted. To whom is this command directed? We know it is not directed to the church because the church is commanded in Romans 12:19 not to seek vengeance. Some argue the command is directed to the 10 horns in 17:16 who would "hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire." Others argue the command is directed toward the angel who is acting on God's behalf as his instrument of justice.

But one thing is certain: Vengeance does not belong to man, it belongs to God. God said in Deuteronomy 32:35 that "vengeance is mine, and recompense." In Romans 12:19, we read, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." That verse contains both a command and a promise. The verse that commands us not to avenge ourselves is the same verse that promises us there will be vengeance. We see the same thing in the Old Testament about ancient Babylon:

- **Psalm 137:8** O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

- **Jeremiah 50:29** Repay her according to her work; According to all she has done, do to her; For she has been proud against the LORD, Against the Holy One of Israel.

The double punishment in verse 6 may come from the double repayment that was often exacted under the old law. (Exodus 22:4, 7, 9) A more likely explanation is that it refers simply to a balancing of the scales — not in the sense that the scales become even but rather in the sense that Rome would be placed on those scales in the same position that Rome had placed the church. We see this idea in Isaiah 40:2, Isaiah 61:7, Jeremiah 16:18, Jeremiah 17:18, and Zechariah 9:12. Verse 7 seems to confirm this view — “As she glorified herself and played the wanton, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning.”

Verses 6-8 teach us at least two lessons about the judgment of Rome. The first lesson is that a man sows what he reaps. In Galatians 6:7 Paul writes, “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man sows, that he will also reap.”

A second important lesson that we learn from Rome’s fall is that all human pride will one day be humiliated. “Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall.” (Proverbs 16:18) Rome’s supreme sin was pride. Ezekiel 28:2-7 could have been penned about any of the Roman emperors we have considered —

Son of man, say unto the prince of Tyrus,  
Thus saith the Lord GOD; Because thine  
heart is lifted up, and thou hast said, I am a  
God, I sit in the seat of God, in the midst of  
the seas; yet thou art a man, and not God,  
though thou set thine heart as the heart of  
God: 3 Behold, thou art wiser than Daniel;  
there is no secret that they can hide from  
thee: 4 With thy wisdom and with thine un-  
derstanding thou hast gotten thee riches, and  
hast gotten gold and silver into thy treasures:  
5 By thy great wisdom and by thy traffick hast  
thou increased thy riches, and thine heart is  
lifted up because of thy riches: 6 Therefore  
thus saith the Lord GOD; Because thou hast  
set thine heart as the heart of God; 7 Be-  
hold, therefore I will bring strangers upon

thee, the terrible of the nations: and they shall draw their swords against the beauty of thy wisdom, and they shall defile thy brightness.

In verse 7 Rome boasts that she will never see the very thing that God said she would see — “A queen I sit, I am no widow, mourning I shall never see.” Rome’s pride (like all pride) caused Rome to feel that it had no need for God. Rome was all that Rome needed! Rome was full of pride and thought it would never and could never fall, and Rome was not the last nation to feel that way.

Pride is one of seven things that God hates in Proverbs 6:16-19, and the pride that God hates is the arrogance of those who feel they have no need of God. God’s punishment for pride in the Old Testament was to inflict extreme humiliation, and that is what God promises Rome. “When pride comes, then comes shame.” (Proverbs 11:2) Rome would plummet from her glory to her destruction quickly and her destruction would be total and complete. Rome’s affluence, pride, and gaiety would be replaced by death, mourning, and famine.

We are reminded of a similar pronouncement regarding Babylon in Isaiah 47:7-11 —

You said, “I shall be mistress for ever,” so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. 8 Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children”: 9 These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure, in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments. 10 You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, “No one sees me”; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me.” 11 But evil shall come upon you, for which you cannot atone; disaster shall fall upon you, which you will

not be able to expiate; and ruin shall come  
on you suddenly, of which you know nothing.

Both Babylon and Rome were filled with pride, and both later had to eat their boastful words.

Isaiah 14 presents a vivid picture of the Babylonian king going into the underworld after his destruction to be greeted by other fallen nations. Rome and its godless emperors would one day make a similar trip and receive a similar greeting.

Is Revelation relevant today? Yes, very much so. One way in which it is particularly relevant is that it reminds us that history repeats itself. Egypt, Babylon, and Rome — all great enemies of God and God's people, and all judged by God. What other cities have taken or will take their place on that list?

9 And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and were wanton with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; 10 they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, "Alas! alas! thou great city, thou mighty city, Babylon! In one hour has thy judgment come."

Verses 9-19 contain three dirges for Rome: The first in verses 9-10 is a dirge sung by kings. The second in verses 11-16 is a dirge sung by merchants, and the third in verses 17-19 is a dirge sung by shipmasters and sailors. Each of these dirges speaks of the greatness, the wealth, and the luxury of Rome.

Are such descriptions of Rome historically accurate? The Talmud says that of the ten measures of wealth that came down into the world, Rome received nine and all the rest of the world only one. Rome's wealth was concentrated in and controlled by the emperors. Seutonius described Nero this way:

He never wore the same garment twice.... He fished with a golden net drawn by cords woven of purple and scarlet threads. It is said he

never made a journey with less than a thousand carriages, with his mules shod with silver.

Seutonius says that Caligula would “drink pearls of great price dissolved in vinegar, and set before his guests loaves and meats of gold.”

Barclay says that “nothing John could say of Rome could be an exaggeration.” Another writes that “our most extravagant luxury is poverty compared with the prodigal magnificence of Rome.” “In the time when John was writing a kind of insanity of wanton extravagance, to which it is very difficult to find any parallel in history, had invaded Rome.”

From an earthly vantage point it seemed that Rome had everything and the church had nothing, but the exact opposite was true!

The kings in these verses placed great faith in the military might and power of Rome. How could they possibly lose while betting on Rome? But what they did not know until it was too late was that Rome is fallen!

11 And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, 12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls. 14 “The fruit for which thy soul longed has gone from thee, and all thy dainties and thy splendor are lost to thee, never to be found again!” 15 The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, 16 “Alas, alas, for the great city that

was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, bedecked with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! 17a In one hour all this wealth has been laid waste.”

This lament by the merchants is very similar to and likely modeled after the lament over the city of Tyre found in Ezekiel 26:1 — 28:19.

These verses describe the great commercial success of Rome, and verses 12-14 in particular describe the vast extent of Rome’s trade. Aristides left us the following description of Rome’s vast trade:

“Merchandise is brought from every land and sea, everything that every season begets, and every country produces, the products of rivers and lakes, the arts of the Greeks and the barbarians, so that, if anyone were to wish to see all these things, he would either have to visit the whole inhabited world to see them—or to visit Rome; so many great ships arrive from all over the world at every hour, at every season, that Rome is like some common factory of the world, for you may see such great cargoes from the Indies, or, if you wish, from the blessed Arabias, that you might well conjecture that the trees there have been stripped naked; clothing from Babylon, ornaments from the barbarian lands, everything flows to Rome; merchandise, cargoes, the products of the land, the emptying of the mines, the product of every art that is and has been, everything that is begotten and everything that grows. If there is anything you cannot see at Rome, then it is a thing which does not exist and which never existed.”

The phrase “slaves, that is, human souls” in verse 13 is interesting. A better translation might be “slaves, even the lives of men.” There were some 60 million slaves in the Roman empire. It was not unusual for a man to own 400 slaves, and those slaves were used for many different purposes. Some masters had slaves walk in front of them so they could return the greetings of friends when the master was too tired or

disdainful to do so. Another had an educated slave stand behind him at dinners to supply him with witty quotations. Others used slaves to remind them when to eat and when to sleep.

As Barclay reminds us, “a society built on luxury, on wantonness, on pride, on callousness to human life and personality is necessarily doomed.” That was true then, and it is true today.

Why do the merchants weep? They weep because of their loss of business. Their lament is not for Rome but for their own lost profit. They have merchandise with no one to sell it to. Their concern for Rome is much like China’s concern today for the U.S. — a concern totally motivated by self interest.

The merchants, like the kings, stand far off and watch the destruction. They do not attempt to help the great city. The kings believed that Rome was a stronghold destined to endure forever. The merchants believed that Rome was a market destined to endure forever. If there is one message in Revelation it is this: **There is but one eternal kingdom!** The church of Christ is the only eternal kingdom. No kingdom of man will endure.

Many commentators discuss at length the various items listed in verses 12-13, but we will not. In short, these are all items that could be found in Rome and that arrived there from all over the world. The cinnamon and the silk likely came from China, and the spices likely came from India.

Verses 16-17a are chilling: “Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, bedecked with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! In one hour all this wealth has been laid waste.” Much could be said of that statement and its relevance both then and now, but I will just quote Homer Hailey: “What about the United States, which has been a land of plenty and great abundance? It has taken much for granted, wasting and squandering its resources. Is it approaching a time when it shall reach for the great abundance bestowed upon it by God, and find it gone for ever?”

17b And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off 18 and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, "What city was like the great city?" 19 And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, "Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! In one hour she has been laid waste.

The city is pictured here as being laid waste in one hour. We have already discussed the phrase "one hour," and you will recall that it denotes a time of critical importance and activity as in the phrase, "My hour has not yet come."

Nero's fire raged a week and failed to destroy the entire city yet the fire that God sends destroys the city in one hour! Rome's fall is total and complete and worse than anything Rome could imagine.

This dirge of the shipmasters reminds us of Ezekiel 27:28-30 —

At the sound of the cry of your pilots the countryside shakes, and down from their ships come all that handle the oar. The mariners and all the pilots of the sea stand on the shore and wail aloud over you, and cry bitterly. They cast dust on their heads and wallow in ashes.

Although Rome was not on the coast, the merchandise of the world entered at its port in Ostia. And again, the shipmasters weep over their loss of trade. Their concern is for themselves, not for Rome.

We see in these verses the incredible materialism of Rome, and if we are looking for modern day parallels, that one is impossible to miss. We may still print "In God We Trust" on our money, but our actions speak much more loudly than those words.

The motto "In God We Trust" first appeared on our coinage during the Civil War. But there is one particular gold coin that does not include



that motto. Why? Teddy Roosevelt specifically asked for its exclusion. He knew the lifestyles of many of the men out West where those gold coins were most seen in circulation, and he did not believe that God's name should be used on coins that were spent in saloons, gambling halls, and brothels. The President expressed this view in a letter dated November 11, 1907:

My own feeling in the matter is due to my very firm conviction that to put such a motto [In God We Trust] on coins, or to use it in any kindred manner, not only does no good but does positive harm, and is in effect irreverence which comes dangerously close to sacrilege. A beautiful and solemn sentence such as the one in question should be treated and uttered only with that fine reverence which necessarily implies a certain exaltation of spirit. Any use which tends to cheapen it, and above all, any use which tends to secure it being treated in a spirit of levity, is from every standpoint profoundly to be regretted.

My how times have changed! How far have we already fallen? Sadly, most today trust in their dollars rather than in God. They have everything that money can buy — but have nothing that it can't. As one commentator noted, "like the uprooted vine that generated the self-consuming fire in Ezekiel 19:14, a culture that worships commercial success will strike the sparks that ultimately burn it to ashes."

20 Rejoice over her, O heaven, O saints  
and apostles and prophets, for God has  
given judgment for you against her!"

The saints, the apostles, and the prophets are shown here in contrast to the kings, the merchants, and the sailors.

Rome's judgment is cause for rejoicing. God's people requested justice, and God has delivered it. The righteous are victorious, and evil has been defeated. Rome was rejoicing in Chapter 11 when it appeared that the two witness had been defeated, but their rejoicing was

premature, and now the tables are turned. Again we find a parallel in the Old Testament judgment of literal Babylon. Jeremiah 51:48 —

Then the heaven and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon; for the destroyers shall come against them out of the north, says the Lord.

But I thought we were supposed to weep with those who weep. Aren't the Christians in verse 20 rejoicing with those who weep? Absolutely! But they are not doing so out of personal bitterness. Their concern, like that of the four living creatures, is for the holiness and reputation of God. They rejoice at the vindication of God and at the defeat of this great enemy of God. These events are an answer to their prayers! How could they not rejoice? God had imposed on Rome the sentence that Rome passed on the church.

21 Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "So shall Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and shall be found no more; 22 and the sound of harpers and minstrels, of flute players and trumpeters, shall be heard in thee no more; and a craftsman of any craft shall be found in thee no more; and the sound of the millstone shall be heard in thee no more; 23 and the light of a lamp shall shine in thee no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride shall be heard in thee no more; for thy merchants were the great men of the earth, and all nations were deceived by thy sorcery. 24 And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth."

A great millstone is thrown into the sea by a mighty angel to explain how the great city would be thrown down and found no more. A sim-

ilar image is used in Jeremiah 51:63-64 to describe the fall of literal Babylon:

When you finish reading this book, bind a stone to it, and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, 'Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the evil that I am bringing upon her.'

Rome, like Babylon, would fall never to rise again. There would be no revived Roman empire.

It is interesting (but not surprising) that premillennialists teach just the opposite! They say that the so-called antichrist will rule from a revived Roman empire.

Verses 22-23 show us five aspects of normal Roman life that would vanish. The sound of musical instruments and rejoicing would go away. The sound of craftsmen plying their trade would never be heard again. The sound of the mill would disappear. No lights in the houses or in the streets would be seen again. The sounds of weddings would no longer be heard. Rome is to become a terrible *silent* and *dark* desolation. Rome, which had once set Christians aflame to provide light for Nero's drunken orgies, would be plunged into darkness and silence.

We find similar descriptions in the Old Testament:

- **Jeremiah 25:10** (concerning Judah) "Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp."
- **Ezekiel 26:13** (concerning Tyre) "And I will stop the music of your songs, and the sound of your lyres shall be heard no more."

Why did this happen? Verses 23-24 give us three reasons: (1) Thy merchants were the great men of the earth, (2) all nations were deceived by thy sorcery, and (3) in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth.

Was Rome a great nation? Yes, it was the greatest the world had ever seen from an earthly perspective. But Rome had not used that greatness for a good purpose. Instead, Rome had used its greatness to deceive and mislead the world. Rome had made its material greatness the goal of its existence. Rome had used its great power to persecute and murder the people of God. Rome had caused all nations to adopt her false standards and her false worship.

Rome fell because Rome was covered with the blood of God's people, and, like Tyre in Ezekiel 24:6, was truly a "bloody city." Rome fell because Rome worshipped wealth and luxury. Rome fell because Rome lived a prodigal and wanton life. Rome fell because Rome found no pleasure except in materialism and perversity. Rome fell because Rome was lifted up with pride and felt it had no need for God.

Waste? Materialism? Wantonness? Perversity? Pride? The shedding of innocent blood? Do we see any modern day parallels in that list?

## Chapter Nineteen

God's people were told to rejoice in Chapter 18, and that is what we see them doing in Chapter 19. They rejoice over the fall of the great city and the victory of the church.

The great joy of those who overcame and conquered is compared here to the joy that accompanies a great wedding feast. The picture is one of victory and unrestrained joy.

The battle at Armageddon (that was first portrayed in Chapter 16) is considered again in this chapter. The two beasts are defeated and cast into a lake of fire. This chapter provides some of the details that were omitted when the battle was first described.

**1 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory**

and power belong to our God, 2 for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great harlot who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

A great multitude in heaven rejoices over the judgment of the harlot. This great multitude (which we first saw in 7:9) represents all of God’s people both living and dead. Although they are pictured in heaven, this book has consistently divided the godly from the ungodly by describing the former as being in heaven while describing the latter as those that dwell on the earth.

Verse 2 reminds us that God’s judgments are true and just. God’s greatness rests not just on his power but on his character. His judgments are *always* true and just, and this judgment of Rome is no exception.

In judging Rome, God avenged the blood of his martyrs as they had requested him to do in 6:10 where they cried with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth.” That prayer set events into motion, and verse 2 tells us that prayer has been answered.

Verse 2 also provides an important focus for what is about to be described. Verse 2 tells us that the focus of this joy and the focus of the judgment is the great harlot — and that great harlot is Rome. We should keep that context in mind if we are tempted at times to leap ahead 1000’s of years (and possibly many more) to the final judgment at the end of time. This vision is still focused on Rome!

3 Once more they cried, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.”

Rome is depicted in verse 3 as a city set on fire by God that burns forever. In 18:9-10 the kings of the earth stood far off and watched the city burn. The shipmasters in 18:18 also watched the great city burn.

Fire is a common symbol for the judgment of God. Sodom and Gomorrah were literally destroyed by fire, yet eventually the fire went out. Nevertheless, Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah are presently undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Those two cities fell never to rise again, and their fall serves as an eternal example. Edom is likewise described in Isaiah 34 as burning forever. That they burn forever simply means that they serve as an example forever. We are seeing the smoke from those cities as we study about their judgment and heed their example.

Rome provides an eternal illustration of the power of God and of his ability to deal with anyone or anything that opposes his will and harms his people. In that sense, Rome burns forever and the smoke that rises from it is always visible.

## Revelation — Lesson 23

19:4 And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!” 5 And from the throne came a voice crying, “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.” 6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. 7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; 8 it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

God was the one king who was able to stop the military might of Rome. God reigned then, God reigns now, God has always reigned, and God will always reign. God reigned prior to the fall of the Rome, and God reigns after the fall of Rome.

The word “Hallelujah” in the New Testament occurs only here in verses 1, 3, 4, and 6. It is a translation of the Hebrew phrase, “Praise ye Jah [Jehovah],” and is being used here by the 24 elders and the four living creatures in the very presence of God. The word “Hallelujah” is a beautiful word, but sadly it is used more often than not today with no thought of God. “Hallelujah” includes within it the very name Jehovah, and his church should treat that word accordingly even if the world persists in using it in vain.

In verse 6, we have yet another reminder that what John is seeing and hearing is a vision. “And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multi-

tude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunders.” John is reminding us that he is describing a vision, and it an important reminder, particularly for the closing chapters of the book.

The word “Almighty” in verse 6 occurs 10 times in the New Testament — once in 2 Corinthians 6:18 in a quotation from the Old Testament and nine times in Revelation. The term denotes God’s sovereignty over all of creation. Rome believed that it was almighty, but it was very badly mistaken. Almighty God created the universe, and Almighty God reigns over the universe — including Rome! That is a vital lesson for nation builders in any age! “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.” (Psalm 127:1)

In verse 7 we meet a third woman — the wife of the Lamb — to go along with the radiant woman we met in Chapter 12 and the harlot we met in Chapter 17. The harlot, however, is no more. And now that the harlot — that great enemy and rival of the church — is gone, it is time for a wedding. It is time for rejoicing. The phrase “rejoice and be exceedingly glad” occurs only one other place in the Bible. In Matthew 5:12, Jesus said, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. **Rejoice and be exceedingly glad**, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” The images in this chapter are a beautiful illustration of that statement by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

But did the martyrs go to Heaven when they died? Didn’t they go to bosom of Abraham as Lazarus did in Luke 16:22? Don’t they have to wait until the end of time to begin enjoying their heavenly reward? I don’t think so. It is true that Lazarus went to the bosom of Abraham with a great gulf fixed, but it is equally true that Lazarus died before the cross. The Bible teaches that faithful children of God who die *after* the cross go to Heaven when they die. That was certainly the Apostle Paul’s expectation who, writing under inspiration, said in Philippians 1:23-24 — “For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.” Paul didn’t mention Abraham’s bosom in those verses. Instead, when Paul departed this life he expected to be with Christ in Heaven. Is someone really going to sug-



gest he was wrong? After all, this side of the cross, what remains to keep us from the presence of God? Hebrews 10:19-22 answers that question: Nothing! —

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

In the Old Testament, the relation of God to his people was often referred to as a husband and wife relationship. (See Hosea 2 and Ezekiel 16, for example.) It was natural then for the relation between Christ and his church to be described that way in the New Testament, and that is what we find, for example, in Ephesians 5 and Romans 7. We also find that here in Chapter 19, where there is a marriage between Christ the Lamb and a woman who can be none other than the radiant woman of Chapter 12 who fled into the wilderness to escape the dragon. At that point on the timeline, that woman in Chapter 12 represented the church. Earlier on the timeline that woman represented the faithful remnant under the Old Covenant who brought forth the son of God according to the flesh, but under the New Covenant that woman represents the church, the bride of Christ.

But verse 7 tells us that the marriage of the Lamb has come. What does that mean? To help us answer that question, let's first consider another question: What exactly does this marriage symbolize? Well, what would we expect it to symbolize? What has just happened? What have the people of God just been commanded to do? Look at 18:20 — "Rejoice over her, O heaven, O saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" They have been commanded to rejoice, and that is exactly what we see them doing. The marriage and the marriage feast are used to illustrate the joy of God's people in Chapter 19 just as the joyous feast of the tabernacles was used for that same purpose in Chapter 7.

So what then does verse 7 mean when it says that “the marriage of the Lamb *has come*”? Let’s start with what it does *not* mean. We know that Paul often described Jesus’ love for his church as the relationship between a husband and a wife, and many commentators have used the closing chapters of Revelation to develop elaborate theories about Christ’s marriage to the church.

Max King, whom we discussed in our introductory lessons, teaches that Jesus was married to literal Israel until the church appeared, at which point Jesus was betrothed to the church while still married to Israel. But when Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, Christ was divorced from Israel and married to the church. That theory sounds more like a soap opera than Scripture! King’s theory is baseless and, in fact, is contradicted by Paul’s pre-A.D. 70 descriptions of Jesus’ relation to the church in such passages as Ephesians 5:23-32 and Romans 7:4-6.

In fact, the church is described sometimes as being married to Christ and other times as being betrothed to Christ. Ephesians 5 describes the relation between Christ and the church as “one flesh,” which is more than a betrothal. (Recall Matthew 1:18 — “After His mother Mary was **betrothed** to Joseph, **before they came together**, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.”) And remember also Romans 7:4 — “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, **that we should bear fruit to God.**” That, too, is more than a betrothal.

But in 2 Corinthians 11:2 Paul wrote, “For I have **betrothed** you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” Is the church married to Christ or just betrothed to Christ? Is there a contradiction? Of course not. **Neither is literally true, but both are figuratively true.** Just as in the Old Testament, these descriptions of the church being married to Christ or betrothed to Christ are illustrations intended to show the love of Christ for his church. Sometimes that love is shown as a marriage, while other times it is shown as a betrothal with the marriage yet to come.

In fact, Paul used marriage in various ways to describe the church. In Ephesians 5, for example, he used marriage both to describe Jesus' love for the church and to emphasize the need for purity in the church. In Romans 7, he used marriage to describe not the relation of the entire church to Christ but instead the relation of an individual Christian to church. Romans 6 and 7, studied together, describe baptism as a wedding ceremony in which we enter a covenant relationship with Jesus. In short, even outside of Revelation, the symbol of marriage is used to describe different aspects of the church and of a Christian's relationship with Christ. Here in Revelation 19 we see yet another aspect — the joy of the church in its victory over Rome.

A central theme of this book is that Jesus loves his church and is intimately concerned with its welfare. How better to illustrate that love and concern than with a marriage? How better to illustrate the great joy of the church than with a marriage and a marriage feast? The context here is unrestrained joy, and a marriage is used to symbolize that joy.

As for the elaborate theories that have been developed based on these closing chapters, I like what Jim McGuiggan has to say on that subject:

It's not out of place here to say a word or two about using figures to build doctrines on. If the doctrine is not clearly taught in other plain sections of scripture, it's a foolish man indeed who founds a school on a figure! Haven't we seen enough of this in the world? We've had men fill us with their types, double applications, and allegories.

The fine linen, bright and pure, that the bride is wearing in verse 8 is a sharp contrast to the worldly apparel that the harlot was wearing. The bride of the Lamb, as Ephesians 5:27 tells us, is without "spot or wrinkle or any such thing," but is "holy and without blemish."

And isn't there a lesson there for us? We are the bride of Christ without spot or blemish, and we must always give Christ our very best. After all that this book of Revelation has told us so far about Christ and his church (and the most beautiful descriptions are yet to come!),

how could his church possibly fail to give him its very best? But do we? I fear sometimes that the modern church has settled into a bed of comfortable but deadly mediocrity (if we even reach that high!) — mediocre discipleship, mediocre evangelism, mediocre preaching, mediocre teaching, mediocre singing, mediocre obedience. Jesus deserves and demands our very best. God sent his very best into this world to die for us — how can we respond with less than our own best? Remember Malachi 1:6-13 —

A son honors his father, And a servant his master. If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts to you priests who despise My name. Yet you say, 'In what way have we despised Your name?' "You offer defiled food on My altar, But say, 'In what way have we defiled You?' By saying, 'The table of the LORD is contemptible.' And when you offer the blind as a sacrifice, Is it not evil? And when you offer the lame and sick, Is it not evil? Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" Says the LORD of hosts. ... You also say, "Oh, what a weariness!" And you sneer at it," Says the LORD of hosts. "And you bring the stolen, the lame, and the sick; Thus you bring an offering! Should I accept this from your hand?" Says the LORD.

That was God's response in the Old Testament when his people brought him something less than their best. Do we really think he responds differently today when his people do the same thing?

9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

What is the main point of this marriage symbol — the marriage itself or the joy that accompanies it? Look at verse 9. The angel says that those who are invited to the marriage supper are blessed — that is, the

*guests* are blessed. Why? Because they are able to share the joy of the event. The context is joy, and the marriage is a beautiful symbol for that joy.

But who are these guests? If the church is the bride, then who is left to be blessed? These guests are those who are called by the gospel and who heed that call in obedience to Christ. Even here, at the joyous wedding feast celebrating the victory over Rome, the church is pictured as continuing its work to proclaim the gospel to those who are lost. Earlier we saw the church doing its work while being persecuted, and here we see the church doing its work while celebrating. The church has a mission, and nothing can stand in the way of that mission. We must continue working until that last great day. And the fact that we see the work of the church continuing here in verse 9 is further evidence that what is being described in this chapter is not that last great day! There will be no “guests” on that day!

10 Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

John falls down to worship the angel but is told that such worship is improper. (This same thing will happen again in 22:8.) Why did John try to worship this angel? Some argue that John was confused as to the identity of the speaker and perhaps thought it was Christ himself, but others respond that John knew Christ very well and was able to recognize him elsewhere in the book. Others argue that John was perhaps so overwhelmed at what he was seeing that he impulsively fell at the feet of the angel — something he would never have done in ordinary circumstances (assuming that one could meet an angel in ordinary circumstances!). I favor this latter view, which also explains why it happens again in 22:8. Can you imagine what it must have been like to actually witness the visions in this book? I’m surprised he didn’t fall down more often!

In any event, God uses John's reaction as an opportunity to drive home a central theme in this book: God alone is worthy of worship. No *creature* — be it an angel or an emperor — is to be worshiped. And if it is improper to worship this wondrous angelic being, then how much more so must it be to worship a perverted pagan emperor!

There is a stark contrast in this event with another event recorded by John. In John 9:38, John described the reaction of the man blind from birth after Jesus gave him his sight — “And he worshipped him.” Unlike this angel, Jesus accepted the worship of men. Unlike this *created* angel, Jesus is the eternal *creator*. Jesus is the great I Am! (John 8:58) Jesus is God! How else can we reconcile John 9:38 with what Jesus told Satan in Matthew 4:10? “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him *only* shalt thou serve.”

What is meant by the phrase “for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” in verse 10? Some hold that this testimony is our testimony about Jesus from his Word, while others hold that it is Jesus' testimony to us through his Word. Either could be the intended meaning. The Word is the testimony of Jesus, and the Word is the spirit of prophecy. Barclay suggests that John may have intended the passage to carry this double meaning.

11 Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. 12 His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. 13 He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

There have been many openings in Revelation. In 4:1 a door was opened in heaven. In 11:19 the temple of God in heaven was opened. In 15:5 the temple of the tabernacle of the testimony was opened. In verse 11 heaven itself is opened.

The first seal in Chapter 6 showed a rider on a white horse who wore a crown and went out conquering and to conquer. Here again we see a rider on a white horse. But, as we discussed in Chapter 6, this rider is different. The rider here is called Faithful and True, and his name is The Word of God. This rider is Jesus Christ, the conqueror of Rome and the righteous judge.

Think for a moment about who it is who is seeing this incredible image of Christ! John likely grew up with Jesus and was the special apostle “whom Jesus loved.” John was with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry even up to the foot of the cross. He was Jesus’ cousin and had seen Jesus in many different settings and circumstances both before his death and after his resurrection. He had witnessed the transfiguration. And yet here he was — old, alone, persecuted, and exiled. Perhaps Jesus had just forgotten about poor old John. Hardly! John sees him once again — as a rider on a white horse, with eyes like a flame of fire, with many diadems on his head, clad in a robe dipped in blood, and wearing the very name that John had used to open his gospel account, The Word of God. Aside from the comfort this book provided to the church, just imagine the comfort this vision provided to John!

Satan wore seven diadems and the beast from the sea wore 10, but Jesus wears “many” diadems. He is the King of kings!

We are told that the rider “has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself,” yet in the very next verse we read that “the name by which he is called is The Word of God.” How can it be true that no one knows a name that is given for all to see in the next verse?

Names in the Bible are often used to denote a person’s status. When one’s status changed, his name was often changed. We are reminded, for example, of Abram, Jacob, and Saul. To have a name that no one else can know means that you have a status that no one else can share. That is certainly true of Jesus — only he can be called The Word of God. Only he has that status.

His robe is dipped in blood. Whose blood? Some argue it is Christ’s own blood, pointing again to the image of Christ as the lamb that was

slain. Others argue it is the blood of the martyrs, shown as a reminder of why Rome, the bloody city, was being judged. Those views are possibilities, but a more likely answer is that the blood is the blood of Jesus' *past* enemies. The picture of Christ shown here is one of a warrior going out to conquer the enemies of his people. The ability of this warrior to conquer is emphasized by showing him drenched in the blood of those he has previously conquered — and Revelation is full of reminders of his past victories over the enemies of God's people. We are reminded of the description of God in Isaiah 63:3 —

I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment.

Finally, although we will see next that Christ rides with an army, we will also see that he alone does all of the work. Jesus doesn't need an army to take care of Rome!

14 And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. 15 From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

The armies of heaven are the armies that are allied with Christ. They are the ones who conquer with Christ. They are the ones who overcome Rome with their faithful endurance. They are not the armies of those who dwell on earth — they are the armies of Heaven.

Who are the soldiers in this army of heaven? They are arrayed in fine linen, and they are white and pure. Who else could this possibly be but the church? Christians are conquerors!

- **Romans 8:37** No, in all these things we are **more than conquerors** through him who loved us.



- **Revelation 2:7** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. **To him who conquers** I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'
- **Revelation 2:26** **He who conquers** and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations,
- **Revelation 3:5** **He who conquers** shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.
- **Revelation 3:21** **He who conquers**, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Who stood with Christ when he conquered Rome? Who was allied with Christ in that great battle? Who overcame the Roman empire through Christ's power? The church!

So is this the battle at the end of time? What battle at the end of time? Where in the Bible are we told that there will be a battle at the end of time? Where is there a battle in 1 Corinthians 15:52 —

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

Where is there a battle in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 —

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

On that last great day we will rise to meet Jesus in the air. There will be no great battle on earth because there will be no one here to fight it, including Jesus. We will meet Jesus in the air; Jesus will not return to this earth. That day will be a day of judgment and sentencing, not a

day of fighting. We are at war *now*. On that last great day we will lay our weapons down; we won't pick them up.

So what battle is being described here? It is the same battle at Armageddon that was introduced but not described in Chapter 16. It is the great battle that depicts the warfare between Jesus and Rome over the fate of the church.

The sword out of Jesus' mouth reminds us of 2:16 — "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." The weapon used against faithless compromisers in the church would also be used against the godless Romans.

The rod of iron reminds us of the Messianic Psalm 2, verse 9 — "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." And it also reminds us of Isaiah 11:4 — "He shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked."

And Jesus treads the wine press. We have discussed this symbol of judgment before. Jesus is preparing the wine of wrath that Rome must drink. He will tread Rome as one treads grapes, and Rome's blood will flow as does wine from the press.

### 16 On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Did Jesus become King of kings and Lord of lords because he defeated Rome in this great battle? No. Here (and elsewhere) Jesus is called King of kings and Lord of lords before the battle even begins. Jesus had all authority when this book started, and Jesus has all authority when it ends.

That was true when Jesus conquered Rome — and that was true when Jesus conquered us! We did not make Jesus lord or king when we obeyed him. We obeyed him because he already had King of kings and Lord of lords inscribed on his robe and on his thigh! We no more crowned Jesus king than we wrote King of kings on his robe and on

his thigh. The only crown that man ever placed on Jesus' head was a crown of thorns.

A central theme of this book is that Jesus **is** King of kings and Lord of lords. (See also 1 Timothy 6:15, and be wary of anyone who would attempt to change the tense of that verb!) That is something that the first century church needed to hear as they were suffering at the hands of godless Roman kings. And that is something we need to hear today. The church of Christ is the eternal kingdom made without human hands, and our king is the sovereign of the entire universe — the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Is that how we view the church? It should be! That is what the church *is*.

17 Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, 18 to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great."

The same image found here is also found in Isaiah 34:6, Jeremiah 46:10, and Ezekiel 39:17-20, where it used for a similar purpose. This gruesome feast is intended to stand in stark contrast to the marriage supper of the Lamb that we saw in verse 9.

An angel invites the birds of the air to come and feast on the flesh of all who stand with the army arrayed against God. Does this angel have any doubt as to the outcome of this battle? No, and his message to the church is that they should not have any doubts either.

Remember that when this book was written the persecution against the church was about to begin again with renewed strength under Domitian. A central purpose of this book was to assure the church that their ultimate victory was certain and that, no matter how it may have seemed, Rome would not and could not defeat them so long as the church remained faithful to Christ. We have not mentioned it in awhile, but it bears repeating: The message of this book is one of

comfort and reassurance directed toward its first century readers, and if our interpretation of this book provides no comfort to that initial audience, then our interpretation is wrong.

But what about all of the **neutral** people in Rome? What about all of the bystanders who weren't on either side? If you're looking for a modern day lesson from this book of Revelation, here's one: **There are no neutral people! No one is neutral when it comes to Jesus and his church!** There is no middle ground. Everyone is either on one side or the other. "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." (Matthew 12:30) Either you are a child of God who dwells in heaven or you are a child of the devil who dwells on earth. There is no other place for you to dwell, and there is no other one for you to serve.

19 And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who sits upon the horse and against his army. 20 And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulphur. 21 And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Who is arrayed against God? The two beasts (one of whom is now called the false prophet) and the kings of the earth, all of whom we have already met. The beast is the beast from the sea who represents the civil persecuting side of Rome. The kings of the earth lead the armies of the earth that are composed of those who dwell upon the earth. They stand in contrast to the armies of Heaven that are composed of those who dwell not on earth but in Heaven. The false prophet is the beast from the earth who represents the false religious

side of Rome. Notice that the focus is still on Rome! This book has not changed its focus, and neither should we.

In verses 19-20, we see a war waged and we see that these two beasts are thrown into the lake of fire. This event was shown in 14:9-11, but here we see some additional details. But although we see more details, we still do not find a description of the battle itself. Instead all we see is the outcome of that battle.

As for the lake of fire, in John 15:6 we are told that a similar fate awaits all who oppose Christ. "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." That same image is used here to describe the fate of this great enemy of God. Rome is utterly defeated and cast into the lake of fire to join all the others who have died in opposition to God.

Why is Rome, represented by the two beasts, cast in to the lake of fire *alive*? Rome was judged and sentenced while it was still very powerful and very much alive. This book reminds us four times that the events it describes were to come to pass soon, and this judgment of Rome was no exception. Rome's judgment did not happen at the end of its life. Rome's judgment happened at the height of its powers. Rome was cast in alive.

Is this the final judgment at the end of all time? No, it is not. To argue otherwise is to lift these verses right of their theological and historical context. It would require us to ignore or twist the time frame of the book, stated twice at the beginning and twice at the end — the events in this book were to come to pass soon. It would also make us wonder why similar language used throughout the Old Testament to describe past judgments against the enemies of God could not be used here in the New Testament for precisely that same reason.

Will there be a last great day of judgment when the righteous hear the words "Well done" and the wicked hear the words "Depart from me"? Absolutely! Could that last great day be described using the same language of judgment we find here about Rome and that we find in the Old Testament about Babylon, Edom, Tyre, etc.? Absolutely! But that

great day is described *elsewhere* in the Bible. It is not the focus here, just as it was not the focus in the Old Testament parallels we have seen over and over during our studies.

What happens next? Those who follow the beasts are slain and become food for the birds, as was foretold at the beginning of the battle.

Notice that even here we get the clear message that vengeance belongs to God alone. The followers of the beast are not killed by the armies of heaven but rather by the sword of the one on the white horse — that is, by Jesus, the righteous judge. Jesus marches with an army to fight Rome, but Jesus doesn't need an army to defeat Rome. He destroys the armies of the earth by the sword that issues from his mouth.

What is that sword? That sword is the word of Christ, which as John 12:48 tells us will be used to judge all who reject Christ. "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."

## Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 is one of the most hotly debated chapters in the Bible. The false doctrine of premillennialism is based on this chapter, and sadly it has permeated much of the denominational world. We looked at some of the consequences of premillennialism during our introductory lessons, and we will not repeat all of that here.

But we should pause to consider one important point — it does make a difference what we believe about premillennialism. Premillennialism is *not* something about which we can just agree to disagree! The false premillennialist doctrine has consequences that run counter to the very heart of the gospel. Premillennialism belittles the church and belittles the sufficiency of Christ's perfect sacrifice. At the heart of premillennialism is the notion that the church of Christ is a mistake

that came about because of a failure by Jesus to accomplish what he intended. Can you think of any doctrine more perverted than that?

Here are some things we should keep in mind as we begin our study of Chapters 20 and 21. The book of Revelation is focused on two primary events, which are really just two sides of the same coin — the judgment of Rome and the victory of the church. Chapter 20 deals with the first of those two events, while Chapter 21 will deal with the second.

Chapters 20-22 are the climax of the book! We have carefully considered the context in our interpretation of the first 19 chapters. Let's not disregard that context now that we have reached the final three chapters!

And what is our goal? Our goal is *not* just to come up with an explanation. That is much too easy! Instead, our goal is to find an explanation that fits the historical context of the book, that agrees with the time frame of the book, and that would have had a meaning for its original readers that was relevant to their current crisis. Remember that Revelation begins and ends with clear statements that what it talks about would happen shortly after it was written.

And one more reminder: Similarity of language does *not* mean identity of subject! We are going to see images that could be used to describe the final judgment at the end of time, but those same images have been used elsewhere in the Bible to describe other past judgments by God that are not the final judgment at the end of all time. Judgments in the Bible are generally described using very similar symbols, and so we cannot determine which judgment is being discussed by looking at those symbols alone. Instead, we must study the context and timeframe of the judgment, as we have been doing.

1 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. 2 And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, 3 and threw him

into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended. After that he must be loosed for a little while.

In verse 1 we see an angel from heaven who comes down with the key of the bottomless pit. We learn two important things from this description. First, Satan has now been defeated. He possessed this key in Chapter 9, but now he seems to have lost it. Second, this scene is being observed from earth. That is, John sees the angel come down from heaven. What that tells us is that the scene we are about to see is being viewed from an earthly vantage point.

How has Satan been defeated? Does this defeat refer to Satan's defeat at the cross or to Satan's defeat at the end of the world? I don't think it refers to either. Once again, let's remember the context and the time frame. The first 19 chapters of this book have focused on the conflict between Rome and the church. Satan's plan to destroy the church through Rome has been completely stopped and totally defeated. That is the defeat pictured here. Think for a moment about the enormity of that defeat! Satan had the most powerful weapon imaginable (the mighty Roman empire) with which to attack the church in its infancy — and yet Satan failed! How would you expect such a tremendous defeat to be described?

Verse 2 pictures the defeat by showing Satan being bound for 1000 years. What does that picture mean? Remember that in apocalyptic language periods of time generally depict a state of affairs or a condition. Recall, for example, the period of 3½ (a broken 7) that we have seen many times in this book used to depict a state of temporary persecution. So what does 1000 years depict? We know that the number 10 represents completeness, and we know that numbers are sometimes raised to powers to emphasize their meanings. (Recall the symbol 144,000, which is 12 squared times 10 cubed, that was used to depict *all* the church.) If the number 10 represents completeness, then the number 1000 represents "complete completeness!"



This use of 1000 is a common symbol even outside of the apocalyptic books. Psalm 50:10 tells us that God owns cattle on 1000 hills, which means that his ownership is complete. Deuteronomy 7:9 tells us that God keeps his covenant to 1000 generations, which means that his faithfulness is complete. Satan is bound for 1000 years, which means his defeat is complete.

Being bound for 1000 years means that, with regard to Rome, Satan has been completely bound and completely defeated. There will be no parole with regard to Rome. Satan is not going to be released for good behavior with regard to Rome.

But after the 1000 years, Satan is loosed for a little while. What does this mean? The first thing it means is that the 1000 year binding could not be describing Satan's defeat at the end of the world. Why? Because when that defeat happens Satan is not going to ever be released again.

So what then does the "little while" denote? Just as the 1000 years referred to a state of affairs rather than to a period of time, so does this "little while" refer to a state of affairs rather than to a period of time. But to what state of affairs does it refer? What is the context? Although Satan has been defeated with regard to Rome, the church must have wondered if Satan might not attack again later and perhaps be more successful next time. God assures them in this chapter that, although Satan will attack again, Satan will never be able to defeat the church. God will continue to protect the church in the future just as he protected it from Rome.

The "little while" refers to Satan's inability to defeat the Church now or ever. Satan did the worst he could do through Rome, and he failed completely. Although Satan will gather his strength and try again, his future attacks will be insignificant compared to what he did and tried to do through Rome. Thus, they are depicted as lasting only a little while.

By saying Satan will return for only a little while, God is saying that Satan's future attacks are nothing to worry about. Satan had at his disposal an evil, blood thirsty empire that ruled the world, and yet he

was not able to defeat the church in its infancy with such a weapon. Why should the church fear future attacks?

And this is an important message for us! It is easy to become discouraged these days, but the book of Revelation should give us courage just as it did to its first century audience.

Is our modern age somewhere in this book of Revelation? Yes! We are living right there in the “little while.” That promise that Satan will not defeat the eternal kingdom of Christ is just as much a promise for us as it was for those first century Christians.

## Revelation — Lesson 24

20:4 Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgment was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Does verse 4 describe a future situation or a past situation? For a clue, let's look at who is assembled here. We have seen this same cast of characters before — the martyrs and the beast. If we are correct that this beast is Rome, then this chapter is still talking about Rome.

And isn't that what we would expect? This entire book has been building toward the climax in these final three chapters. Do we really expect God to suddenly change the subject now that he has reached the grand conclusion?

Who are on the thrones in verse 4? It can be none other than the church. Jesus promised in Chapters 2 and 3 that those who overcame would share his rule over the nations. That is what we see here.

In addition to seeing the church as a whole, John also sees those individual Christians who were killed by Rome. He sees the martyrs who were killed because they had not worshipped the beast.

Had these Christians been defeated? Hardly! Revelation rings throughout with the message that death is not a defeat for a Christian. Defeat would have occurred had a Christian renounced Jesus in order to live. Remember Matthew 16:25 — "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The only defeated Christians were those who compromised with Rome.

What happens to these martyrs? They live and reign with Christ for 1000 years. The Revised Standard Version more accurately reads “they came to life” and reigned with Christ 1000 years. They are like the two witnesses we saw earlier. They appeared to have been killed and defeated by Rome, but they came to life. All was not as it seemed!

Is this resurrection literal or figurative? Our general rule with apocalyptic language is to understand language figuratively unless something forces us to understand it literally, and there is no reason to depart from that rule here. In fact, the Bible includes many *figurative* resurrections. Daniel 12:2, for example, is a figurative resurrection depicting the coming of the Messiah, and that same figurative resurrection is mentioned in Luke 2:34 by Simeon. Isaiah 26:19 and Hosea 13:14 are other examples.

What does this particular resurrection scene in verse 4 depict? It depicts the same thing in a new setting that was depicted in Ezekiel 37 where the same image was also used. In Ezekiel 37, Ezekiel saw a bodily resurrection occur in the valley of dry bones. In verse 11, God told him that the bones were “the house of Israel” who had lost all of their hope. The resurrection of those bones was used to depict the restoration of their hope. Read verses 12-14 —

Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD.

Does such an interpretation fit the context of this passage? Yes, perfectly. These martyrs are figuratively raised to life to depict the restoration of hope that the church was experiencing. In Ezekiel the symbol was used to depict a national restoration of God’s people from

Babylonian captivity. Here the symbol is used to depict the restoration of God's people from Roman captivity.

What happens after they come to life? They reign with Christ for 1000 years. What does that mean? **We know what that means!** It means that their restoration is completely complete! Their *victory* over Rome is just as complete as was Satan's *defeat* with regard to Rome. Those two events are two sides of the same coin. If one is 1000 years, then so must be the other.

And note that they reign *with* Christ for 1000 years. You often hear people talk about the 1000 year reign *of* Christ, but where is that mentioned anywhere in these verses? The 1000 year period denotes the reign of the martyrs *with* Christ. There is no time limit given here (figuratively or otherwise) on the duration of Christ's reign.

Finally, we should recall our earlier comments about those who build elaborate religious theories based on a single verse or perhaps a few verses from Revelation. Isn't it odd that such an important theory (in their own mind) is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible? Barnes explains the situation well in his commentary on Revelation —

It is admitted, on all hands, that this doctrine [of premillennialism], if contained in the Scriptures at all, is found in this one passage only. It is not pretended that there is, in any other place, a direct affirmation that this will literally occur, nor would the advocates for that opinion undertake to show that it is fairly implied in any other part of the Bible. But it is strange, not to say improbable, that the doctrine of the literal resurrection of, the righteous, a thousand years before the wicked, should be announced in one passage only.

If premillennialism were true then wouldn't one have expected Paul to say something about it somewhere in his many letters? Instead, what Paul tells us is very different from premillennialism.

5 The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. 6 Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years.

Who are the rest of the dead in verse 5? This group must be those who died in service to the beast. It is the same group we saw in 19:21. Those in this group also come back to life, but they do not come back to life until after the 1000 years are over. That is, they have no part in the complete victory of the saints.

Verse 6 is the fifth of the seven beatitudes in this book. What is the *first* resurrection? At the end of verse 4 and in verse 5 we read: “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.” To which of those two resurrections does “this” refer? Verse 6 gives us the answer. Those who are raised in the first resurrection are blessed and holy. They are the ones who reign with Christ 1000 years. Thus, the first resurrection is the resurrection mentioned at the end of verse 4.

If there is a first resurrection, then is there a *second* resurrection? Yes. The second resurrection is the one mentioned at the beginning of verse 5. Those in the second resurrection are the group that comes to life *after* the 1000 reign with Christ, and we will learn more about that group in verse 13.

What is the second death in verse 6? The second death is mentioned in contrast to the first death that resulted in the two groups of dead people we see in verses 4 and 5. The first death affected both those who were on the side of Christ and those who were on the side of the beast. One of those two groups, however, would not die again! The martyrs who came to life would not face the second death. The second death will affect only those who served the beast.

Is the second death the eternal death that awaits them at the end of time? Not necessarily. First, we have been discussing figurative resurrections and so we should not be surprised to also find figurative *deaths*. Second, although for some the first death was quite literal, for most of the Romans it was not. We have already discussed the figurative meaning of the seals, trumpets, and bowls that lead to their first death. Third, we must never lose sight of the time frame of the book, which we will see at least twice again before this book ends — it reveals things that are *shortly* to come to pass. And fourth, just as we see earlier that Heaven immediately awaits a faithful Christian after death, so too eternal torment immediately awaits the faithless after death. That latter fate was true even before the cross. (Luke 16:23) Thus, even if we were to conclude that this second death is the literal and eternal death that awaits the faithless, we would not have to conclude that it is a yet future event.

Some might ask why there will be a final judgment day if the faithful and the faithless already go to their respective destinations prior to that day. But don't we do the very same thing today in our criminal courts when we separate the guilt phase from the sentencing phase? A person's eternal fate is sealed on the day of that person's death, but the sentence will be proclaimed on a later day. And on that day the wicked will also be given the opportunity to do something they never did in this life — bend the knee to Jesus Christ and confess that he is Lord of all. Nero will one day be on his knees before the Lord Jesus Christ, as will we all.

Those who experience the first resurrection will not experience the second death. Instead, they will be priests and will reign with Christ for 1000 years. Was this something new for them? What this a status that these Christians had not previously enjoyed? Not at all! The church is a royal priesthood! (1 Peter 2:9) Revelation 1:5-6 tells us that we became part of a kingdom of priests when we were freed from our sins by the blood of Christ. These verses in Chapter 20 are simply a public reaffirmation of a status that the martyrs enjoyed even before their death. They reigned with Christ in life, as do we! They were royal priests in life, as are we!

7 And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be loosed from his prison 8 and will come out to deceive the nations which are at the four corners of the earth, that is, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9 And they marched up over the broad earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city; but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, 10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Why is Satan not loosed until after the 1000 years are ended? So that he will not detract from the picture of complete victory symbolized by the 1000 years. The “little while” in verse 3 during which Satan is loosed is contrasted with the 1000 year reign. Both periods of time depict a state of affairs. The church’s victory was total and complete. Satan’s victories will be neither total nor complete. Satan has *not* been loosed for 1000 years! Satan has been loosed for only a little while.

What causes Satan to be loosed? We aren’t told, but I like what Hailey has to say on that issue: “In the spirit of faithfulness [the early Christians] bound Satan by overcoming him. When such a spirit and loyal devotion to the principles and cause of Christ no longer distinguish God’s people, the restraining power is gone; Satan is loosed once more.”

What are Gog and Magog in verse 8? We first meet Gog of the land of Magog in Ezekiel 38:2-3 —

Son of man, set thy face against Gog, the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him, And say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold I am



against thee, O Gog, the chief prince of  
Meshech and Tubal.

Ezekiel 38:17 tells us that God had spoken about Gog “in old time by my servants the prophets of Israel, which prophesied in those days many years that I would bring thee against them.” And yet where is any such prophecy found in the Bible? No such prophecy mentions Gog by name, but there are many prophecies that foretell of heathen enemies of God’s people that would be defeated by God. There is no literal Gog or Magog. Instead, Gog of Magog figuratively depicts whoever happens to be the current enemy of God’s people. That is how he was used in Ezekiel 38.

The setting in Ezekiel was that the Jews had been promised a restored kingdom, and they had responded, “So what?” First there had been Egypt, and then the Philistines, and then Assyria, and now Babylon. Who was next? What guarantee did they have that the same thing wouldn’t happen to their newly restored kingdom?

To convince the Jews that under the Messiah their glory would be secure, Ezekiel used a symbolic battle with the fictitious Gog of the land of Magog to show that they would be able to defeat *any* enemy with the Messiah on their side. There, as here in Revelation, Gog of Magog denotes “anybody yet nobody in particular.” No matter who it is who attacks the church, that enemy will fare no better than Rome.

The meaning of the symbol is the same in Ezekiel and in Revelation. God’s people have just been vindicated from a terrible oppressor. A huge army gathers from all over the world to make war against them. God defeats that army without his people having to even lift a finger.

What God is saying is that “I have already defended and vindicated you in this present crisis and I will do so again anytime and anywhere no matter who rises against you.”

And once again that is a beautiful message for us today! I fear that the church today has developed a severe inferiority complex. If at any time the church could have felt inferior and powerless, it was during the Roman persecution — and yet the church then as now was anything but inferior or powerless. Rome was not the eternal kingdom!

That description belongs only to the church! Later in Chapter 21 we will find out exactly how God views the church, and he does *not* view it as inferior. If we see ourselves as inferior, is it any wonder if we find ourselves ineffective? The first step to being the kind of church that God wants us to be is to see ourselves as God sees us, and there is no better place to determine how God sees the church than right here in the closing chapters of Revelation. I fear that the church's neglect and misunderstanding of this great book have hindered the mission of the church.

And who is Gog today? Where is Magog today? What is our great enemy today? Whatever it is, God will deliver us from that great enemy if we remain faithful to God and refuse to compromise with Gog. Gog's army is huge. In Ezekiel 39:12 Gog's army was so large it took 7 months to bury them all! But however big and powerful the opponent, God can take care of them, but we must do our part. Remember Revelation 12:11 — "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death."

We also see in these verses that Satan would change his tactics after his defeat with regard to Rome. Rather than relying on a single great power as he did with Rome, verse 8 tells us he would gather his allies from the four corners of the earth. But wherever he gathers his army for battle, the war is the same one that has raged throughout the centuries starting with the opening chapters of the Bible, and the outcome of that battle is certain.

In verse 9, the army surrounds the beloved city. What is this city? It is the new Jerusalem that we will see later in 21:2. It is the church. The old Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God's people in the Old Testament. The new Jerusalem is the dwelling place for God's people in the New Testament. The new Jerusalem is the church, the beloved city.

The "camp of the Saints" in verse 9 is an interesting phrase. The word "camp" in Greek is a military term that is used six times in Acts to describe the barracks or headquarters of Roman soldiers. It is used

twice in Hebrews to describe the camp of Israel. The “camp of the Saints” is the barracks of God’s faithful army.

In verse 10, Satan is cast into a lake of fire to depict his utter and complete defeat. Why has he been completely defeated? Because he has just been told that no matter what he ever does he will never be able to defeat the church. Not one of his future attacks will ever be successful. His failure with regard to Rome will be the story of his life. His defeat is total and complete not just with regard to Rome but with regard to any army he may use to battle the church no matter how large or powerful that army may be. Satan cannot overcome the church!

Verses 4-10 have shown us the triumph of the church over Rome and the assurance of the church’s future security. Verses 11-15 will show us the other side of the coin. These next verses will show us what happened to those who bet against the church and lost! They will show us what happened to those who renounced Christ to save their lives here on earth.

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; 15 and if any one’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

We see in these verses a great judgment scene. Is this the final judgment? It is certainly true that the Roman persecutors and the faithless Christians will one day face a literal final judgment that will be very similar to what is described here. But similarity of language does not prove identity of subject! The time frame of the book suggests that this is not the final judgment. The context of these verses suggests that this is not the final judgment. Let's try to avoid the temptation to suddenly jump ahead in time thousands of years!

Yes, I know that countless sermons have used these final chapters of Revelation to describe Heaven and the final judgment, but I also know that for many the book of Revelation is just a large cafeteria in which you move down the line picking what you want and leaving the rest. Could this language be used to describe the final judgment and the church in Heaven after the end of time? Yes. Is that what is being described? I don't think so. And if we have two possible explanations — one occurring shortly after the book was written and one that has yet to occur — shouldn't we prefer the one that occurred shortly after the book was written in light of the time frame given in this book?

Although the world will end with a literal judgment, there are many *other* judgment scenes in the Bible. The picture of God sitting in judgment is a common one in the Bible and often refers to events that are *not* the end of the world. In Psalm 9:4-7 the Psalmist uses a judgment scene to describe God's past judgments against the enemies of his people:

For thou hast maintained my just cause; thou hast sat on the throne giving righteous judgment. Thou hast rebuked the nations, thou hast destroyed the wicked; thou hast blotted out their name for ever and ever. The enemy have vanished in everlasting ruins; their cities thou hast rooted out; the very memory of them has perished.

Notice the past tense in those verses. Daniel 7 is another example. Recall that the fourth beast in Daniel 7 refers to the Roman empire, and read in Daniel 7:9-11 what *precedes* the destruction of that fourth beast:

I watched till thrones were put in place, And the Ancient of Days was seated; His garment was white as snow, And the hair of His head was like pure wool. His throne was a fiery flame, Its wheels a burning fire; A fiery stream issued And came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, And the books were opened. I watched then because of the sound of the pompous words which the horn was speaking; I watched till the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given to the burning flame.

Does that sound familiar? Read Revelation 20:11-15 again! They are describing the same event. In both we have a throne. In both we have an occupant of that throne. In both we have books opened. In both we have fire. In both we have Rome. The parallels are inescapable — and Daniel gives us the *time* of the judgment — the days of the Roman empire.

Who is judged here? The dead that are raised in verse 13 are the ones who are judged here. Who are they? They are the “rest of the dead” from verse 5 — that is, they are the people who died in opposition to Christ and in the service of Rome. These are the ones who were killed by the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls.

These verses show the great contrast between those who stood with Christ and those who stood with Rome. Those who stood with Christ experience a complete and total victory symbolized by a 1000 year reign with Christ. Those who stood with Rome experience a complete and total defeat symbolized by death in a lake of fire.

But what about the book of life in verse 15? Why is it mentioned? That book is brought out to justify this sentence. We also know from Chapters 2-3 that there were some in this group who saw only a blotted out spot where their name had once been in that great book. Can you imagine anything worse than seeing a blank spot in that book and knowing that your name was once there? If there is anything more

horrible to contemplate than seeing erasure marks where your name once appeared in the book of life I'm not sure what it could be.

What about in verse 14 where it says that death and hades are defeated? That has to be the end of the world, right? Why? If I moved that event in any direction I would not move it *later* in time! Instead, I would move it toward the cross. That was when death and hades were defeated! Yes, it is certainly true that on that great last day when we are literally raised incorruptible it will come to pass that "death is swallowed up in victory," (1 Corinthians 15:54), but it is equally true that death was defeated at the cross and at Christ's resurrection from the dead. As Romans 6:8-9 tells us, "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him." The defeat of death is a past event now, and it was a past event when Revelation was written. As 2 Timothy 1:10 tells us, Jesus "has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." Past tense!

Why then are death and hades shown as being defeated here? Because Rome's power of death had been removed. Death is personified in Revelation and nowhere is that clearer than in verse 13 where Death gives up its dead! **Rome's defeat was Satan's defeat, and Satan's defeat was Death's defeat.** Rome had used death as a terrible weapon, and that was all over.

What is left in this book? Chapters 21 and 22 conclude the book with a beautiful description of the triumphant and victorious church. In fact, nowhere will you find a more beautiful description of the church than in these final chapters of the Bible. The Old Testament ends with a curse. Let's see how the New Testament ends.

## Chapter Twenty One

The church has just come through a major crisis, and these final two chapters describe the victorious and vindicated church that comes out

of that crisis. We will hear about the newness of its environment — a new heaven and a new earth. We will hear about its beauty — golden streets and jeweled walls. We will hear about its purity — a beautiful bride. We will hear about its stability and strength — huge walls and a city four-square. We will hear about its importance and its testimony — a source of light to those living in darkness.

The question for us will be whether these descriptions of the church apply to the church on earth then and now or rather to the church in Heaven at the end of all time. We already know which of those two options fits better with the time frame and the context, but is there perhaps some language used in these chapters that requires us to move these chapters forward in time? We can all agree that many of these descriptions found here could apply equally well to the Lord's church at any point in its history, but is that true of *all* the descriptions here? Stay tuned!

1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

In 20:11 the earth and the sky fled from the presence of God, and no place was found for them. The figure of heaven and earth passing away is common in the Bible. God depicts the judgment of the ungodly by *figuratively* bringing their world to an end just as one day he will *literally* bring their world to an end.

We have seen throughout this book how literal events are used as symbols to describe other events. For example, we have seen the literal plagues of Egypt and the literal fire of Sodom used as figures to describe the judgment of Rome. Those literal events were *past* events, but we also see the same thing done with *future* literal events. The events that will occur at the literal judgment at the end of time are used here (and elsewhere in the Bible) to figuratively describe other judgments by God. So, too, the literal dismantling of the world that someday will occur is used here to figuratively describe the dismantling of Rome's world.

In Isaiah 13 God dismantles the earth and the stars to depict the judgment of Babylon by the Medes. In Isaiah 34 the heavens are dissolved and rolled together as a scroll to depict a judgment against Edom. Matthew 24:29 describes the judgment of Jerusalem as a day when “the sun [shall] be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken.” Joel described the events leading up to the establishment of the church in Acts 2 as a time of “blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD.” (Acts 2:19-20 quoting Joel 2:30-31)

Is verse 1 discussing the final judgment at the end of time? While that event could be described with language such as this, there is no reason to conclude that John has suddenly leapt forward in time by thousands of years. The context of Chapter 21 and the time frame of this book suggest that this language is describing the judgment of Rome. And that conclusion fits perfectly with how the same language is used in Isaiah and Matthew to describe other past judgments by God against great enemies of his people.

We *know* from Matthew 24:34 that Matthew 24:29 is describing a first century event (the judgment of Jerusalem). Why then can't the same language here in Revelation 21 describe the judgment of Rome? If Matthew 24:29 is not the end of the world, why would someone feel compelled to apply this same language in Revelation 21 to the end of the world? What was said *once* in Matthew 24:34 about the judgment of Jerusalem is said *four* times in Revelation about the judgement of Rome. (1:1, 1:3, 22:6, 22:10)

Just as the apocalyptic language in Matthew 24:29 depicted the destruction of the Jewish world in Jerusalem, so the same language here depicts the destruction of the Roman world. Just as things would never again be the same for Jerusalem, so things would never again be the same for Rome. Their old world was gone. Something else was about to take its place. Remember Daniel 2:44 — “And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall



break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever.”

What is the new heaven and the new earth in verse 1? The language of judgment is often language of destruction, but the language of blessing is often just the opposite — language of creation. A new heaven and a new earth are created in which the previous oppressor (in this case, Rome) does not exist. The creation of a new heaven and a new earth depicts the removal of some specific enemy or some other radical change in circumstances. The particular change under consideration must be determined from the context — in this case, Rome.

In this case, the dramatic change in circumstance also includes the removal of the sea. That sea that separated God from his people and from which the first beast arose is missing in this new world.

2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; 3 and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

What is the holy city in verse 2? Look at the clues! It is the new Jerusalem. It is prepared as a bride. Many more clues will follow, but from these two clues alone we already know that this holy city is the church.

Why does verse 1 picture the church as coming down out of Heaven? One reason is to show the contrast with the beasts of Rome that came up out of the earth and sea. The church is not the product of man! The eternal kingdom was not made with human hands. Unlike the

false religions of this world, the church of Christ did not originate from man. The church was established by God.

A second reason the church is shown coming down out of Heaven is that God's people have been referred to throughout this book as dwelling in Heaven (even while still on earth) and the wicked have been referred to as those who dwell on earth. Now that the wicked and their wicked Roman world are gone, the church is pictured as returning to a world that has been made new. God had pictured them safe in Heaven while he took care of the Roman problem on earth, and now that the Roman problem has been resolved, God pictures the church returning to earth. But this earth is not the same one they left because this earth is a Rome-free earth. That great enemy of God's people is no more.

Why are there no more tears or death or pain? Verse 4 tells us — it is because the former things have passed away. What are the former things that have just passed away? The blood thirsty harlot and the two beasts are gone. Rome is no more. The condition of the church has just changed dramatically.

But couldn't this same language apply to Heaven? Yes, it could if taken out of this context. The end of the world will certainly bring a dramatic change of circumstances. But the context suggests that a different change is being considered here.

But how could the beautiful promises in verse 4 apply to anything other than the end of the world? You should ask Isaiah that question because he used similar language to apply to something other than the end of the world, and if he could do that, then why not John?

- **Isaiah 25:8** [with reference to a deliverance from Moab] He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it.
- **Isaiah 30:19** [with reference to a deliverance from Assyria] For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem: thou shalt

weep no more: he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee.

These promises in Isaiah were intended to emphasize that Israel's past troubles would soon be no more, which is the same way the language is used in Revelation. Rome had been judged. The figurative language in verse 4 describes the dramatic change in circumstances experienced by the victorious church.

So *when* will all of the promises in verse 4 occur? When will every tear be wiped away? When will death be no more? When will there be no more crying or pain? Verse 3 gives us the answer — these promises will occur when the dwelling of God is with men. So when will that happen? We should ask instead when *did* that happen! 1 Corinthians 3:16 tells us that we are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in us. Ephesians 2:22 describes the church as a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. God dwells with men *now*. Christ's perfect sacrifice made that possible. The events in this book were simply a public reaffirmation of what was already true — God is on the church's side! God dwells in his church, and anyone who persecutes that church will answer to him.

These descriptions concerning crying, tears, pain, and death should not be taken literally. This language is symbolic, and we must consistently treat it as such. Here, as in Isaiah, these descriptions depict the state of God's people after a specific enemy has been removed by God.

But what about the phrase “no more death”? Death has played a major role in this book. Death was the primary weapon that Rome used against the church. But when God defeated Rome, he defeated Rome's power to inflict death. Rome would never again have the power of physical death over God's people. And once again, compare Isaiah 25:8 — **“He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it.”** Isaiah was speaking there about a deliverance from Moab. If Isaiah can use that language to figuratively describe a deliverance from Moab, why can't John use the same language in the same way to describe a deliverance from Rome? If we don't ground our interpreta-

tion of Revelation firmly in the Old Testament, which is the source for much of the language in this book, then our interpretation will almost certainly be wrong.

Finally, as for death, remember Hebrews 2:14-15 — “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.” These events have already occurred.

5 And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. 7 He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.”

All things are new. The former things (that is, Rome) have passed away, and the church now finds itself in a new environment. The world of Rome has been judged, and a new world has been created for the church.

It is done. Satan and Rome have been defeated. Their world has been destroyed. The blood of the martyrs has been vindicated. A new world has been created that does not include Rome. The church has come down from Heaven to enjoy its new environment. Everything has been finished with regard to Rome.

The second death in verse 8 is the death in Chapter 20 that was reserved for those who were on Rome’s side. Did that second death in-

clude only Romans? No. Verse 8 tells us that it includes the cowardly, the faithless, and the polluted. That is, it also includes those former Christians who renounced Christ in order to live. It includes those who saved their life, only to lose it.

How does God view those who compromise with the world and turn their backs on Jesus? Cowards! Faithless! Polluted!

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."

What are we about to see? Heaven? No. The angel says that we are about to see "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." We are about to see the victorious church!

The real question is not *what* we are about to see, but rather *when* are we seeing it? Are we about to see the church in Heaven after the final judgment of the world, or are we about to see the church back on earth safe and sound after the judgment of Rome?

We have already had a first clue that should help us answer that question. Look at verse 2. There John saw "the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down out of heaven** from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." We see the same clue in verse 10. Not only are we not looking at Heaven in these verses, but we are not looking at the church in Heaven in these verses. We are seeing the church "coming down out of heaven."

10 And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare Jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. 12 It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons

of Israel were inscribed; 13 on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

This beautiful chapter parallels Ezekiel 40 in many of its descriptions of the church. For example, Ezekiel's vision of the temple in Ezekiel 40 also takes place while Ezekiel is on a high mountain.

In verse 10, John sees the holy city coming down from Heaven. As we discussed, the holy city is pictured coming down from Heaven because a new Rome-free world has been created in which it may dwell.

Verse 11 tells us that this city has the glory of God. That is true because the church of Christ is the body of Christ, and Christ as Hebrews 1:3 tells us is "the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person." The city is the church of Christ!

This city has 12 gates guarded by 12 angels with the names of 12 tribes inscribed on each gate. The wall had 12 foundations with the names of the 12 apostles inscribed on each. (How can *anyone* read that description of this city and not understand that numbers are used symbolically in this book?) Twelve is the number of God's people, and this city is the dwelling place of God's people. Ephesians 2:20 says that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The city of God described here is the church of Christ.

And so far we have not seen a single description of that city of God that does not apply to the church right here and right now just as it applied to the church in John's day.

## Revelation — Lesson 25

Where in the Bible is the most beautiful description of the Lord's church? Is it in Daniel 2, where we read about the eternal kingdom that sweeps away the kingdoms of the earth? Is it in Isaiah 2, where we read about the house of God established on the mountains to which all nations are drawn? Is it in Joel 2, where the establishment of the church is described as the great and awesome day of the Lord? Is it in Ezekiel 40, where the church is described as a huge temple constructed according to the pattern of God? Is it in Matthew 13, where Jesus gave us the parables of the kingdom? Is it in Matthew 16, where Jesus promised to build his church? Is it in Acts 2, where we read a firsthand account of the church's establishment? Is it in Ephesians 5, where Paul beautifully describes Jesus' love for his church as a husband's love for his bride? Is it in Hebrews 12, where the church is described as the city of the living God?

Each of these is beautiful, but none of these would be my choice for the most beautiful description of the church. Instead, I would turn immediately to the concluding two chapters of Revelation that we are now studying. In my opinion, those two chapters contain the most beautiful description of the Lord's church found anywhere in the Scriptures.

As we mentioned last week, the Old Testament ends with a curse in Malachi 4:6. The New Testament by contrast ends with a beautiful description of the Lord's church, the holy city of God in which God is at last able to once again dwell with men as he did in the Garden before the Fall. The final chapters of Revelation are the perfect ending to the story of reconciliation that began with the opening chapters of Genesis.

21:15 And he who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. 16 The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its breadth; and he measured the city with

his rod, twelve thousand stadia; its length and breadth and height are equal. 17 He also measured its wall, a hundred and forty-four cubits by a man's measure, that is, an angel's. 18 The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. 19 The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every Jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, 20 the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. 21 And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

Here we have a description of the city – and it is remarkably numerical! It is also remarkably beautiful once we understand the symbols it uses.

Why is the city measured? Ezekiel measured what he saw in Ezekiel 40-43 in order to stress its holiness and separation from what is common. Ezekiel 42:20 — “He measured it by the four sides: it had a wall round about, five hundred reeds long, and five hundred broad, to make a separation between the sanctuary and the profane place.” Earlier, in Revelation 11, we saw the temple measured for the same reason. The church is measured here yet again for the same reason. The church belongs to God. The church is apart from the world. **And we are being measured by God today just as God was measuring the church in Revelation 21.** Do we measure up?

What are the measurements? The city is a cube — 12,000 by 12,000 by 12,000 stadia. This description causes trouble for literalists since 12,000 stadia is about 1500 miles. The walls surrounding the city are 144 stadia high. The foundations of the city are adorned with 12 precious jewels, and the 12 gates are made of 12 pearls. (Once again,



how could *anyone* not see the symbolism here? And if these numbers are symbolic, then what about the 1000 years we saw earlier? On what basis could someone conclude that all of these 12's are symbolic and yet that earlier 1000 is literal?)

As for the reference to an angel in verse 17, Hailey writes: "The measure 'according to a man, that is, of an angel,' is that it is a measure understood by man, one in common use be men, but in the hands of an angel."

The church is described as a precious and beautiful city in the shape of a huge golden cube with golden streets. The number 12 appears in every measurement — this city is for the people of God. The city of pure gold with streets of pure gold is not a description of Heaven — the text itself tells us that much! It is a description of the city of God that comes down *out of* Heaven. It is a description of the city where God presently dwells with his people — and that city is the church. John is describing the church!

We generally apply these descriptions to Heaven, and many no doubt could apply to that beautiful home that God has prepared for his church. But the context suggests that those descriptions are used here to describe the church — not the future home of the church. **John is describing a people — not a place!**

The church is the city of God — and how does God see his church? He sees it as a huge golden city with streets of gold. John is telling us how God sees his church! But am I saying that the church here and now has streets of gold? Yes! Am I saying that the church here and now is the city foursquare? Yes! That is exactly what I am saying. That is what I believe these beautiful chapters are telling us.

Do we see ourselves as God sees us? Do we truly understand how *beautiful* the church is? Do we truly understand how *important* the church is? We often say that Revelation shows us things we can't see (Heaven) in terms of things we can see (golden streets, etc.), but is that really what it's happening here? If these chapters are describing the church, then isn't God really describing something we can see (the church) — and isn't he then telling us that we are not seeing it as it re-

ally is! Isn't he telling us that we are not seeing the church as the beautiful, golden city of God that it is. These chapters are giving us God's view of his church — and if that view is not our view, then we need to change our view!

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates shall never be shut by day—and there shall be no night there; 26 they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Why is there no temple in the city? In the Old Testament the temple stressed the separation between God and man. God lived in the inner sanctuary where only the High Priest could enter. But in this city, God dwells with his people. In this city, there is no separation between God and man. In this city, every citizen has direct access to God through Jesus.

Why in verse 23 is there no need of the sun or the moon? Because the glory of God and the Lamb provide all of the light. Isaiah 60:19-20 uses this same image to describe the condition of Israel after the restoration of the temple and the holy city —

The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the LORD shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the LORD

shall be thine everlasting light, and the days  
of thy mourning shall be ended.

Verse 24 tells us that the nations shall walk by the light of this great city and that the kings of the earth shall bring their glory and honor into it. One would expect a huge golden cube 1500 miles long in each direction would reflect some light and attract some attention! It is not God's desire that his church be obscure and hidden.

God's view of the church and his mission for the church is to be a beautiful golden city that reflects his glory and gives light to a lost and dying world – and nowhere is that message stated any more clearly than it is here in these verses from Revelation 21. God's people in his church are the light of the world. The church reflects the glory of God, and all nations flow to the church because of that light.

- **Matthew 5:14** You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.
- **Isaiah 2:2** Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it.

Verse 27 tells us that nothing unclean will enter this city. The city is holy and secure. Only those who have been made clean by the blood of Christ are allowed to enter this city. No one enters this city until he has followed the command of Acts 22:16 — “Arise, and be baptized, and **wash away thy sins**, calling on the name of the Lord.”

The church is the body of Christ. People are added to the church when they are saved. If you have been saved, then you are in the Lord's church. If you are not in the Lord's church, it is because you are not saved. Those outside the Lord's church are unclean; those inside the Lord's church have been cleansed by the blood of the Lamb. The gates of this city are open — but you can enter those gates only after being cleansed by the blood of Christ. (Revelation 1:4-6)

Is it true that only the church of Christ will be saved? **Of course it's true! How could it possibly be otherwise?** If God adds you to the church when you are saved, then how could anyone outside the

church ever be saved? Everyone who is saved is in the church, and everyone who is lost is outside of the church. If people have trouble with the concept that only those in the church of Christ will be saved, then it tells me they do not understand what the church is. It tells me they think of the church of Christ as a denomination of some sort rather than as what it is — the eternal kingdom of Christ established on the first day of Pentecost following the resurrection. The world has many misconceptions about the church of Christ — let's make sure we don't contribute to them! If we use denominational language, sing denominational songs, and see ourselves as just another church on the block, then is it any wonder if the world sees us as a denomination? The church of Christ is not a denomination! It is the body of Christ, and can you think of a more horrible image than a denomination of the body of Christ?

We see in these verses an important clue as to whether these descriptions of the church describe the church then and now, or whether they apply only to the church in Heaven after the end of time. Verse 25 tells us that at the time of this vision, the gates of this great city are *open*, and verses 24 and 26 show people (kings, in particular) entering through those gates. Isaiah uses this same image in Isaiah 60:11 —

Therefore thy gates shall be open continually;  
they shall not be shut day nor night; that men  
may bring unto thee the forces of the Gen-  
tiles, and that their kings may be brought.

Will this description be true of Heaven after the world ends? Will the gates of Heaven remain open? If so, for whom? Why does the church need an *open gate* after the end of the world?

Verse 24 tells us that by light of this city shall the nations walk. If this is a description of the church after the end of the world, then who are these nations? If this is a description of the church after the end of the world, then who are these kings of the earth who live outside the city in darkness yet are able to enter? The church on earth is the light of the world. The nations of the world are drawn to the city by the light that it casts out into the world. Recall the description of the church in Isaiah 2:2 —

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it.

So what have we seen in Chapter 21? This chapter has shown us the triumphant and victorious church on earth. The church shines among the nations and brings light to those living outside in darkness. The nations are drawn to it by the light that it casts. The description of the church will continue through the first five verses of Chapter 22.

## Chapter Twenty Two

1 Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

What is the river of the water of life in verse 1? Water is a common symbol for the blessings of God, and one that we have seen before in this book. (Recall our comments about the feast of the tabernacles in Chapter 7.) In Isaiah 12:3, God's people were told that with joy they would draw water from the wells of salvation. In John 7:37-38, Jesus said that if anyone believed in him then that person would have rivers of living water flowing out of his heart. The water of life depicts the blessings that flow from God and that the church enjoys now and forever.

But has the church always enjoyed these blessings? Yes! Read Joel 3:18 — “And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the

LORD and water the valley of Shittim.” And then turn to Acts 2 to find out when that prophecy from Joel was fulfilled. The church has enjoyed those blessings from the day of its establishment.

In verse 2, we see a tree of life with 12 fruits. (First the water of *life*, and now the tree of *life*. Do we see a message there to a church that daily faced the threat of death from Rome?) This tree provides nourishment for God’s people just as the original tree of life did in the Garden. But this tree provides 12 different kinds of fruit 12 times a year. These blessings are for the people of God — and the church enjoys these blessings then, now, and always.

Verse 2 tells us something else about this tree of life — the leaves on the tree are for the healing of the nations. Again, we see nations that need the light and healing that this city—the church—provides. Who are these nations outside of the city if this is a description of the church in Heaven after the end of the world? If we are looking at the church in Heaven then who is it that needs healing — and from what are they being healed?

This is a description of the church on earth! The church sheds light on the darkness outside. The church provides healing to those who enter into its open gates. The invitation we will see in a moment in 22:17 is for those outside of the church (those who are thirsty) to come and drink of the water of life. (“And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price.”) Could such descriptions apply to the church after the end of the world?

3 There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; 4 they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. 5 And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.

Verse 3 tells us there will be no more curse. Zechariah 8:13 says that Israel and Judah were once “a byword of cursing among the nations.”

But God promised that he would make them a blessing instead of a curse, and Zechariah 14:11 says that “there shall be no more curse; Jerusalem shall dwell in security.” That is the same picture we have here. The church, too, would dwell in security.

Verse 3 also tells us that the throne of God and of the Lamb is in this city. God rules from his dwelling place — and God dwells in the church. Ezekiel 43:7 says that God’s throne is located where he dwells — in the midst of his people forever. Ephesians 2:22 describes the church as a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. The church is the eternal kingdom, and the eternal King dwells in his eternal kingdom.

Verse 4 tells us that those in the city shall see his face. Once again we have a beautiful description of the church here and now. The church is a royal priesthood, and as priests we have direct access to the throne. In fact, Hebrews 4:16 says that we may *boldly* approach the throne of grace. Every Christian has the same access to God as the High Priest had under the Old Covenant. In fact, we have more access — we may approach the throne boldly at any time whereas the High Priest could only enter the holy of holies once a year.

Verse 5 tells us that there will be no more night in this city. And what about the church? We are the light of the world. The church of Christ is the only source of light in a world of filled with darkness. There is no night in the church — how could there be with Jesus Christ as our light?

Verse 5 also tells us that the citizens of this city shall reign for ever and ever. Romans 5:17 says that we reign in life through Jesus Christ. Revelation 5:10 says that we are a kingdom of priests who reign on earth. 1 Peter 2:9 says that we are a royal priesthood. Notice the tense of those verbs. The church reigns with Christ *now* and forever.

What we are seeing in these verses is the triumphant, victorious church of Christ that reigns forever with Jesus on its side. The message to the first century church was not “Wait until the end of the world and you will enjoy these blessings.” The message to the first century church was that the church enjoys all of these spiritual blessings right here and right now. Isn’t that what Paul told us in Eph-

esians 1:3 — “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who **hath blessed** us with **all spiritual blessings in heavenly places** in Christ.” That was the message of comfort they needed to hear, and that was the message they heard.

6 And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. 7 And behold, I am coming soon.” Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

Verse 6 begins the epilogue of the book, and as we saw in the prologue, the epilogue begins with the all-important time frame for the vision. Revelation 1:1 says that the events in the book must soon take place. Revelation 1:3 says that the time for fulfillment is near. Here in 22:6 we see that what John had seen must soon take place, and in verse 10 we will be told that the time is near.

What can be said for any interpretation of this book that ignores these clear declarations? One must certainly work hard to misunderstand them!

In verse 7, the speaker says “I am coming soon.” Who is the speaker in verses 6-7, and is there a different speaker in verse 7 than in verse 6? Some argue that the angel is speaking in verse 6 due to the third person reference to God. Others argue God or Jesus is speaking in verse 7 due to the first person reference to “I”. Others respond that in verse 7 an angel may simply be speaking on God’s behalf. Hailey concludes that it most likely is God “declaring that in Christ He will come speedily to His needy saints.”

In short, verses 6 and 7 in the original Greek are ambiguous with regard to the speaker’s identity, giving us only the pronoun translated “he.” People sometimes ask me why I don’t like the New International Version of the Bible. My answer is that I don’t trust it, and verse 6 is a prime example (repeated many, many times elsewhere in the NIV). Who is the speaker in verse 6? The KJV says “he.” The ESV says “he.” The ASV says “he.” The RSV says “he.” The NRSV says “he.” The



NKJV says “he.” The HCSB says “he.” The NAS says “he.” The REB says “he.” The original Greek is ambiguous, and those translations properly carry that ambiguity over into the English. But the NIV does not. The NIV in verse 6 reads “The angel said to me.” And so a reader of the NIV would have no idea that the Greek permitted any other understanding of that verse. The Greek is ambiguous, but the NIV is not. The goal of a translation is not to remove ambiguity from the original text. The goal of a translation is to carry any ambiguities in the original text over into English so that the English reader gets an understanding as close as possible to the meaning conveyed by the original text. A good translation acts a sheet of glass between you and the original text. The NIV utterly fails in that goal, and that is why I never use it.

<p>NIV</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 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.”</p>	<p>KJV</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.</p>	<p>ESV</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”</p>	<p>ASV</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 And he said unto me, These words are faithful and true: and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angels to show unto his servants the things which must shortly come to pass.</p>	<p>RSV</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.</p>
<p>NRSV</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”</p>	<p>NKJV</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 Then he said to me, “These words are faithful and true.” And the Lord God of the holy prophets sent His angel to show His servants the things which must shortly take place.</p>	<p>HCSB</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 Then he said to me, “These words are faithful and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent His angel to show His servants what must quickly take place.”</p>	<p>NAS95S</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 And he said to me, “These words are faithful and true”; and the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place.</p>	<p>REB</p> <p>Rev. 22:6 He said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. The Lord God who inspires the prophets has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.</p>

The Greek word translated “soon” in verses 6 and 7 is the same word we find in the letters to the seven churches in 2:16 (“Repent; or else I will come unto thee **quickly**.”) and in 3:11 (“Behold, I come **quickly**: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.”). If we try to stretch the word “quickly” to encompass Jesus’ return at the end of the world, then what do we do with those promises to the seven churches? Those seven churches aren’t around anymore! Either Jesus came quickly while they were still around, or he didn’t come to them at all.

The word “soon” (translated “speedily” or “quickly” in the KJV) occurs four times in this chapter! (Verses 6, 7, 12, and 20.) The same Greek

word appears in 1:1 and 3:11. The Greek lexicons tell us it means “pertaining to a point of time subsequent to another point of time (either an event in the discourse or the time of the discourse itself), with emphasis upon the relatively brief interval between the two points of time” or simply “a very brief period of time.” The same Greek word occurs twice in Matthew 28:7-8 —

And go quickly, and tell his discip̄les that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his discip̄les word.

Any doubt what the word means in that context? It also appears in John 11:28-29 —

And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee. As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came unto him.

Any doubt what it means in that context? The same author wrote verses 6 and 7! What basis is there for us to interpret those verses in such a way that they mean the very opposite? Jesus said he was coming quickly. If that doesn't match our understanding of the book, then let's change our understanding rather than changing the text!

For those who believe these chapters apply to the end of time, let me ask a question — what could God have written here to convince you otherwise? If using the word “quickly” four times in a single chapter doesn't do it, then what would it take? (See the handout.)

But some will ask, to what does this word “soon” refer in verse 7? In what way did Jesus come soon or come quickly after the book was written? We already know the answer to that one — Jesus came in judgment against Rome.

But verse 7 must be referring to the second coming? Right? No. For starters, the phrase “second coming of Christ” appears nowhere in the

Bible. The closest we get is Hebrews 9:28 — “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall **he appear the second time** without sin unto salvation.” Will Jesus appear again to judge the world? Absolutely. Will that be his second appearance? Yes. Will that be his second *literal* coming? Yes. Will that be his second coming? No, there have already been at least two other *figurative* comings of Christ. There was the *figurative* coming of Christ against Jerusalem mentioned in Matthew 24:30, and there was the *figurative* coming of Christ against Rome mentioned here in verse 7. The coming against Jerusalem happened in the first century (Matthew 24:34), and the coming against Rome happened soon after this book was written (22:6-7).

For those keeping track, verse 7 is the sixth of the seven beatitudes in Revelation. “Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

8 I John am he who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; 9 but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”

John has been told before not to worship this angel and yet here he is doing it again. We have already discussed this issue and concluded that John was likely just overcome by all that he was seeing. But once again God uses the event to teach a vital lesson — Worship God!

This book of Revelation has been filled with false gods and false worship. Christians were facing death because of their refusal to worship the Roman emperors. No created being is worthy of our worship — not even this wondrous angelic being.

10 And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. 11 Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and

the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” 12 “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. 13 I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood.

In verse 10, John is told *not* to seal up the book. Why? Because the time for its fulfillment is near. In Daniel 8:26, Daniel received the *opposite* command regarding a vision that he had just seen — “And the vision of the evening and the morning which was told is true: **wherefore shut thou up the vision; for it shall be for many days.**” God tells John not to seal up his vision for the time of its fulfillment is near, but he tells Daniel to seal up his vision because its fulfillment pertains to many days hence. When was Daniel’s vision fulfilled? 400 years later. Could this be any more clear? How can we expect to ever understand this book if we ignore these flashing neon time frames?

In verse 11, Jesus tells the wicked to continue in their wickedness. Why? Because their time is short. Verse 12 says the Jesus is coming quickly! The Romans were so entrenched in their evil that Jesus knew they would never change. He tells them that if they want to do more wickedness then they had better hurry. The time is short! Again, this verse is difficult to apply to the end of the world. Does Jesus want all sinners to continue sinning?

And how does one enter into this city? Verse 14 tells us — “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.” One obtains the right to enter the city by *washing*. That, too, has been true since the day the church was established. Acts 2:38 — “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, **and be baptized every one of you in the name of**

**Jesus Christ for the remission of sins**, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Acts 22:16 — “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and **wash away thy sins**, calling on the name of the Lord.”

The beatitude in verse 14 is the seventh and final beatitude in Revelation. (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14) As we have mentioned before, this book has a beautiful structure and organization that is built around the number 7. If you are reading the KJV, then verse 14 reads “Blessed are they that do his commandments” rather than “Blessed are those who wash their robes.” The latter (I am told) has better support in the manuscripts.

16 “I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.” 17 The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let him who hears say, “Come.” And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price.

Jesus is the root and the offspring of David. He is the promised Redeemer. He is the fulfillment of prophecy.

The Spirit and the church invite those outside to come and drink the water of life. When is this invitation extended? Now. It is extended every time a gospel sermon is preached from this pulpit (which we would hope is every time a sermon is preached from this pulpit!). No invitation will be extended after the end of the world.

The water of life is a blessing that men enjoy on earth when they come to Christ and are added to his church. It is without price — it is the free gift of God’s grace. Romans 5:18 — “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one **the free gift** came upon all men unto justification of life.”

18 I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one

adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19 and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

Tampering with the word of God is serious business. Those who add to the words in this book by teaching things in Christ's name that Christ never taught will find themselves sharing in the horrible plagues described in this book. And those who take away from the words in this book the parts they disagree with or the parts that don't fit with their theories will lose their share in the tree of life and in the holy city.

What? You mean the right to the tree of life can be taken away? Yes, and we have already seen that one's name can be blotted out of the book of life. What does that tell us about the doctrine of "once saved, always saved"?

Whenever I read these verses I think of the Reader's Digest condensed Bible that was released in 1982. The Old Testament was cut by 55% and the New Testament by 25%. Except for Philemon, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude, every book in the Bible was condensed to some degree. (Apparently those four were short enough already. I guess Obadiah had some fluff!) I have always wondered if verse 19 made it into the condensed Bible but I have never taken the time to find out.

But with all humor aside, let me ask a serious question — do we effectively use an abridged Bible? Are there parts of the Bible we never study either because of neglect, or worse just because we don't much like what they say? Do we neglect some books just because they are too long to fit into our carefully tailored curriculum? When was the last time we had a class on Isaiah?

20 He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! 21 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

The book ends with encouragement for those suffering persecution. They had nothing to fear. Jesus was coming soon to bring vindication and judgment and nothing would stand in his way be it the mighty Roman empire or the modern commentator who believes the rescue has yet to occur! Jesus said he was coming soon, and he did come soon. The Roman empire is no more — swept away long ago by the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ! What a beautiful ending to a beautiful book! Amen!

## Conclusion

During our introductory classes I pointed to Revelation 6:10 and said that it is a key verse in this book. In Revelation 6:9-10, we read:

I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

The cry from the martyrs in verse 10 is what prompted these judgments, and God's repeated answer to their question "How long?" was "Soon!"

The martyrs in verses 9-10 play a central role in this book. Who were they? Most of them are unknown to us by name — but not all of them.

We know the names of some of those martyrs, and there are two in particular I think of when I read those verses. Tradition tells us that the Apostle Paul was beheaded by the emperor Nero in A.D. 64 or 65. Tradition also tells us that Peter was crucified in Rome around that same time. Paul was most likely saved from that fate by his Roman citizenship.

Revelation 17:6 — "I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." That is Paul's

blood. That is Peter's blood. Revelation 6:9 — "When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held." Peter and Paul were under that altar. Peter and Paul were asking the question "How long?" in verse 10. Revelation 18:20 — "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!" That's addressed to the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter. Revelation 21:14 — "Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." That's Paul's name and Peter's name.

This vivid book becomes even more vivid when we put a face on those martyrs. Yes, Jesus loves his church more than we can ever know or understand, and we can read this book as Jesus' response to Rome's attack against the church. But this was also Jesus' response to Rome's murder of Paul. This was Jesus' response to Rome's murder of Peter.

What was Paul thinking about as he was led to the executioner's block? I am certain it included what he told Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 —

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is **at hand**. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.

But I am also certain it included something he wrote to the very Christians who would suffer with him at the hands of Nero. Something that other Christian martyrs no doubt also recalled as they were being put to death by Rome. Something that is a beautiful summary of the entire book of Revelation. Something that we will use to end our class. Romans 8:31-39 —

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will



he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In those 9 verses is the entire book of Revelation. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us! That is the theme of Revelation.